

Helping Children with Autism

Disclaimer

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Sources: Commonwealth Government web sites, and media releases 2008

The Australian Government has committed \$190 million over the next four years to deliver the *Helping Children with Autism* package to address the considerable need for support and services for children with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs).

The Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) initiatives in the package totaling \$146 million are grouped under two key areas:

- Increased access to early intervention services for children aged 0-6 years; and
- Education and support for families and carers of children with ASDs.

All initiatives will include support for families, carers and children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, as well as rural and remote areas.

What is an Autism Spectrum Disorder?

ASD is a life long neurological disability of unknown cause. This is a severe neuro-developmental disorder which is thought to begin at birth or shortly after. While there is no cure, there are treatments and strategies that are effective for improving the lives of children with an ASD. Children and adults continue to change and grow and many show dramatic improvements in a range of skills throughout their lives.

Autism spectrum disorders have specific characteristics that may present in a variety of combinations and range along a continuum from mild to severe. Children with an ASD have deficits in communication, social skills and/or behaviour and sensory issues.

It's estimated 1 in 160 children will have an ASD

1. Increased access to early intervention services

Why is this important?

Access to early intervention services such as speech, occupational and behavioural therapy is vital for children with an ASD. Providing help and support for these children early in their lives will make it easier for them to attend school and participate in everyday life.

Following diagnosis, many parents and carers have difficulty finding the services that most benefit their child. The high cost of intensive and targeted treatment can also be a barrier for parents and carers of children with an ASD, preventing them from accessing early intervention services.

This initiative will ensure greater access to a range of early intervention services including:

- up to **200 targeted playgroups across Australia**. These playgroups will offer play based learning opportunities for children and social support networks for their families and carers. Playgroup Australia will be rolling out this program in the coming months.
- access for around 4,000 eligible children of up to **\$8,000 in services** over two years for more structured and intensive early intervention services, including one-on-one intensive activities, behavioural therapies and tailored group and individual programs; and

- for children with severe ASD up to **\$20,000 of individual assistance** over two years to contribute to the costs of intensive early intervention services.

New **Childhood Autism Advisors** located across Australia will also assist parents and carers to find the best services available to meet the particular needs of their child.

Prior to the appointment of the childhood autism advisors, existing autism stakeholder groups will be provided with early support funding to build their capacity to provide support to families.

In addition to the *Helping Children with Autism* package, the Australian Government is committed to **establishing six new autism-specific child care centres** as part of the broader commitment to provide up to 260 new child care centres nationally. One of these centres is earmarked for the South West Sydney region.

Who will benefit?

Children aged 0 to 6 years who have been diagnosed with an ASD will benefit from increased access to early intervention services prior to starting school. Families and carers will receive information, advice and assistance from the advisory services. All children with ASD up to the age of six years will be eligible to participate in the new playgroups with referral through an autism advisor.

Access to early intervention services packages will be based on referral by an autism advisor and available for children whose family or carer is eligible for Carer Allowance (child)

How will service and assistance packages operate?

Details of the package are not yet available. See contact details at the end to seek additional information as it comes to hand.

2. Education and support for families and carers

Why is this important?

Parents and carers of children with ASDs often need support to help them address their child's specific needs. There is strong evidence that early intervention in the family environment is highly effective. This component will provide:

- **A national program of workshops** to deliver flexible and targeted support for families and carers of children with ASDs including those from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and those living in rural and remote areas. The workshops will assist families and carers to better support their children following diagnosis and to undertake effective early intervention activities in the home. This will help families and carers to more effectively manage the pressures they face in raising their children. The workshops will also offer opportunities for families to create links within their local ASD community.

Tenders are currently being sought to implement this initiative.

- **An ASD website** that offers information, online resources and interactive functions to support parents, carers and professionals. The site will provide impartial and evidence based information about ASDs and early intervention approaches. It will also include the locations and contact details of the advisory services and approved early intervention services (searchable by postcode and shown on maps).

Who will benefit?

Children aged 0 to 6 years with ASDs or ASD-like symptoms, their families, carers and the professionals providing services for these children will benefit from the initiatives under this component.

3. Training for Education staff, parents and Carers

The [Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations \(DEEWR\)](#) is delivering the following two initiatives:

- \$16.3 million over five years for professional development for [teachers and other school staff](#) to support school students with ASD to achieve better educational outcomes; and
- \$7 million over five years for [parents and carers](#) of school students with ASD to attend workshops and information sessions and to access online workshops and information.

Implementation of the professional development for teachers and school staff as well as the workshops and information sessions for parents and carers is now underway.

