

## **Submission to the House Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Disability Inquiry into the Thriving Kids Initiative**

### **Key Issue**

The Thriving Kids initiative has the potential to improve outcomes for children with developmental differences, but only if it builds on evidence and existing community experience.

Evidence from the Sunshine Coast demonstrates that children and families thrive when supports are:

- Neuro-affirming and strengths-based,
- Affordable and accessible,
- Delivered in small, relationship-focused groups, and
- Embedded in local community networks alongside schools and allied health.

Services such as All About Autism (AAA) show what this looks like in practice. For ten years, AAA has provided small-group programs that build executive functioning, social connection, and emotional regulation. Families report that their children develop skills, confidence, and a sense of belonging that is not achieved in mainstream or therapy settings alone.

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### **Insights from Families and Children who attend AAA**

- Belonging and identity: Many autistic children mask in mainstream environments and experience exclusion. In neuro-affirming spaces, they find belonging. As one parent said: *“AAA is the only place my child feels safe to be themselves.”*
- Skill development in natural settings: Children build communication, regulation, and executive functioning skills in low-pressure, play-based groups. These skills transfer back into school and family life.
- Peer connection: Mixed-age, small groups enable authentic friendships. Alumni report that these connections helped shape their identity and wellbeing into adolescence.
- Accessibility and equity: Affordable services are essential to avoid excluding First Nations and CALD families. High-cost private options deepen inequity.

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### **Lessons for Thriving Kids**

The experience of community-based services highlights several lessons for the initiative:

1. Invest in what works: Programs that are affordable, neuro-affirming, and embedded in community deliver long-term outcomes.
2. Bridge systems: Families need help navigating between health, allied health, and education. Thriving Kids should strengthen these links.
3. Prioritise equity: Without affordable options, families with fewer resources will be excluded.
4. Support workforce sustainability: Staff need training in neuro-affirming practice and opportunities to collaborate across disciplines. Upskilling staff in neuro-affirming practice is essential.
5. Value continuity: Children benefit from consistent, long-term support rather than short-term, fragmented programs. Children need continuity across systems, not gaps or duplication.

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### **Recommendation**

#### **For Thriving Kids to succeed, it must:**

- Partner with and scale existing community-embedded models,
- Ensure affordability so no child is excluded,
- Prioritise neuro-affirming practice as the standard, and
- Provide stable, long-term funding to sustain workforce and outcomes.

#### **Contact for follow-up:**

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