

No Child Left Out: Designing Thriving Kids for a Diverse Australia

August 2026



The National Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Disability Reform Committee

(NCDRC) was established in response to a recognised need for a collective and coordinated approach to inform disability reform impacting culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. The committee brings together a wide network of services, peak bodies and community organisations who work closely with culturally diverse communities to provide collaborative input to disability service reforms. The NCDRC's initial focus is on the Thriving Kids program, providing a key mechanism for governments across all jurisdictions to engage with a wide network of culturally diverse service providers and the communities they serve. It is important to recognise that culturally and linguistically diverse communities are not a single homogeneous group, but comprise a wide range of cultural, language, migration, and settlement experiences requiring tailored and flexible approaches.

■ THE REASON

Why a focus on culturally diverse communities within Thriving Kids?

More than 51% of the Australian population are first or second generation migrants¹, but only 10% of NDIS participants (Q2, 2025/26) are culturally diverse², highlighting a significant equity gap and the risk of perpetuating service gaps. Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) research found that children from culturally diverse backgrounds are half as likely to access early intervention supports as other children. Children from CALD backgrounds are more likely to be developmentally vulnerable at school entry than non-CALD children, as measured by the AEDC. This was consistent across all five AEDC cohorts of children from 2009 to 2021. Overall, children from CALD backgrounds in Australia who did not attend any type of ECEC were almost 80% more likely to be developmentally vulnerable, compared to those who attended³. A focus on culturally and linguistically diverse communities is needed for Thriving Kids to achieve its objectives with a large proportion of the population.

What is the program challenge?

Low access of disability services by culturally diverse communities results from a mix of cultural and systemic barriers. For Thriving Kids, early identification and engagement is critical, yet even more challenging for children than adults. Barriers include limited awareness and understanding of available services, language and communication barriers, low digital literacy when navigating systems, visa related eligibility constraints, and a lack of culturally appropriate information and engagement pathways. These barriers are often compounded by intersecting factors such as trauma, migration stress, socioeconomic disadvantage, regional isolation, and low digital literacy.⁴ Experiences of stigma, fear, shame, and mistrust of formal systems can further delay early engagement and support-seeking within some communities.

These barriers are well understood and can be effectively addressed through organisations with culturally diverse bilingual and bicultural staff who have strong, trusted relationships within their communities. When these organisations are involved, NDIS access for culturally diverse communities is more than double the national average, demonstrating genuine expertise and meaningful community engagement.

What is the solution?

We recommend a focus on three immediate strategies during this design and implementation phase of Thriving Kids. These strategies enable better program engagement with culturally diverse communities and better population-level outcomes.

SOLUTION ONE



Establish both State and Territory, and Federal level CALD Advisory Committees to guide the governance, design, implementation and evaluation of the Thriving Kids program

SOLUTION TWO



Commission culturally diverse organisations in the service mix

SOLUTION THREE



Invest in program infrastructure for culturally inclusive service delivery

While there are many interrelated aspects of the program challenge to address, these three strategies will enable governments to address the major barriers to engagement from CALD communities, by ensuring the right networks of expertise are present at the right stages of program development.

■ CASE STUDY ONE

Culturally diverse services have demonstrable benefits for the families that engage with them.

A Vietnamese participant with an intellectual disability and his father in SSI's Local area coordination (LAC) program had been experiencing difficulties in navigating the NDIS and linking with appropriate services due to barriers around language, having migrated to Australia in 2021. As a result, the family became increasingly isolated and disengaged from government services, placing them at heightened risk of unmet support needs, caregiver stress, and potential family breakdown.

In 2025, a Vietnamese speaking LAC was allocated to the family. The LAC was able to support both the participant and his father by explaining the evidence required for plan reviews and breaking down how NDIS funding could be used. The LAC

also connected the participant with a Vietnamese speaking speech therapist, provided information about services to support reunification with the participant's mother who remains in Vietnam, and helped the father better understand his rights when interacting with government agencies, including access to interpreters and appeal processes.

Following this in language support, the father reported significant improvements for both himself and the participant. The participant has demonstrated improved engagement and progress at school, increased social connections, and greater independence and confidence, including a stronger willingness to attend therapies. The father has also shared that his improved understanding of Australian services has helped the family adapt more smoothly to life here and they are confident in working towards a more stable and positive future.



■ SOLUTION ONE

Establish both State and Territory, and Federal level CALD Advisory Committees to guide the governance, design, implementation and evaluation of the Thriving Kids program

NCDRC members have reported that when Governments include only one or two culturally diverse peak bodies and/or organisations in governance or consultative groups, members are unable to adequately convey the full strategic weight and value of culturally diverse perspectives in that context. This lack of inclusion becomes even more significant when considering the complexity and diversity of the communities they are expected to represent.

