

CYDA's Submission to the Inclusive Communities Fund Consultation

“Listen to children and trust what they say about their experiences. Give them early assessments and the right assistive technology so they can learn without fear or pressure. Support families to understand disability so the child does not carry that responsibility.” — Young person, CYDA's Thriving Kids report

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Children and Young People
with Disability Australia

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A note on terminology:

In this submission, Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) uses person-first language, e.g., person with disability. However, CYDA recognises many people with disability choose to use identity-first language, e.g., disabled person.



Content warning: Exclusion, Bullying

Acknowledgements:

Children and Young People with Disability Australia would like to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the Lands on which this report has been written, reviewed and produced, whose cultures and customs have nurtured and continue to nurture this Land since the Dreamtime. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present. This is, was, and always will be Aboriginal Land.



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Summary of recommendations

CYDA acknowledges the Inclusive Communities Fund as an important investment in community capacity and disability inclusion. We provide the following recommendations in the context of the serious impact that NDIS changes are having on our community.

Recommendation 1: Prioritise funds for co-design and delivery of programs in ways that ensure children and young people with disability are included and kept safe from harm. This includes:

- Extending the Fund to support inclusion in school-related extracurricular and non-classroom activities, including recess and lunchtime activities and clubs, excursions, camps, sports days, and before and after school programs
- Developing co-designed resources that support organisations to keep children safe and included
- Giving DROs a lead role in partnering with organisations

Recommendation 2: Use person-centred, rights-based, sustainable criteria to determine suitable activities for the Fund. These include:

- Activities that centre the needs and desires of the disability community
- Activities that remove barriers and have a lasting impact

Recommendation 3: Expand Local Government Associations Disability Action Plans to include youth mentors by:

- Piloting a program with LGAs to embed inclusion in community organisations and embed within all local government activities
- Appointing a youth mentor in each LGA to support implementation

Recommendation 4: Embed a rights-based approach in organisational governance structures and implement evaluation frameworks at the outset of the program. This would include:

- Increasing organisations' capacity for governance to centre rights-based understanding of inclusion
- Commencing monitoring and evaluation early in the Program implementation
- Carving out a proportion of the additional \$150 million which has been committed annually from 2029–30 Disability Peer Support and Connections Program for ongoing measurement and evaluation of the outcomes of the ICF program



Introduction

Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) is the national representative organisation for children and young people with disability (YPWD) aged 0 to 25 years. CYDA has extensive national networks of YPWD, families and caregivers of children with disability, and advocacy and community organisations.

Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing's consultation on the Inclusive Communities Fund.

Whilst we acknowledge the Inclusive Communities Fund's investment in community capacity as an important initiative to drive disability inclusion, CYDA is **deeply concerned** that consultation on the Fund is occurring alongside significant cuts to NDIS Social, Civic and Community Participation and Capacity Building Daily Activity supports. The impact of these cuts must be considered in the Fund's design and evaluation, rather than treated as a separate issue. Importantly, the proposed \$200 million over three years does not adequately address the individualised supports people with disability need to participate fully in community life.

Evidence referenced in this submission

Our recommendations are grounded in the lived experience of children and young people with disability and their families. This submission incorporates evidence from both peer-reviewed and grey literature, as well as insights from CYDA's previous consultations with our community about matters relating to community inclusion and the NDIS, including:

Have your say about NSW Foundational Supports: Three focus groups with 17 participants (children, young people with disability, and their families) to have their say about the development of Foundational Supports for Children with Disability in NSW. (2025/26)

NDIS Changes: What Matters to you? 10 young Autistic people discussed the potential impacts of NDIS reforms including impacts on social and community participation funding (May 2026).

CYDA survey consultations conducted in 2023, 2024, and 2025 with young people with disability, their families and caregivers:

- [Masking is Not Thriving Survey Report](#) on Thriving Kids (**1235 responses**)
- [NDIS Eligibility Re-assessments Survey Report](#) (**222 responses**)
- [NDIS Provider Registration Survey Report](#) (**161 responses**)

[Disability Attitudes Focus Groups Report](#) (2025): Exploring young people's attitudes towards disability in Australia

Direct quotes in this submission are drawn from the findings of **CYDA** consultations with young people, families, and caregivers. Quotes are indented from main text, italicised and in inverted commas. The name of the consultation project source follows the quote, names are anonymised to protect privacy, and quotes are minimally edited for brevity and/or clarity.

