Government
of South Australia
Department for
Child Protection

# Foundational theories and knowledge Working with children and young people with disability Practice Paper

## 1. Introduction

This practice paper provides DCP practitioners with an understanding of the principles of working with children and young people with developmental delay or disability. This practice paper uses the language ‘caregiver’ to refer to parents, carers and any other adult caregiver.

The rights of children and young people with disability are embedded in the Disability Inclusion Act SA (2018) (the Inclusion Act) which emphasises that children and young people with disability should be considered a priority group with different needs and vulnerabilities.

DCP practitioners need to be responsive to the unique needs of children and young people with developmental delay or disability, noting that children and young people with developmental delay or disability have a range of abilities, strengths, interests and potential for development that must be recognised and supported. Assessments and interventions should consider the needs and strengths of the individual child or young person.

The term ‘disability’ in this practice paper refers to physical, intellectual, sensory impairment and neurodevelopmental disabilities, which may be present from birth and/or acquired.

The nature and impact of disability varies significantly and it is recognised that many people, including children and young people, with disability do not feel negatively impacted by their disability but instead locate the cause of difficulties in societal factors (such as services not being suitable or accessible to people with disability, buildings and other spaces being inaccessible and in the prejudices and discrimination people with disability often face). For some children and young people with disability, their disability is part of their identity or culture.

This practice paper uses ‘person first language’ that is referring to ‘children or young people with developmental delay or disability’ but it is recognised that some people may prefer terms such as “being on the spectrum” or “neuro diverse”. DCP practitioners working with children and young people with disability should enquire about how they refer to themselves and use the language preferred by the individual child or young person.

This practice paper should be read in conjunction with the DCP Practice Principles, Relationship based practice- Practice Paper and Strengths Based Practice-Practice Paper.

## 2. Early identification and intervention for children and young people with developmental delay or disability

Developmental delay and disability are present to a higher degree for children and young people in care than in the general population. Early identification is critical to the wellbeing and development of children and young people with developmental delay or disability (refer to Identify and respond to the child or young person's disability needs key step in the Supporting children and young people in care chapter of the Manual of Practice). When there are concerns that delays in development may be occurring for a child or young person, a referral for assessment must be undertaken. If delays in development or disability are identified, early intervention supports should be put in place as soon as possible to reduce the likelihood of developmental delays or disability needs compounding.

Early childhood intervention is an approach that involves accessing specialised support and services for children 0 to 6 years old and ensuring supports are in place to access the community. There is evidence that effective early intervention can positively alter the child or young person's longer term trajectory[1] and potentially reduce the risk of secondary health and psychosocial complications. Early intervention is more effective when delivered across all environments. Working as a care team is essential to support coordinated and effective early intervention across all a child or young person's life domains, such as home, childcare/school and other community settings (refer to 'Work in partnership with the child or young person's care team in Support the placement key step in the Supporting children and young people in care chapter or the Manual of Practice).

To ensure early identification and intervention for children or young people placed in care, preliminary and comprehensive health and developmental assessments must be carried out to examine disability support needs, developmental abilities and health conditions. Further information relating to preliminary and comprehensive health checks is available in the Access health services for the child or young person key step of the Supporting children and young people in care chapter of the Manual of Practice. Disability specific information is available in the Identify and respond to the child or young person's disability needs key step in the Supporting children and young people in care chapter of the Manual of Practice.

## 3. Assessment considerations for case planning

The presence of a developmental delay or disability for a child or young person is of significant relevance in assessment, case direction and case planning. A child or young person's associated needs can contribute to greater vulnerability and increase parenting challenges. Refer to Assessment framework for more information.

Assessment must explore how developmental or disability needs for a child or young person contribute to additional care requirements, what adjustments or additional supports are necessary and the commitment required by these supports (such as specialist equipment or modifications, specialist schooling, adjustments to family contact, need for respite care, and attendance and engagement with therapists). Assessment must consider the unique needs of each child or young person in relation to the capacity of their caregiver to meet those individual needs.

In addition, it must be considered that children and young people with developmental delay or disability are particularly vulnerable to harm. This vulnerability can increase when children and young people with developmental delay or disability are cared for by caregivers with disability that impacts on their parenting capacity.

There are a variety of reasons that children and young people with developmental delay or disability experience increased vulnerability to abuse and neglect including:

- the additional emotional, physical and financial demands on caregivers relating to raising a child or young person with developmental delay or disability, which can increase social isolation and reduce support networks
- social or financial disadvantages resulting from reduced employment capacity of caregivers due to caregiving commitments or additional support costs
- difficulties accessing required resources or support
- a lack of understanding by the child or young person of appropriate boundaries in relationships and protective behaviours
- cognitive and communication difficulties that may impact a child or young person's capacity to communicate or understand abusive experiences
- children and young people who require high levels of personal care which may provide opportunity for caregivers and others to be abusive
- increased dependence on others to have their needs met including by people other than their caregivers
- children and young people with developmental delay or disability that affects their emotional regulation, including exhibiting behaviours such as aggression, physical violence, self-harm or running away, that may result in caregivers and others using inappropriate restrictive practices (such as seclusion or restraint that causes harm – see Understanding Restrictive Practices Practice Paper for further information regarding restrictive practices)
- being cared for by caregivers and others who do not have sufficient knowledge, resources and support to respond to their needs.