With more than 30% of the Australian population born overseas and another 20% being second generation migrants¹, better representation will lead to improved program design and steering. This is not about proportional representation for its own sake; rather, it is about creating the conditions in which culturally diverse perspectives can provide government with the strategic insights required to deliver services effectively and equitably.

All jurisdictions will require program governance structures that engage meaningfully with peak bodies and

service providers. We also agree with the importance given to co-design by the National Advisory Committee and state-based consultations. This governance approach should be supported by clear accountability mechanisms to ensure CALD inclusion is embedded across commissioning, monitoring, evaluation, and measurable outcomes, rather than remaining discretionary. Strengthening this approach through a dedicated co-design or steering mechanism would enable more structured and ongoing engagement, ensuring lived experience informs decision-making throughout all stages of program design and delivery.

If 30% of any group's membership were culturally diverse organisations, this would not be excessive or strategically unsound. However, we do not advocate for a fixed percentage. Rather, we expect governments nationally to ensure that multiple organisations are providing culturally diverse representation throughout their program design and implementation processes.

Through effective representation, culturally diverse organisations will be able to provide critical and practical input for:

- Transition communications (now to early 2028)
- Design and implementation of ongoing Thriving Kids communications, community education, online resources, engagement and entry pathways, and services
- A workforce strategy which delivers a culturally diverse, multilingual and culturally responsive workforce
- Ensuring the rollout of Thriving Kids is underpinned by nationally consistent principles that support CALD communities.
- Coordination with all agencies relevant to early childhood development
- Services accessible to different visa classes
- Trauma informed and culturally responsive frameworks for practice and organisations
- Monitoring, evaluation and continual improvement – including for equity
- Embedding accountability mechanisms to ensure CALD inclusion is reflected in governance, commissioning, monitoring, evaluation, and measurable outcomes.



■ CASE STUDY TWO

NSW Ability Links, which operated from 2014 to 2020, was a place based initiative that supported people with disability and their families without requiring a formal diagnosis, service fee, or visa prerequisite.

Linkers supported CALD and First Nations individuals aged 9–64 to set goals, navigate services, and build more inclusive communities, while Early Linkers provided short term, tailored support to families of children aged 0–8 experiencing emerging developmental concerns.

A 2016 statewide evaluation conducted by consultancy firm Urbis found the program delivered strong outcomes, with a benefit–cost ratio of 2.4 to 1 and a substantial proportion (75%) of outcomes achieved for CALD participants⁵. Program stakeholders identified bilingual and culturally diverse

SSI Linkers as key to achieving positive client outcomes, due to their shared understanding of cultural norms and values. This strong foundation of trust enabled the community to inform the direction of the program, which followed a strengths-based approach focusing on people’s interests, aspirations and abilities.

These culturally appropriate design and delivery mechanisms directly feed into the NDIS Review’s recommendations to strengthen navigation support and make it accessible to all people with disability, both within and outside the scheme. This includes the provision of specialist navigators for people with more complex needs and those from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The ethos that drove Ability Links should act as a beacon for all initiatives that engage CALD people with disability and highlights the importance of comprehensive impact measurement in identifying both successes and gaps.

■ SOLUTION TWO

Commission culturally diverse organisations in the service mix

Low rates of NDIS access² indicate the presence of systemic barriers affecting culturally diverse communities. These barriers include the stressors associated with settling in a new country and adapting to unfamiliar cultural expectations; limited English proficiency and digital literacy, particularly when navigating enrolment processes; visa related restrictions impacting eligibility for supports and employment; and a lack of awareness or understanding of available programs. Although mainstream organisations work hard to address these issues, progress has been limited. Culturally diverse organisations, by contrast, are effective incubators of the diverse workforce needed across all sectors, demonstrating strong capability in community engagement. Empowered multilingual workers and extensive networks of trust within communities are key strengths. Community members consistently report that culturally diverse organisations understand how to uphold each person's dignity in ways others are often unable – avoiding the hurt or shame that contributes to reticence about engaging with mainstream organisations. Trusted communication pathways including bilingual workers, ethnic media, faith-based networks, community leaders, and informal cultural networks, are critical in reaching families who may otherwise remain disengaged.

Culturally diverse organisations represent a strategic opportunity for Thriving Kids to engage the whole population effectively from the start. Continued and sustainable funding of culturally responsive navigation and settlement-linked service models remains critical to maintaining and expanding these outcomes. Leveraging that opportunity requires designing a commissioning approach that ensures appropriate culturally diverse organisations are engaged in ways that leverage their capabilities and complement other services.