Background and context

Children and young people represent a significant and growing proportion of people with disability in Australia. In 2022, around 12.1 per cent of children and young people aged 0–24 years had disability, with six per cent considered to have very high supports needs. Most required assistance with everyday activities, and over half experienced multiple types of disability, reflecting the complexity of supports required for this group.¹

The NDIS has played an important role in the lives of children and young people. Compared with the broader disability population, participants in the Scheme are much younger, with 52 per cent aged 18 and under.²

With the NDIS reforms expected to result in many children and young people losing or being excluded from access to the Scheme, it is critically important that supports outside the NDIS are carefully designed to meet their needs. Of the estimated 241,000 participants expected to be removed from NDIS, 64 per cent are aged 18 or under.³

Submission Structure

In this submission, CYDA addresses the four questions in the consultation paper relating to Disability Representative Organisations. For each question, we respond to the relevant consultation questions by presenting a recommendation followed by a more detailed response:

Question 1: What support, resources or changes would help organisations become more inclusive and accessible for people with disability?

- How could community organisations partner with disability-led organisations to achieve this?

Question 2: What activities should the Fund support, given that it will not pay for service delivery?

¹ ABS (2022) [Children and young people with disability](#)

² NDIS, 2026. [Explore data, \(Q4, FY205/26\)](#)

³ The Guardian, 2026 (July). [Internal Department of Health modelling obtained under FOI](#)

- For example, staff training, advice on how to make services more inclusive, or other accessibility changes.

Question 3: What role could local governments play in supporting community inclusion?

Question 4: What is the best way for community organisations to build meaningful and lasting inclusion?

- How can we make sure the benefits of the Fund continue after the 3-year funding period ends?



Detailed Recommendations

Question 1: What support, resources, and changes would help organisations become more inclusive and accessible for people with disability?

Recommendation 1: Prioritise funds for co-design and delivery of programs in ways that ensure children and young people with disability are included and kept safe from harm. This includes:

- Extending the Fund to support inclusion in school-related extracurricular and non-classroom activities, including recess and lunchtime activities and clubs, excursions, camps, sports days, and before and after school programs
- Developing co-designed resources that support organisations to keep children safe and included
- Giving DROs a lead role in partnering with organisations

Extend the Fund to support activities beyond the classroom

CYDA strongly urges the Government to include schools and school-related activities in the Fund. The Fund should be used to support inclusion in extracurricular and non-classroom activities, including recess and lunchtime activities and clubs, excursions, camps, sports days, and before and after school programs. This is particularly important for students with disability who are not NDIS participants and therefore cannot access NDIS-funded supports to participate in these activities. It is also important in the context of increased compliance associated with the Federal Government's recent cuts to disability loading⁴.

Recess, lunchtime, and other activities outside the classroom are important opportunities for children and young people to build friendships, social connections and a sense of **belonging**. However, students with disability can only benefit when they are meaningfully included⁵. CYDA's Education Survey (2024) found that 57 per cent of respondents (127) reported exclusion from school excursions, events or activities⁶.

Schools do not always have the resources, staffing, or disability capability to support inclusion outside the classroom. Teachers may volunteer their own time and forgo breaks to run lunchtime clubs, while parents are often asked to attend school camps or

⁴ Department of Education, 2026. [2026-27 Budget factsheet - School funding integrity](#)

⁵ Brock, M. E., Martin, S. M., Lin, T.-J., Et. Al., 2026. Recess for Students with Extensive Support Needs: A Missed Opportunity for Meaningful Inclusion. *Exceptional Children*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001440292614258>

⁶ CYDA, 2024 [CYDA's survey of the learning experiences of children and young people with disability](#)

excursions to provide support that should be available through the school. This limits a young person's independence and opportunities to participate alongside their peers:

“Even school parents were asking, ‘oh, do you want to come with [child’s name withheld]?’ I’m like, ‘No, I don’t want my parents on school camp’. I want to get up to mischief. I don’t want to have my mum and dad there. Why do I need my mum when they should cover that sort of thing. In certain disability camps there’s some independence or freedom so me and my brother – we’ve got the same disability – we loved camp. We got up to lots of mischief on camps.”— Young person with disability, Child Safe Organisations Project⁷

Exclusion during recess, lunchtime, excursions, and camps also affects relationships beyond the school gate. Children and young people with disability may be included in structured classroom activities but excluded from informal opportunities to build friendships. Over time, this contributes to isolation from peers and their broader community.

