

Parliament of Australia

Inquiry into the Thriving Kids initiative

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Executive Summary

The Smith Family is a national charity dedicated to supporting Australian children and families experiencing disadvantage, with a vision for every child to have the opportunity to change their future. In FY24/25, our education-focused programs reached over 186,000 children and young people across 91 communities, partnering with 781 schools to address educational inequality caused by poverty.

Drawing on our long-term *Learning for Life* program and the intensive *On PAR* pilot, this submission highlights the persistent barriers families face in accessing timely and coordinated support, the capacity challenges within schools to meet complex needs, and the critical role of parents in supporting their children's development. Our evidence shows that family circumstances—such as single parenthood, health or disability challenges, and low socio-economic status—significantly impact educational outcomes.

We strongly support the Thriving Kids initiative and its focus on equity and inclusion. We advocate for a system-level response based on progressive universalism: strengthening universal services, enabling national policy with local adaptation, and empowering parents to act early. By embedding these principles, Thriving Kids can help break the cycle of disadvantage and ensure all children have the support they need to thrive.

Key Recommendations:

1. **Strengthen Universal Services:** Invest in and resource universal platforms (such as schools and early learning centres) to provide early intervention and support for families with complex needs.
2. **Adopt Progressive Universalism:** Ensure all children benefit from high-quality services, with additional, targeted support for those facing the greatest challenges.
3. **National Policy with Local Adaptation:** Develop a clear, evidence-based national framework that allows for local adaptation and continuous improvement based on community needs and feedback.
4. **Empower Parents:** Equip parents and carers with the knowledge, resources, and support to play an active role in their children's development and educational journey.
5. **Foster Collaboration:** Encourage strong partnerships between families, schools, community organisations, and service providers to create integrated, responsive support systems.

The Smith Family (along with other members of The Possibility Partnership) welcomes the opportunity to contribute as a critical friend and partner in this journey, bringing deep experience and a commitment to evidence-based, collaborative solutions for Australia's children and families.

The Smith Family

The Smith Family is a national charity which has supported Australian children and families experiencing disadvantage for more than a century. Our **vision** is a world where **every child** has the opportunity to change their future. Our **belief** is that education is one of the world's most powerful change agents and our **purpose** is to **overcome educational inequality** caused by poverty.

We are working at **scale** to support Australian children to overcome educational inequality caused by poverty. In FY24/25, our education-focused programs supported more than **186,000** children and young people experiencing disadvantage. We are working in **91 communities** across all states and territories and have partnerships with **781 schools** supporting high proportions of children and young people from low socio-economic backgrounds

The Smith Family is a member of The Possibility Partnership (TPP) – a collaboration of some of Australia's leading community service organisations, who work with vulnerable families. In considering next steps in enabling co-design of Thriving Kids with key stakeholders, including families and children, and implementation of this change, we would be happy to be considered as critical friends along the journey.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into the Thriving Kids initiative. As a national children's education charity supporting thousands of young Australians experiencing disadvantage, we bring deep, long-term experience and evidence-based insights into the systemic barriers affecting children's wellbeing and educational outcomes.

Data informing this submission

This submission draws on the experience of our team members providing long term support to families who experience disadvantage through our *Learning for Life* program and our more intensive *On PAR* pilot, an early intervention approach to support families who experience very complex, compounding challenges. It covers three key points of note:

- Challenges experienced by families in accessing the right support at the right time
- Capacity for schools/educational systems to meet the needs of families with complex needs; and
- Parents understanding of their role in supporting their child's complex needs.

Learning for Life is The Smith Family's long-term, evidence-based program supporting young Australians experiencing disadvantage to succeed at school and beyond. The program provides financial assistance for essential school expenses, guidance from a dedicated Family Partnership Coordinator, and access to tailored learning and mentoring opportunities. *Learning for Life* recognises that family circumstances play a crucial role in educational outcomes: in 2024-25 almost 60% of the 71,818 participating students nationally live in single-parent, households, 40% of students experience a health or disability challenge, 26% are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background. Around a third of students live in households with six or more people, and families often face additional barriers such as limited digital access, lower parental educational attainment, and reduced workforce participation. By partnering with families and understanding their unique characteristics and challenges, *Learning for Life* helps break the cycle of disadvantage and aims to empower children to stay engaged with education and build brighter futures.

On PAR Pilot Program

The **On PAR (Participation, Attendance, Retention) Program** is a pilot initiative by The Smith Family designed to support families experiencing significant and complex disadvantage, with a focus on improving educational engagement and outcomes for vulnerable primary school children in communities such as Mount Druitt (NSW) and Onkaparinga (SA). Through a two-year, intensive, family-focused case management approach, *On PAR* caseworkers partner with parents and carers to set educational goals, address barriers to school participation, and build capacity for ongoing support. The program targets children with low attendance or achievement, referred by partner schools, and provides tailored interventions including goal setting, regular monitoring, and transition planning. A key aim is for participating students and families to become eligible for The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* program, ensuring long-term educational support. *On PAR*'s strengths-based, collaborative model has demonstrated positive outcomes in student attendance, achievement, and wellbeing. The quotes in this submission are derived from recent interviews with 10 families participating in *On PAR*.

