

## Thriving Kids can work if it's done in the right way, disability advocates say

The founders of AllPlay argue \$2bn NDIS alternative Thriving Kids can help families who fear their kids will fall through the cracks – but only if it's set up in the right way.

Nicole Rinehart and Jonathan Wenig

Australia stands on the brink of one of the most significant reforms to child development and disability support in a generation. The Thriving Kids initiative – a \$2 billion Australian government program set to launch in mid-2026 – aims to deliver equitable, evidence-based supports for children aged 0–9 whose level of delay and/or disability falls short of NDIS eligibility criteria.

This initiative has generated considerable anxiety in the (disability) community. There is understandable concern about the impact of Thriving Kids on families, particularly access to the NDIS.



Jonathan Wenig, founder of All Things Equal, thinks Thriving Kids can work if it is done in the right way.

The reality is that change can be difficult and not all change is good. But in our view, Thriving Kids will be a giant and transformative step forward IF the program is guided by research, and by what has been proven successful in the past.

On both counts, we are well placed to provide critical advice.

First, make access to support diagnosis agnostic. Families shouldn't have to wait months for a label to receive supports we already know will help their child.

Second, ensure programs are pragmatic by asking how a support will actually be used in the real world. If an intervention runs between 9am and 3pm and parents have to pull their child out of school and leave work twice a week to attend, participation plummets and stress rises. Deliver that same program at 4.30pm, close to home, and participation soars.



Nicole Rinehart from Monash University and founder of AllPlay

Third, design for life-course transitions. The steepest cliffs come when supports end - the move into primary school, secondary school and the workforce. Each step should be planned with the next in mind, so children and families are not forced to start again every few years.

Fourth, embed inclusion in mainstream settings. Partnerships with community sport, arts organisations and schools create more entry points and more chances to practise skills where children actually live their lives. This is how inclusion becomes habit, rather than a special event.

## AllPlay and All Things Equal

Over a decade, the trajectory of AllPlay, an Australia-wide initiative which put the latest research findings into the hands of parents, carers, children, teachers, coaches and professionals, has explored and discovered how to break down barriers to inclusion for children with disability.

In the early years, AllPlay Footy made it plain that not all children want to play football, so families asked for other choices, and AllPlay Dance was born. Then came the question, what about adolescents? And we discovered the work being undertaken by not-for-profit organisation Flying Fox in building confidence and community through inclusive camps and programs.



Members of the All Things Equal group.

When the AllPlay team started pondering what happens in schools, we developed programs for Departments of Education, and also partnered with Giant Steps Australia, which runs schools and programs for children with autism. AllPlay Learn now helps to translate inclusion into the everyday routines of teachers and students.

More recently, we asked what happens when these children grow up, and established All Things Equal, a training initiative that offers a bridge to real jobs and purposeful adult lives.

Across these programs the theme is consistent: join the dots, remove the friction, and keep asking “who is missing?”.



Staff from All Things Equal, an all-abilities cafe.

When we ask that question, girls often emerge as a group existing systems don't see early enough. Disability prevalence is similar for males and females, yet girls and women are under-represented among National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) participants.

The solution is not a siloed “girls program”. It is a system designed for families that removes the frictions that keep too many children, including girls, from being identified early and supported well.

## What needs to be done?

Thriving Kids can and should hard-wire these lessons from day one by:

- Connecting community to evidence-based supports – without insisting on a diagnosis first.
- Tying funding to usable access.
- Embed a national research platform within Thriving Kids to test, learn and scale.

- Training the mainstream workforce.
- Designing for transitions.
- Keeping equity in constant view. Ask “who is not turning up?” – by gender,

language, postcode, First Nations status and family income – and adjust the design until the answer is “no one”.

Thriving Kids is a rare opportunity for Australia to construct simpler, smarter architecture for

disability support by starting with what works, designing for real families, and joining the dots

from early years to employment.

The payoff will be multigenerational.

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