Funding should therefore support not only additional assistance for children and young people with disability, but initiatives that build inclusive school cultures and address the attitudes and behaviours of their peers. CYDA's community have highlighted the need to address less visible forms of exclusion and bullying that can repeatedly send children and young people with disability the message that they do not belong.

“I was always the last person picked in team sport.”

“Often, it was boring during breaks because I had no friends and nothing to do. I just wandered the playground in loops, wanting to go inside and get paper to draw, but I wasn’t allowed.”

“I was being bullied by my best friend and I didn’t even know.” – Young people with disability from NSW DJC focus group

This sentiment is supported by initiatives and research that recommend models that teach children without disability to be more inclusive⁸ and about human rights by putting language to behaviours that exclude others.⁹

“Support delivered in the classroom and playground, rather than removed completely from peers, would help build inclusion and belonging skills in real-life settings.” – Caregiver, Thriving Kids Report

⁷ CYDA, 2022, [National Principles of Child Safe Organisations Consultation Report](#)

⁸ Purple Orange, 2020. [Inclusive School Practices Toolkit](#)

⁹ Tarheelstate Teacher, 2020. [Tackling Exclusion in the Classroom: Teaching Students to be Includers](#)

How could community organisations partner with disability-led organisations to achieve this?

Partnering with disability-led organisations

Disability Representative Organisations (DROs) and disability-led organisations should be explicitly eligible to apply as lead or co-lead applicants under the partnership model, rather than being limited to consultation or supporting roles with mainstream organisations. The current proposal promotes partnership but does not make clear whether DROs can lead funded projects. CYDA recommends addressing this explicitly by ensuring the Fund enables and prioritises DRO leadership.

Fund genuine co-design

CYDA recommends that the Fund supports community organisations to partner with DROs and other disability-led organisations to co-design resources and approaches that improve inclusion, belonging, and safety for children and young people with disability.

Importantly, children and young people with disability should be directly involved throughout the co-design process, rather than consulted only after resources have been developed. Genuine co-design requires adequate time, accessible participation and appropriate payment for people with disability.¹⁰ As one young person told CYDA:

“I think people are very fast to rush in with ideas and be, ‘We want resources, blah, blah.’ But generally putting in the work, people view certain disabilities as a burden or for example, it takes too long. So, they want to create resources that address diversity and stuff, but they won't actually implement for example, getting someone to relay the opinion of a person with disability. So, putting actual care and time into it, rather than just wanting to get the resources done really fast”. — Young person with disability, Child Safe Organisations Project

This approach reflects the principle of ‘nothing about us without us’ and Australia’s obligations under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, including children’s right to express their views on matters that affect them.

Build on existing resources

The Fund should also avoid investing in resources that already exist. Before developing new materials, DROs and disability-led organisations could be funded to

¹⁰ Altman, T., Hunter, S., & Gay, M., 2026. From Tokenism to Transformation: Relational Guiding Principles for Genuine Co-Design with Young People with Disability Through a Critical Disability Lens. *Youth*, 6(2), 57. <https://doi.org/10.3390/youth6020057>

undertake a desktop audit and establish a repository of existing resources that community organisations can readily access.

There are already useful resources developed with and for children and young people with disability. For example, CYDA's Taking Charge of Change project provides resources to support children and young people with disability and their families through key life transitions¹¹. CYDA's Child Safe Organisations Project also included an audit of existing resources to support organisations to keep children and young people with disability safe and included¹². Building on this work would reduce duplication and allow funding to be directed towards identified gaps.

Provide practical training and ongoing support

Partnerships should extend beyond the development of resources. The Fund should support disability-led organisations to provide community organisations with practical disability inclusion training, mentoring and ongoing advice. This would allow organisations to apply what they learn to their own programs, policies and practices, rather than relying on one-off disability awareness training.

Below are two examples of existing training delivery models which the Fund could invest in:

CYDA's Workplace Disability Inclusion ¹³

Training outcomes:

- Understand the experiences of young people with disability
- Understand models of disability and the history of treatment of people with disability in Australia
- Understand language around disability
- Be confident asking questions about and talking about disability

Youth Disability Advocacy Service (YDAS) provides Together: Access & Inclusion Training for workers who want to become more confident and capable of working with disabled young people¹⁴.

Together, these approaches would position disability-led organisations and people with disability as partners in designing and delivering the Fund, while building the lasting capability of community organisations to be more accessible, safe, and inclusive.