Refer to Safeguarding children and young people Practice Paper for additional information.

## 4. National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)

The NDIS provides access to disability related information, supports and services for children and young people and adults living with a disability. The National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) manages the NDIS. The NDIS has been designed to invest early when developmental delays or disability are first identified with the aim of improving long-term outcomes. The Regional Disability Team can provide support with NDIS access, planning meetings and implementation. Refer to DCP Disability and Development Services for more information.

Caregivers should be involved in NDIS planning meetings and decision making on services.

**The early childhood approach for children aged 0 to 6 years**

The NDIA has engaged Kudos Services as a partner organisation in South Australia to provide developmental assessment and referral pathways to early intervention supports for children aged 0 to 6 years as part of the NDIS early childhood approach.

The NDIS provides early childhood partners who are professionals with experience and expertise in working with children and young people with developmental delay or disability and their families. Early childhood partners can assist in working with caregivers to understand the child or young person's needs and connect to supports and services, including supporting an Access request to the NDIA. Early childhood partners are the first point of contact with the NDIS for children aged 0 to 6 years with developmental delay or disability.

**NDIS for children and young people 7 years and over**
Children and young people 7 years and over require a disability diagnosis and evidence of the impact that their condition has on their life, including any impact on their mobility, communication, social interaction, learning, self-care and self-management, to be eligible to access funding through a NDIS plan. The NDIA has identified some conditions as always resulting in permanent impairment and substantially reduced functional capacity and in these circumstances, evidence of the child or young person's diagnosis is sufficient to meet eligibility requirements. Refer to Providing evidence of disability for children on the NDIS website for more information in relation to eligibility and supporting evidence. Planning for children and young people 7 years and over may be undertaken by the NDIA directly or by NDIA partners called Local Area Coordinators (LACs).

Further information is available in the Identify and respond to the child or young person's disability needs key step in the Supporting children and young people in care chapter of the Manual of Practice or on the NDIS website.

## 5. Intervention considerations

All interventions should appropriately respond to the support requirements of children or young people with developmental delay or disability in the context of their everyday needs. Areas for consideration include whether:

- a diagnostic assessment has occurred to identify developmental delay or disability type and severity
- an assessment of the impact of the developmental delay or disability on the child or young person's day to day functioning has occurred
- the referral pathway (for assessment or support services) is responsive to individual needs, the capacity of the service will meet the needs of the child or young person and their context, the waiting time is acceptable for the complexity of need
- an application to the NDIA for support is necessary
- the individual has a NDIS plan that adequately meets their needs
- the NDIS plan would benefit from review
- adaptation is needed for communication access (such as communication aids including the use of pictures rather than written language, communication advocates, Easy English resources, communication boards, visual conversation or concept maps, lists or comic strip conversation supports)
- environmental modification is needed for the child or young person to best participate (such as physical access or reducing distractions through movement or noise)
- the child or young person would benefit from specialist equipment
- the child or young person has been linked to mainstream supports if not eligible for NDIS support.

It is essential that intervention acknowledges the strengths of the child or young person with developmental delay or disability, rather than focusing solely on deficits. Intervention supports should be useful in the child or young person's context.

Caregivers hold valuable information about the children and young people they care for and should be involved to ensure that interventions are based on all the information to meet the child or young person’s needs. Where relevant, caregivers should be actively engaged to build their capacity to understand and support the needs of the child or young person. For more information refer to DCP Practice Principles and Supporting and collaborating with carers Practice Paper.

# 6. Caring for children and young people with developmental delay or disability

Supporting caregivers and ensuring that they have the knowledge and skills required as well as the supports and services in place to provide care for children and young people with developmental delay or disability is particularly important. Children and young people with disability may require specific respite care arrangements to meet their needs and to support and sustain their care arrangements. Respite care funding for children and young people with disability residing in a family based placement can be included in the child or young person’s NDIS plan (refer to Identify and respond to the child or young person's disability needs key step in the Supporting children and young people in care chapter of the Manual of Practice). For kinship carers, the Therapeutic Carer Support Team can provide short term in-home support (refer to DCP Disability and Development Services for more information).

Children and young people with developmental delay or disability in some instances may have multiple services involved and therefore working in partnership with the child or young person’s care team is integral to ensure appropriate care, intervention and support is provided.

Refer to Supporting and collaborating with carers Practice Paper, Support the placement key step in the Supporting children and young people in care chapter of the Manual of Practice.

Children and young people with developmental delay or disability may require longer to acquire new skills and may learn in different ways. They may need more assistance for daily activities in addition to needing more intensive opportunities to observe and practice new skills than their peers. Connecting and involving caregivers with specialist developmental or disability supports is crucial so that they can develop their capacity to foster their child or young person’s developmental potential.

