

Submission to the Inquiry into the Thriving Kids Initiative

Introduction

I am a parent of two neurodiverse children, and the Thriving Kids program will directly affect our family. I am making this submission to ensure the program genuinely supports children like mine to grow and thrive in ways that affirm their identity and wellbeing.

Key Issue 1: Concern with ABA-Based Approaches

The Thriving Kids initiative appears to be based heavily on Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) therapies. While ABA has historically been used with autistic children, there is growing evidence and testimony from autistic people that it can be harmful to mental health.

Research and lived experience show that:

- ABA often focuses on teaching children to mask their autistic traits, rather than supporting them to embrace their neurodivergence.
- Masking has been linked to higher rates of anxiety, depression, and burnout in autistic people.
- Neurodiversity-affirming approaches are increasingly recognised as more ethical and effective, as they build on strengths rather than seeking to “fix” perceived deficits.

Children should not be put in situations where they feel pressured to suppress who they are in order to fit in. Instead, they deserve therapies and supports that affirm their identity, encourage genuine self-expression, and foster long-term wellbeing.

Recommendations

1. Any changes to the Thriving Kids program must be led and co-designed by neurodiverse people, including autistic adults, to ensure the program reflects lived experience.
2. The program should prioritise neurodiversity-affirming therapies and supports, rather than relying on behaviourist approaches that risk long-term harm.
3. The program should promote inclusion, self-acceptance, and mental health, ensuring children feel comfortable in their own skin rather than pressured to conform.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into the Thriving Kids initiative. I strongly urge the government to ensure this program is co-designed with the neurodiverse community and based on approaches that affirm, rather than suppress, children's identities. Our kids deserve to thrive by being supported as they are — not by being trained to mask who they are.