Contracting large organisations with the expectation that they will successfully partner with smaller organisations has repeatedly demonstrated shortcomings to NCDRC members. This add-on approach inhibits place-based delivery and further marginalises the significant populations we serve. Poor partnership practice fails to effectively leverage the strengths of subcontracted organisations. This reinforces the need for equitable and properly funded partnership models, where smaller community-led organisations are resourced as equal partners rather than subcontracted delivery channels.

Smaller, grassroots and community-led organisations often hold deep trust within local communities and play a critical role in engagement, early identification, and sustained participation. Due to their community-embedded nature and geographic reach, culturally diverse organisations are well placed to ensure limited resources are managed effectively, avoiding both over-servicing and the failure to reach families who would benefit from early intervention. To maximise and sustain the value of public investment in community services, we recommend relational contracting approaches and contract terms of at least five years.

Culturally diverse organisations already provide all or several elements of the local Thriving Kids service mix, including:

- Best practice early childhood intervention services that include a mix of allied health, early childhood specialists and family capacity building workers
- Capacity building of parents and carers through parenting programs, peer supports and individual advocacy
- Soft entry points for families including schools, playgroups, community hubs, and cultural organisations, to build relationships with services on their terms and support early identification and engagement
- Multilingual community information and education via direct engagement with CALD communities
- Primary contact workers, coordination or navigator functions
- Effective engagement and referrals to wider services and informal community supports

Through greater investment in building capacity and capability, more culturally diverse organisations could deliver all these elements, strengthening capacity across the broader service mix.

■ CASE STUDY THREE

The Health Impact Project (HIP) demonstrates how a Multicultural Child Participation Model can play a vital role not only in direct service delivery, but also in strengthening the broader local service system to better respond to the needs of CALD families.

HIP aims to improve the health and wellbeing of children under five years of age and their parents through Community Hubs located in schools across New South Wales and Queensland. In FY25, the project engaged 260 caregivers and 273 children, including 71 children with disability. Families were supported to access occupational and speech therapy, alongside culturally tailored information days and workshops covering service navigation, parenting, child health, oral health, nutrition, hygiene and physical activity.

The project also enables other services to reach CALD families more effectively. For example, the Brisbane South Primary Health Network (TOTS), partnered with HIP to deliver outreach through a bilingual Speech and Language Pathologist across five Community Hub sites in Logan. Through

this collaboration, custom hub-specific resources were developed and culturally accessible workshops (Helping Your Child to Talk and Reading with Your Child) were delivered, increasing uptake and engagement by CALD families who may not otherwise access speech services.

A tangible example involved a young mother attending playgroup with her two year old child. She was experiencing social isolation, limited awareness of developmental milestones, and hesitation to engage with formal services. Through outreach delivered under TOTS by a bilingual Speech and Language Pathologist and supported by occupational therapy and Community Hub staff, early concerns about the child's communication and play development were identified and addressed within a culturally safe playgroup environment. Real time parent coaching of culturally responsive communication and practical demonstrations enabled the mother to confidently use strategies at home. As a result, the child showed improved joint attention, increased use of gestures, and greater engagement in play routines, while the mother gained confidence to access further supports, including Child Development Services and the NDIS.



■ SOLUTION THREE

Invest in program infrastructure for culturally inclusive service delivery

Allocate budget within program infrastructure to support effective information exchange and service delivery with CALD communities and program participants. This includes investment in targeted, culturally informed communication strategies, recognising that translation of mainstream materials alone is insufficient. State and Federal Governments will need specific communication strategies for multicultural communities, reflecting how culturally diverse communities access information, understand available programs, and engage with services.

Program infrastructure which will be critical for effective and equitable engagement with a significant proportion of the community, should include:

- Multilingual and easy English communications and websites which are designed for diverse languages and cultures and informed by disability needs
- Multilingual and easy English resources for families and children to build capacity and strengthen understanding around systems and supports
- Workforce planning for and investment in a multicultural and multilingual workforce, including for regional/rural/remote locations
- Professional development for a multicultural and culturally responsive workforce
- Co design and lived experience engagement with culturally diverse communities, supported by capacity building of organisations and community leaders to contribute to Thriving Kids
- Whole-of-government coordination supporting the achievement of Thriving Kids' outcomes – including the active involvement of education and health agencies
- Free or low-cost access to Thriving Kids services and to interpreters
- Community input to monitoring, evaluation and ongoing improvement
- Culturally safe and accessible complaints and safeguarding mechanisms
- Consistent access to qualified interpreters across all program touchpoints
- Communication strategies leveraging trusted community networks such as ethnic media, faith groups, and community leaders

For example, the Raising Children website is already working with culturally diverse organisations and their community networks to improve accessibility and usefulness for diverse communities.