## 6.1 Considerations for children and young people with developmental delay or disability in residential care

Children and young people with developmental delay or disability in residential care may require additional supports. This includes both DCP and non-government organisation (NGO) residential care as well as general and disability specific residential placements. It is important that DCP practitioners consider the specific needs of the child or young person with developmental delay or disability and the nature of the residential care environment.

The Specialist Services Team provides a range of services to children and young people in DCP residential care and placements supported by NGOs (refer to DCP Disability and Development Services for more information).

## 7. Incorporating a child or young person's voice

Children and young people have the right to participate in decision making. Children and young people with developmental delay or disability often encounter barriers to engagement making it challenging to participate in important conversations and to express their opinions, wants and needs.

Active effort should be made to create accessible environments and opportunities to support the participation of children and young people with developmental delay or disability, considerate of individual needs as they relate to:

- age, both chronological and developmental
- type of developmental delay or disability including physical, intellectual, sensory impairment and/or neurodevelopmental
- investing necessary time, attention and tools to promote participation based on individual need (such as different mediums, formats, methods of engagement, technologies and spaces).

For additional information refer to Supporting the participation of children and young people in decision making Practice Paper and Seek the views of the child or young person in the Supporting children and young people in care chapter of the Manual of Practice.

## 8. Preparing for transition to adulthood

It is essential for DCP practitioners to carefully plan for young people's transition to adulthood. There are additional assessments and case planning that needs to occur during this stage for young people with disability. The DCP disability consultant will provide guidance regarding the additional preparation required.

DCP practitioners need to:

- ensure that young people's NDIS plans have adequate funding for Support Coordination and Capacity Building, including funding to cover a functional assessment and support to develop their independent living skills
- ensure that young people transitioning to adulthood have access to ongoing necessary supports
- consider an application for a guardianship and/or administration order through the South Australian Civil and Administrative Tribunal.

Refer to Identify and respond to the child or young person's disability needs key step in the Supporting children and young people in care chapter of the Manual of Practice and Transition to adulthood chapter in the Manual of Practice for more information.

# 9. Cultural considerations

## 9.1 Considerations for Aboriginal children and young people with developmental delay or disability

The five elements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (ACCP) must be applied when working with Aboriginal children and young people with developmental delay or disability (refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle Practice Paper). Aboriginal children and young people and their caregivers must be given opportunity to participate in all significant decisions affecting them including in relation to their development delay or disability and associated supports (refer to Family Led Decision Making for Aboriginal families Framework). DCP practitioners need to ensure that details of the children or young person's cultural identity are captured correctly to ensure that the child or young person's cultural needs can be advocated for as part of NDIS planning, including referral to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and other culturally appropriate services who provide NDIS services. Involvement of Principal Aboriginal Consultants and Aboriginal Family Practitioners may assist with this process in conjunction with the DCP disability consultant and consultation should be considered throughout case planning.

## 9.2 Considerations for children and young people with developmental delay or disability from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds

When working with children and young people with disability from CALD backgrounds, DCP practitioners should be mindful of how developmental delay or disability may be perceived by the child or young person and their caregivers. In some instances, this may cause children or young people and their caregivers to be reluctant to acknowledge a developmental delay or disability. It is important to remember that perceptions can vary from culture to culture, between individuals and within families. Consideration should also be given to the most culturally appropriate referral pathways. The DCP Multicultural Services team can provide cultural advice and further support to DCP practitioners (refer to Working with Diversity - Culturally and Linguistically Diverse people - Practice Paper).

For more information to support engagement with Aboriginal and CALD children and young people with disability and their caregivers refer to Relationship based practice- Practice Paper, Engage with the family key step in the Intake, investigation and assessment chapter of the Manual of Practice and Identify and respond to the child or young person's disability needs key step in the Supporting children and young people in care chapter of the Manual of Practice.

## 10. References

[1] Doyle O, Harmon C, Heckman J, Tremblay R. (2009). Investing in Early Human Development: Timing and Economic Efficiency. *Economics & Human Biology, 7 (1), 1-6.*

[2] Connolly, H. Commissioner for Children and Young People, South Australia (2022). *From Checkbox to Commitment: what children and young people with disability said about identity, inclusion and independence*. May 2022.

## Document control

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Reference No./ File No.** | | | |
| **Document Owner** | | **Lead Writer (name, position)** | |
| Directorate/Unit: Quality and Practice | | Practice Leader, Practice Approach | |
| Accountable Director: Quality and Practice | | | |
| **Commencement date** | 2 May 2023 | **Review date** | 2 May 2026 |
| **Risk rating**<br>**Risk Assessment Matrix** | **Consequence Rating** | **Likelihood** | **Risk Rating** |
| | Minor | Unlikely | Low |

| **REVISION RECORD** | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Approval Date** | **Version** | **Revision description** |
| March 2020 | 0.1 | Draft |
| May 2020 | 1.0 | Final |
| 14 April 2023 | 2.0 | Review as per policy review cycle |