¹¹ CYDA, 2026. [Take Charge of Change](#)

¹² CYDA, 2022, [National Principles of Child Safe Organisations Consultation Report](#)

¹³ CYDA, 2026. [Workplace Disability Inclusion](#)

¹⁴ YDAS, 2025. [Together Training](#)

Question 2: Activities the Fund should support

Recommendation 2: Use person-centred, rights-based, sustainable criteria to determine suitable activities for the Fund. These include:

- Activities that centre the needs and desires of the disability community
- Activities that remove barriers and have a lasting impact

This submission outlines specific activities we recommend the Fund support in our response to questions 1, 3, and 4. In addition to these activities, we recommend the Fund use criteria to determine which activities to support. We also outline example activities that would adhere to these criteria.

CYDA recommends the Fund use the following **criteria** to determine which activities to support.

- Based on evidenced gaps and need established by the disability community, as well as innovative understanding and approaches
- Removes recognised barriers to full and equal participation
- Co-designed and delivered with all stakeholders using community partnerships
- Strengths, rights, and place-based – including online as a place that is likely to be suitable to some
- Sustainable legacy – impact that lasts beyond project delivery
- Intersectionally aligned – inclusive of all genders, sexualities, non-speaking and minimally speaking community, those with intellectual disability, First Nations, and culturally and linguistically diverse communities

Some activities that would align with these criteria include:

Leadership programs that are co-designed and led and leave a legacy of children and young people with leaderships skills and in decision making positions. CYDA's Young Leaders Programs are a good example.¹⁵ They could also include citizen advisory groups and community leadership labs that provide training and support for children and young people with disability to identify local opportunities and influence local decisions.

Mapping barriers to participation in a local community and co-designing interventions.

Piloting **school belonging projects** that create support for recess, lunch, and extracurricular activities and creating case studies on the outcomes.

Create **detailed case studies** of governance models for online peer support and activity groups that can act as guidelines for other groups.

¹⁵ CYDA, 2026. [Young Leaders webpage](#)

Partnerships between disability organisations and local governments to run **training programs for community groups** in AAC and communication differences.

Partnership between disability organisations and the disability community to co-design **governance resources** for community organisations to embed disability-rights into their policies and practices.

Question 3: The role of local governments in supporting community inclusion

Recommendation 3: Expand Local Government Associations (LGA) Disability Action Plans to include youth mentors by:

- Piloting a program with LGAs to embed inclusion in community organisations and embed within all local government activities
- Appointing a youth mentor in each LGA to support implementation

To meaningfully include children and young people with disability in their local communities, particularly in youth programs and activities, investment needs to go beyond one-off disability awareness training. Organisations need **practical support** to embed accessibility and inclusion into their everyday practices, programs, and culture.

The Australian Local Government Association's Disability Inclusion for Local Governments guide provides councils with practical guidance to implement Australia's Disability Strategy, including guiding principles, case studies and examples of inclusive practice¹⁶. With the support of the Fund, this government-funded resource could be **expanded and adapted** to help local governments support community organisations to improve disability inclusion.

CYDA recommends piloting a **local government disability inclusion program** that combines practical guidance with dedicated youth inclusion mentor roles. Through investment of the Fund, young people with disability could be engaged as mentors to work directly with councils and local community organisations to review programs, identify and remove barriers to participation, and embed accessible and inclusive practices across youth and community activities. This approach would move beyond awareness training towards sustained changes in organisational practice, culture and attitudes.

To further address issues of relevance to local communities, **place-based** funding models could be implemented where funds are given to local governments or to a local community group to be the lead local group (operating as a backbone organisation) to coordinate and resource community outcomes of inclusion and accessibility. Such approaches could be implemented by adapting existing successful models for the purposes of the Inclusive Communities Fund¹⁷.

¹⁶ Australian Local Government Association, 2026. [Disability inclusion for local government](#)

¹⁷ Victorian Government, 2023. [Understanding place-based approaches and how they evolve over time](#)

Question 4: Building meaningful and lasting inclusion in community organisations

Recommendation 4: Embed rights-based approach in organisational governance structures and implement evaluation frameworks at the outset of the program. This would include:

- Increasing organisations' capacity for governance to centre rights-based understanding of inclusion
- Commencing monitoring and evaluation early in the Program implementation
- Carving out a proportion of the additional \$150 million which has been committed annually from 2029–30 Disability Peer Support and Connections Program for ongoing measurement and evaluation of the outcomes of the ICF program

Consultation question: How can we make sure the benefits of the Fund continue after the 3-year funding period ends?

