

MEDIA RELEASE

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ASDP Responds to NDIS Reform Direction, Calls for Functional Approach and Strong Developmental Supports

The Australasian Society for Developmental Paediatrics (ASDP) has responded to the Australian Government's proposed reforms to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), following the address by Minister for Health and Aged Care, **Mark Butler**, at the National Press Club this week.

ASDP recognises the importance of ensuring the long-term sustainability of the NDIS, while continuing to deliver meaningful outcomes for children and families. The Society notes that while the direction of reform is becoming clearer, significant detail regarding implementation remains unresolved.

"Developmental paediatricians work at the frontline with children and families navigating complex needs," said Dr Katie Heathershaw, ASDP President. "Reform must strengthen—not disrupt—access to timely, evidence-based developmental care."

Refocusing the NDIS on Functional Need

ASDP supports a shift away from diagnosis as the primary gateway to the NDIS, and a return to the Scheme's original intent of supporting individuals with significantly reduced functional capacity.

"Diagnosis alone does not determine a child's needs," said Dr Heathershaw. "Two children with the same diagnosis can have vastly different levels of functional impact. Assessment must focus on a child's capacity, strengths, and challenges in daily living, communication, behaviour and participation."

The Society notes that a functional approach, has the potential to improve equity and better target supports. However, further clarity is needed on how functional capacity will be assessed in children, including whether assessment tools are evidence-based, consistent and appropriate for developmental and fluctuating conditions. It will also be important to ensure these tools are appropriate for use in children from non-English speaking backgrounds and from different cultures, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

Early Intervention Must Remain Central

ASDP acknowledges the Government's focus on strengthening earlier supports outside the NDIS, including the development of foundational supports such as those proposed under the Thriving Kids program.

"Early identification and targeted supports are critical to lifelong outcomes," said Dr Heathershaw. "If supports are shifted outside the NDIS, they must be consistent, equitable, accessible, and grounded in developmental expertise."

The Society notes that these systems are not yet fully established and will require coordinated implementation across state and federal systems.

Delays in access to early supports during critical developmental periods can have lasting impacts on outcomes across health, education and participation.

A Healthy NDIS for the Future

ASDP is particularly concerned about the risk of service gaps during the transition to new models of care. Without clear and timely implementation of alternative supports, there is a risk that children and families may experience delays in accessing essential services.

The Society also highlights the need to rebuild community-based support pathways for children with mild to moderate needs, including early childhood, school and preschool-based services, many of which have diminished over time as the system shifted toward the NDIS.

ASDP emphasises that successful reform depends on investment in workforce capacity, including developmental paediatricians and allied health professionals, noting that a functional assessment model requires time, expertise and multidisciplinary input.

“We share the Government’s goal of a fair, sustainable system,” said Dr Heathershaw. “Ensuring continuity of access to support for children, particularly during early developmental stages, will be critical to achieving that goal.”

ASDP welcomes the opportunity to work with Government to ensure reforms are informed by clinical expertise and grounded in the lived experience of children and families.

Media Contact:

Dr Katie Heathershaw President, ASDP: 0412 874 994

About ASDP

The Australasian Society for Developmental Paediatrics (ASDP) is the peak professional body for developmental paediatricians across Australasia, representing 1000 specialist medical doctors across the region, and dedicated to improving the health and wellbeing of children with developmental and behavioural conditions.