

Submission to the Childcare and Early Learning Productivity Commission Inquiry

Queensland Parents for People with a Disability (QPPD) is a parent-based, mission-driven advocacy organisation that was established in 1981. The mission of the organisation is to vigorously defend justice and rights for people with disabilities by exposing exclusionary practices, speaking out against injustices and promoting people with disabilities as respected, valued and participating members of society.

QPPD has a long history of encouraging and equipping parents to seek inclusive lives for their family member with disability and has engaged in many advocacy efforts to challenge exclusionary attitudes and systems. QPPD parents share a simple dream – that our family members and other people with disability will be supported to take their rightful place as valued and contributing members of their community.

“For twenty years QPPD has advocated for the inclusion of people with disabilities into their communities. At the heart of our advocacy QPPD has held a belief that when people with disability are connected and have relationships with others they are safer, more respected, have greater opportunities, and enriched lives.” *Fiona Connelly (former QPPD President, QPPD Placement Policy report, 2001)*

Fundamental to the pursuit of a life embedded in community is the notion of starting and maintaining an “ordinary pathway” through life, which includes full inclusion and participation in the same regular and typical early childhood experiences as children without disability. While this may appear obvious, QPPD knows that unfortunately children with disability, even at an early age, can experience rejection and exclusion from ordinary community experiences and there can be both subtle and overt pressure for families with a member with a disability to accept “segregated” or “special” alternatives, and this can facilitate a process of marginalisation.



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Conversely our members who have experience of their family members progressing through ordinary childcare, kindergarten, and other early childhood settings and regular schools have found this pathway has helped their son or daughter to take their place as a valued member of their community.

QPPD believes that children and young people with disability are at risk of being:

- labelled and viewed with lowered expectations because of those labels
- neglected and subject to activities which do not maximise their potential
- rejected from the mainstream (whether in childcare, school, employment or other community)
- provided only with special and /or alternative programs, thereby missing opportunities for access to the richness of the general curriculum and the ordinary rhythms and rituals of community

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QPPD offers an alternative to this cycle of marginalisation; we believe that children with disability:

- are people first, regardless of the nature of their disabilities
- can develop and learn
- achieve better educational outcomes in regular settings and with access to the general curriculum
- should be encouraged to lead typical lives
- are more likely to achieve a typical and valued life in the community if they are part of regular activities and services alongside their peers
- can make a positive and valuable contribution to their local schools

- may need extra supports and assistance in order to participate fully in regular life.

Therefore the following mindsets are critical:

- That everyone is born belonging – rather than a default of separation and differential treatment
- That diversity enriches our communities and any costs and efforts of including all must be seen as an investment rather than a burden
- That people with disability must as a matter of equity be supported to participate “on the same basis” as their peers.

With this in mind, QPPD recognises the following issues in the provision of early childhood education and care to children with disability:

- Support for young people with disability to be well-included in early childhood services is critical for many reasons, including the fact that many families with a member with disability are economically disadvantaged because parents cannot participate in the workforce.
- It is particularly critical that young people with disability who are likely to face educational disadvantage due to developmental delays and/ or other impacts of their disability are not further disadvantaged by being locked out of the early educational experiences available to other Australian children.
- Children with disability may be excluded from childcare services (as they are from schools). This can happen through active discouragement upon enrolment e.g. “We may not have the resources to meet your child’s needs” or through using ‘waiting list’ excuses to deny service to children with disability. There are anecdotal reports from families and agencies that this is occurring, even though this is clearly unlawful.
- QPPD has been informed that the amount of paperwork to apply for the Inclusion Support Subsidy is large and time-consuming for childcare services. Childcare services are already stretched. Demands on staff are great and staff must constantly account for time. So it is unsurprising that the good will to include children with additional needs is threatened by additional paperwork, red-tape, and other demands put on the centre that cannot be claimed as ‘paid time’.

- Funding increases for specialist equipment appears to have been on hold for the last financial year, resulting in what could be viewed as a cut to funding. This may lead to children not being able to access all environments and their needs for support in development not being met. This goes against 'best-practice' described in the National Quality Framework.
- There are significant training and education needs for early childhood workers. There is little (to no) material in certificate childcare training courses that relate to concrete, best-practice with children with delays or disabilities. Many graduates of these courses, who often have little experience with children with disability, require additional training and support to be competent in meeting the needs of a diverse group of children. It is necessary for them to undertake further training and study in order to become 'highly skilled' in meeting the developmental needs of the children in their care.
- Many children use communication methods other than speech. Early childhood educators need to access and train in alternative and augmentative communication methods (AAC). For example, KeyWord Signing, Auslan, PECS, Speech Generating Devices amongst other methods. Such training could be recognised by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). These qualifications could then also be recognised under the National Quality Framework as contributing to an 'Element' in several of the assessed areas in the National Quality Standard ratings. This would encourage the whole staff environment to take up teaching and care practices that benefit a diversity of communication styles and abilities. Due to the work conditions of the industry, it is critical that all training is seen as an investment and educators are properly rewarded for engaging in training.
- A truly welcoming, warm and inclusive early childhood learning environment would see professional development and mentoring in: different models of communication, strength-based approaches to learning, embedded intervention, scaffolding of student interaction and collaboration, the building of peer friendships, and family-centred practice which recognises the expertise of the parent on their child.

- Families with a child with a disability may benefit from more flexible childcare models, however, we would caution against models which are an alternative that undermines inclusion in the mainstream models that currently exist. While some families may want to use private nannies or carers, for example, there is a great risk that these (like current “special” schools) undermine inclusion in family day care settings, kindergartens and childcare programs. If these private arrangements become the default for young children with disability many of the benefits of the inclusive pathway described above will be lost.
- QPPD strongly urges National Regulations to be amended so that Early Childhood Development Units are brought into the National Quality Framework. QPPD believes that the practices of Early Childhood Development Units should also be under rigorous assessment so that parents can compare the quality of services provided by ECDUs with embedded intervention practices of other early childhood education and care services. Given that there is no evidence overall that special education is equal or superior to inclusive education (see Jackson 2008 for an overview of evidence to date), it is critical that specialist disability programs are scrutinised to ensure that children with disability are not disadvantaged by the maintenance of a dual system.

Finally, “[c]hildren who experience disability are amongst the most excluded in Australia and throughout the world.” (Colognon, p8, 2013). Even within a busy early childcare classroom children with disability can be left on the margins. It is important then, in line with the Early Years Learning Framework, that the capacity of Early Childhood educators to provide a high-quality inclusive environment which enables children with disability to access all learning experiences, develop friendships, be seen as an individual and equal member of a community of learners, is developed further. It is important that such skills and training are formally recognised by regulatory bodies so that educators are financially, ethically, and professionally rewarded.

When parents of children with disability truly believe that their child is being offered the best in care and learning the uptake of early childhood education and care will be greatly increased, offering many parents the opportunity to undertake work or education.

Thank you.
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Dr Lisa Bridle
Education sub-committee members
Queensland Parents for People with a Disability.

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