Challenges experienced by families with complex challenges to access support.

The broad challenges in accessing appropriate support for families with complex needs is well documented through reports and analysis by DSS, AIFS, Inclusion Australia and others. Notwithstanding this focus, data on outcomes and feedback from families demonstrate that these issues remain largely unaddressed. Broadly summarised,

Families with complex needs face challenges accessing coordinated support due to siloed services and complicated systems. Neurodiverse families encounter additional barriers, including stigma, lack of tailored services, and communication difficulties. Systemic issues like fragmented services, workforce shortages, and rigid eligibility criteria further hinder access. These challenges contribute to parental stress, fear of judgment, and additional difficulties for culturally diverse families.

The paediatrician, she can't diagnose autism. She's put us on the public waiting list, but like she said that can take up to three to five years. (mother of child, in kindergarten/reception¹

The paediatrician has Justin down for an autism assessment. It's through [a major teaching hospital] and the letter I received a while back, it said it can take up to 18 to 24 months. (mother of child in year 3)

The opportunity in Thriving Kids.

The Smith Family is highly supportive of the intent of Thriving Kids and commends the approach being taken through the Inquiry and establishment of the Advisory Group. As noted, the focus of our work is with families who experience financial disadvantage and a range of associated complex challenges often associated with living in poverty. Recent and persistent AEDC data shows that developmental vulnerability is higher in disadvantaged communities with 1 in 5 children vulnerable on two or more domains, compared to 1 in 13 in the least disadvantaged communities.²

¹ Unpublished interviews with parents participating in the *On PAR* pilot program. All italicised text is from this source. All names have been changed.

² Commonwealth of Australia (2025). Australian Early Development Census National Report 2024. (Online) Department of Education, Canberra.

Thriving kids is a unique opportunity to embed a system level response focussed on equity and inclusion, underpinned by three key design elements:

1. Strengthen current universal services and systems to work with families with complex needs.
2. National Policy with local adaptation
3. Empower and enable parents to support their children's development needs.

Strengthen current universal services and systems to work with families with complex needs:

Thriving Kids should be based in the premise of Progressive Universalism combining universal access to services or benefits with additional, targeted support for those who are most disadvantaged or at risk of poor outcomes.

The impact of school or early learning environments can have a significant impact on transitions and engagement. The 'climate' comprises the norms, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices and organisational structures and routines that influence the quality and character of school life for children families and school staff.³ Universal platforms, appropriately resourced and skilled provide a means to provide vital early intervention support for children and their families who might otherwise struggle to engage with school and to build a child's sense of belonging in the school and classroom.

These issues are particularly prominent in low SES schools. Michelle Bruniges' research on concentrations of disadvantage in Australian schools highlights the significant impact of socio-economic factors on educational outcomes. Her work emphasises that schools with high proportions of students from low socio-economic backgrounds face unique challenges, including limited resources, lower parental educational attainment, and reduced workforce participation. These factors contribute to a lack of capacity to provide appropriate support, affecting students' engagement and achievement. Bruniges advocates for targeted interventions and policies to address these disparities, aiming to create a more equitable education system that supports all students, regardless of their background. Thriving Kids provides an opportunity to work with education settings and educators to create supportive environments and provide evidence based early intervention and support negating the need for families to navigate complex systems on top of their already complex lives.

(Child) got his autism, he's moderate delay, he's ADHD. [The On PAR caseworker's] already got speech covered. But we're trying to get an OT at the school. Through the NDIS he's already doing OT outside of school, but I wanted to try and do it in school so then I don't have to drive 55km there and back. (mother of child in kindergarten/reception)

[Child's] got his speech, he's got his OT. He's doing great at them. But the paediatrician is treating him for his autism not his ADHD and I think the ADHD takes over his autistic side. He has ADHD medication at 8:00 and then at 1:00 o'clock at school. The paediatrician upped the dosage, but (child's) turned more violent being on it. He just keeps getting worse. He needs to see a psychologist which is still in the works with [the caseworker]. I'm on the wait list. The last time I spoke with [the caseworker], they said that the wait list was at least 12 months long. (mother of child in year 2 and child in year 1)

³ Perales, F., Johnstone, M., Xiang, N. & Tomaszewski, W. (2023) 'Explaining gaps between students from regional and metropolitan areas: accounting for socio-demographic and school climate factors.' *Australian Journal of Education*, 67(1), 76-93.