CALD families often require tailored parenting support to navigate the complex intersections of their migration and settlement experience, including navigating their cultural identity in a new country and potentially traumatic life events. Many experience significant barriers when seeking to understand and access local health, education, and social systems, such as the Disability Support Pension, where lengthy wait times and complex documentation requirements can delay access to essential support for years.

Free, universally available evidence-based information can play an important role in providing families with the support they need in real time.

In a 2-year initiative, the Raising Children Network has partnered with community-based organisations to improve the outreach, relevance, accessibility and impact of its evidence-based parenting

resources to CALD families. Led by Plumtree Children's Services, and supported by Ethnic Community Services, its co-design approach involves collaborating with families from three communities, Kurdish, Hindi, and Arabic, with guidance from an overarching advisory group comprised of senior representatives from key services and multicultural organisations.

The initial phase developed a best-practice co-design framework for effectively working with families from CALD backgrounds. The framework includes underlying operating principles, a partnership model core to its success, deep involvement of trusted community leaders and families, and the processes essential to providing a trusted, culturally safe environment that facilitates knowledge-sharing, capacity-building, and robust cultural safety in the workplace.

The second phase of the project then involved applying the framework to develop and disseminate culturally responsive parenting information in partnership with both identified newly arrived and more established families from cultural and language-based playgroups in Western Sydney.



No Child Left Out: Designing Thriving Kids for a Diverse Australia at a Glance

SOLUTION ONE



A State/Federal CALD Advisory Committee to guide the governance, design, implementation, and evaluation of Thriving Kids.

Ensure culturally diverse perspectives shape decisions

- Multiple culturally diverse organisations in governance and advisory groups
- Ongoing co-design across program design, implementation, and oversight
- Input to:
 - Communications and transition planning
 - Service design and access pathways
 - Culturally diverse and multilingual workforce strategy
 - National consistency and cross-agency coordination
 - Visa-inclusive, trauma-informed, culturally responsive practice
 - Monitoring, evaluation, and equity outcomes

SOLUTION TWO



Commission culturally diverse organisations in the service mix.

Position culturally diverse organisations as core service partners

- Relational commissioning and longer-term contracts
- Targeted capacity and capability investment
- Place-based early intervention aligned to community need
- Trusted engagement that supports dignity and access

SOLUTION THREE



Investing in program infrastructure for culturally inclusive service delivery

Enable effective information sharing and service delivery

- Multilingual and Easy English communications, websites, and resources
- Multicultural and multilingual workforce planning and development
- Co-design and lived-experience engagement
- Capacity building for community organisations and leaders
- Best-practice frameworks, feedback, and complaints mechanisms
- Free or low-cost access to services and interpreters
- Whole-of-government coordination and national consistency

This report highlights the urgent need to embed CALD voices, expertise and leadership at the centre of Thriving Kids reform. The NCDRC calls on governments and program decision makers to ensure that **Thriving Kids and related reforms are co designed with CALD communities**, governed by **genuine representation from culturally diverse service providers**, and delivered through **properly funded, culturally capable services**. These commitments must be reflected in **program governance, commissioning frameworks and evaluation measures**, not left to discretionary practice. Immediate action is required to deliver equitable access, improve outcomes for children and families, and build a disability service system that is effective, sustainable and responsive to Australia's diversity, including the unique intersection between disability and multicultural experiences.

■ REFERENCES

- ¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2021). Snapshot of Australia. ABS. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/snapshot-australia/latest-release>.
- ² National Disability Insurance Agency Quarterly Report Q2 2025–26 © National Disability Insurance Agency (2025). <https://www.ndis.gov.au/media/8281/download?attachment>
- ³ Lam, B., McMahon, T., Beauchamp, T., Badu, E. & Brinkman, S. (2024). Stronger Starts, Brighter Futures II: Exploring trends to promote the early development of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Australia. Occasional Paper – Number 5. © SSI/ Education Futures University of South Australia 2024 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25954/r0n2-se65>
- ⁴ Inquiry into the Thriving Kids Initiative Submission – October 2025 (2025) © SSI https://www.ssi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/2025_SSI-Submission_Inquiry-into-the-Thriving-Kids-Initiative_Oct-2025.pdf
- ⁵ SSI. (2016). Summary of evaluation of SSI's Ability Links. https://www.ssi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Evaluation_of_ALNSW_Summary_Final.pdf