Achieving ongoing benefit requires a wholesale shift to rights-based practice within community organisations. When organisations are supported to shift their culture, policies, and everyday ways of doing things to centre the rights of children and young people with disability, everyone benefits.

Increased capacity must be based on rights-based understanding.

Focusing on governance will ensure sustainability of changes. For instance, new volunteers and/or staff coming into an organisation will build capacity more effectively when the organisation has a governance structure that includes:

- Diversity and lived experience in its leadership
- Accessible operations – meetings, documents and venues can be accessed by all
- Policy statements that outline the rights of people with disability, children and young people
- Transparent and accessible communication, feedback and complaints processes
- Regular review and evaluation activities
- Peer support programs
- Ongoing training, mentoring and capacity building

Evaluation: Involving people with disability in evaluation

Given the Fund's limited timeframe, CYDA recommends that monitoring and evaluation begin early in its implementation, rather than towards the end of the program. This will help determine whether the Fund is achieving its intended outcomes and allow lessons from implementation to inform improvements while the Fund is still operating.

The Fund should include a clear monitoring and evaluation framework that assesses not only program delivery, but whether funded activities lead to meaningful changes in organisations' attitudes, behaviours and approaches to disability inclusion. Existing approaches, such as the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Child Protection Guidance Note: Monitoring & Evaluation, could be adapted to support the Fund's objectives.¹⁸

People with disability should also be directly involved in designing and overseeing the evaluation. As CYDA recommended in its feedback on the evaluation scope for Australia's Disability Strategy,¹⁹ an evaluation committee should include people with disability with relevant skills and experience. An Expression of Interest process could be promoted through Disability Representative Organisations (DROs) and their networks to support broad and diverse participation.

Missing data, lost opportunities

As outlined in the Consultation Paper²⁰, building inclusive communities is a policy priority for Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031, and as such is one of the objectives of the Fund to support in the fulfilment of the ADS priority.

CYDA highlighted in our submission to the to the Australian Disability Strategy Review²¹, without high-quality data, there are limited opportunities to develop evidence-based approaches to protect children and young people and monitor existing and new interventions.²² The direct experience of children and young people with disability and the policy experience of CYDA demonstrates that there is a significant need to improve the collection and use of data at a range of levels across all systems.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report²³ on Australia's children revealed limited instances of gathering children's opinions or experiences as evidence. While national-level monitoring exists, it mainly involves administrative data from service delivery and surveys targeting adults, exclusively. Further, *"there are currently no national indicators to measure how children transition through major development stages, or how children interact with services and move through different*

¹⁸ DFAT, 2017. [DFAT Child Protection Guidance Note Monitoring & Evaluation](#)

¹⁹ CYDA, 2025 [Feedback on Australia's Disability Strategy's Evaluation scope](#)

²⁰ DHDA, 2026. [Inclusive Communities Fund Consultation Page](#)

²¹ CYDA (2024) [Submission to the Australian Disability Strategy Review](#)

²² Wayland, S & Hindmarsh, G. (2017). [Understanding safeguarding practices for children with disability when engaging with organisations | Child Family Community Australia](#) (aifs.gov.au)

²³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022. [Australia's children, web report](#), last updated 25 February 2022.

systems...[and] ... there is limited ability to track children through different data sources to assess their outcomes". This is a significant gap.

There is an urgent need to examine how data is used to inform policy and practice in the NDIS, Early Childhood Education and Care, education and employment support systems, and this includes the Inclusive Communities Fund program.

To support the data collection and post evaluation phases of the Inclusive Communities Fund Program, we recommend carving out a proportion of the additional \$150 million which has been committed annually from 2029–30 Disability Peer Support and Connections Program.²⁴

CYDA advocates for the improvement and refinement of data collection to strengthen the evidence base and improve outcomes, as “...*society cannot be equitable unless all children are included, and children with disability cannot be included unless sound data collection and analysis render them visible.*”²⁵

²⁴ DHDA, 2026. [Disability Peer Support and Connections Program and reform of the Information, Linkages and Capacity Building Program](#)

²⁵ United Nations Children’s Fund 2013, *State of the World’s Children 2013: Children with Disability*, United Nations, New York, p. 63.

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