National Policy with local adaptation

Children's outcomes are influenced by myriad personal and environmental factors, such as family dynamics, socio-economic status, access to social and cultural capital and access to quality education. Theoretical frameworks like Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory⁴ illustrate how these factors interact across different levels of a child's environment, from immediate family and school settings to broader societal influences.

The opportunity in Thriving Kids is to take a coherent, but not standardised approach, provide a clear, evidence based national framework with clarity around evidence base, core program elements and principles. National mechanisms such as data-based planning and targeting, data monitoring and evaluation and sharing practice learning, provide consistency in implementation, adapted to local contexts and available resources. In this endeavour the purpose must be clear to providers and continuous improvement feedback loops should be established to ensure support adapts to changing needs.

Services provided through Thriving Kids are ideally implemented through augmentation and resourcing existing universal service platforms, such as schools, early learning centres, child and family hubs etc. integrating with existing services rather than adding an additional layer to already complex service systems. We note that this work requires investment of time, resourcing and administrative capacity and this activity should be recognised in the development of funding models.

Programs that define core elements grounded in evidence-based practice like the Harlem Children's Zone in the United States exemplify the benefits of evidence-based interventions that address these complex influences.⁵ By providing comprehensive support services, including early childhood education, after-school programs, and family support, the Harlem Children's Zone helps to create a nurturing environment that promotes positive outcomes for children. The adaptability of such programs to local contexts ensures that they can effectively meet the unique needs of each community while maintaining core elements grounded in evidence-based practices. This approach not only supports individual children but also fosters a more equitable education system overall.

He sees a developmental educator and an occupational therapist at home. We see speech at school. She just goes purely to school and that's fine with me. But at school, is probably where I would like to see On PAR get him more support. That's where he is five days a week. (mother of child in kindergarten/reception)

He's been diagnosed with autism level 3 and he's got ADHD. Because he's violent, everyone's like 'Oh, no. I just don't think he'll fit in with us.' They just rejected us. There's really nothing there for those of us who need all this extra help. As a parent, there's only so much you can do. (mother of child in year 2)

⁴ Bronfenbrenner, U. (2000). Ecological systems theory. In A. E. Kazdin (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Psychology* (Vol. 3, pp. 129–133). Oxford University Press

⁵ [Documents & Publications | Harlem Children's Zone](#)

Enable parental action on early intervention

The Smith Family's experience in working with families who experience disadvantage and associated challenges is that they want the best possible outcomes for their children but often don't know how to help their children or where to get support. Carers of children with neurodiverse conditions experience significant challenges with social isolation and maintaining relationships.⁶ Many parents are overwhelmed with their responsibilities and experience stress, exhaustion and poor mental health.⁷

Thriving Kids is an opportunity to work through the universal service system to provide inclusive and responsive supports and for parents and carers to understand child development and the role they can play in partnership with service providers to support their child's progress, navigate services and build social and community connections. Services should be equipped to be responsive and parent led, offering on time evidence-based support and guidance to enable them to act early and play a constructive role in supporting their child's development.

He went into Year 1 not knowing how to write his name. Not knowing how to spell his name. Not knowing how to count to 10. Nothing. When he was talking, he was still like baby talking. I put it down to the school. (mother of child in year 2)

I don't know really much about anything about the program. [The caseworkers] manage appointments or anything like that. I've gone to see them about signing paperwork for them, to give them permission. I've asked them to help the girls learn. To help out a little bit with maths and some spelling. I don't know if they've seen specialists or that sort of thing. We don't really got as much time to do all these things that we wanna with the girls because of the little one being sick and back and forth to the hospitals and stuff. (father of child in year 6 and child in year 1)

⁶ Community Affairs Reference Committee (2023) *Assessment and support services for people with ADHD*.
https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/ADHD/Report

⁷ D'Arcy, E., Burnett, T., Capstick, E., Elder, C., Slee, O., Girdler, S., Scott, M. & Milbourn, B. (2024) 'The well-being and support needs of Australian caregivers of neurodivergent children.' *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 54: 1857-69.

Conclusion

The Smith Family's long-standing commitment to supporting children and families experiencing disadvantage has demonstrated the transformative impact of sustained, evidence-based educational support. Our experience highlights the persistent barriers faced by families with complex needs and the importance of early, coordinated intervention delivered through universal service platforms. Models such as *On PAR* where caseworkers work with families through an evidence-based practice framework, with family led approach provide a template for engaging families and supporting them to access relevant supports and deepen understanding of children's developmental milestones and the role they can play in supporting their child's development.

The Thriving Kids initiative presents a unique opportunity to embed progressive universalism in policy and practice — ensuring all children benefit from high-quality services, with additional support for those facing the greatest challenges. By fostering strong partnerships with families, schools, and communities, and by prioritising local adaptation within a national framework, we can create the conditions for every child to thrive.

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to contribute as a critical friend and partner in this journey, working collaboratively to break the cycle of disadvantage and build brighter futures for Australia's children