Workshops and information sessions to provide support and advice to parents and carers of children with ASD

This component will provide face-to-face workshops and information sessions for the parents and carers of school-aged children with ASD.

The selected provider, the [Australian Autism Education and Training Consortium](#) (AAETC), will work closely with state and territory autism associations, ASD specific parent and carer support groups and other parent and carer associations to develop and deliver the workshops and information sessions.

One-day face-to-face workshops will be held in metropolitan and regional areas across Australia for a minimum of 1,450 participants per annum. These will be followed by information sessions conducted over the course of one day, allowing parents and carers the opportunity to access one-to-one and small group advice and support. It is expected that workshops and information sessions will commence from mid-2008.

Online workshops will be held for parents and carers unable to attend a face-to-face workshop or for those parents and carers in remote locations where no workshop is held.

The AAETC is currently developing a website which will provide further information regarding the workshops and information sessions and access to on-line workshops. It is anticipated that access to the web link will be available in mid-2008.

4. Medicare Benefits for early diagnosis and treatment

The [Department of Health and Ageing \(DoHA\)](#) will contribute \$20.7 million over five years for new Medicare items. From 1 July 2008, six Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) items are available to eligible allied health professionals for the diagnosis and treatment of children with pervasive developmental disorders.

Why is this important?

Diagnosis represents a critical point for children with autism and other pervasive developmental disorders. This initiative will provide new Medicare items for diagnosis and early intervention treatment for children with autism or any other less prevalent pervasive developmental disorders, such as Rett's disorder, Asperger's syndrome and childhood disintegrative disorder. This will allow for prompt and accurate diagnosis of autism in children and increase their access to early intervention therapy

Who will benefit?

Children aged up to 12 years with autism or any other pervasive developmental disorders and their families/carers will benefit from this initiative through increased access to early diagnosis and treatment services. It has been estimated that 1 in 160 children have autism.

Medicare items will be introduced for:

Consultant physicians (paediatricians and psychiatrists) to diagnose and develop a treatment plan for children up to 12 years of age on referral from a GP

Four (4) MBS services in total will be available for eligible allied health professionals (psychologists, speech pathologists and occupational therapists) to collaborate with the referring practitioner in the diagnosis of a child and/or the development of a child's PDD treatment and management plan.

A further twenty (20) MBS services in total will also be available for eligible allied health professionals (psychologists, speech pathologists and occupational therapists) to provide treatment to a child (aged under 15 years and who was under 13 years at the time of receiving their PDD treatment and management plan) for their particular condition, consistent with the treatment and management plan prepared by the referring practitioner.

These items can be provided by private Medicare registered general psychologists, speech pathologists and occupational therapists upon referral by a consultant psychiatrist or paediatrician. The child must be present at every session. Health professionals will be given appropriate training to support the implementation of the new Medicare items.

For information on the allied health professional Medicare items for pervasive developmental disorders, please click on the links below:

- [Medicare Benefits Schedule Item Descriptors \(PDF 65 KB\)](#) – allied health professional Medicare items for PDDs (including fee and rebate information). Allied health professionals should refer to this information before providing services under this initiative.
- [Medicare Benefits Schedule Explanatory Notes](#) – a full explanation of the allied health professional Medicare items for PDDs. Allied health professionals should refer to this information before providing services under this initiative.
- [Overview of the allied health professional Medicare items for PDDs – fact sheet. Helping Children with Autism – Medicare Allied Health Professional Items for Pervasive Developmental Disorders \(PDD\)](#)
- [Questions and Answers](#) – allied health professional Medicare items for PDDs.

How can I find out more?

Further information on the allied health professional Medicare items for PDDs is available from Medicare Australia on 132 150 (for providers) 132 011 (for patients), or by emailing epc.items@health.gov.au

5. How will the Helping Children with Autism package be implemented?

The Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), Department of Health and Ageing (DoHA) and Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) are working together to implement the package.

FaHCSIA will:

- consult stakeholders about implementation;
- undertake a provider selection process for early intervention services;
- undertake a provider selection process for a national program of education and support workshops; and
- establish advisory services following consultation and identification of appropriate locations.

When will the package commence?

It is expected that the components of this initiative will progressively be implemented from July 2008.

How can I find out more?

Further information is available through the:

The *Helping Children with Autism* Inquiry Line on 1800 289 177 and TTY 1800 260 402

Enquiries can also be emailed to asd@fahcsia.gov.au or to autism@deewr.gov.au.

and on the following government websites

www.health.gov.au/autism

www.fahcsia.gov.au/autism

www.deewr.gov.au/autism