

30 September 2026

Thriving Kids starts: AABA wants reform to succeed, but key questions remain

Thriving Kids represents a major change to how many Autistic children and families will access early support. Australia's Autism Advisory Board (the AABA) wants it to succeed. As this new program begins, important questions remain about how Thriving Kids will work in practice, whether supports will be adequate and consistent across Australia, and how the NDIS transition will work. For children and families in Queensland, uncertainty is even greater, with the state yet to reach agreement with the Commonwealth on Thriving Kids implementation.

Getting the settings right as Thriving Kids rolls out will be critical. We see five priorities for implementation:

1. **A well-managed transition with the NDIS.** Current NDIS access arrangements remain in place until 1 January 2028, giving Thriving Kids time to roll out, be tested and build capacity. We are calling for transparent monitoring to ensure NDIS access is maintained in practice during the transition, and a clear readiness test before access changes take effect to ensure Thriving Kids has sufficient targeted support capacity.
2. **Adequate and consistent targeted supports.** Thriving Kids targeted supports, such as allied health therapy and intensive family capacity building, will only be available to children who meet an access threshold that is still being worked out. Getting that threshold right, so it reflects children's support needs across different settings and over time, and so Autistic children and families who need personalised support can get it, is critical. With different approaches being taken across states and territories, children with comparable needs should be able to access a reasonably consistent level of support wherever they live. We are calling for national parameters around issues such as minimum duration of support and access to further periods of support where needed.
3. **Protecting existing autism supports.** The National Agreement requires Thriving Kids funding to be additional to comparable supports already in place, not a substitute for them. Existing investment should not be rebadged or double counted towards new Thriving Kids commitments. Governments should protect effective existing supports and ensure Thriving Kids delivers genuinely additional investment.
4. **Rural and remote delivery that works.** Workforce shortages and thin markets make separate program streams particularly difficult to sustain in rural and remote communities. More flexible approaches, including better alignment of commissioning across Thriving Kids, other state-funded services and the NDIS, would make better use of the available workforce and support more viable local services.
5. **Early visibility of what is working and where problems are emerging.** The staged rollout should be used to identify what is working, spot problems early and adjust course. Community feedback needs to be matched by nationally comparable data on unmet demand, waiting times, access to targeted supports, the amount and duration of support provided, movement between Thriving Kids and the NDIS, and whether children experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, First Nations children and other priority groups are getting fair access.

AABA is the national council for Australia's long-running, community-established autism associations, bringing together Autism Queensland, Aspect, Amaze, Autism SA and Autism WA.

Together, we serve and support Autistic people and their families across Australia.