

24th Aug 2023

To Whom It May Concern,

As part of my work, I run a program called Welcome to the Game which supports children and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds living with disabilities, autism and additional support needs to develop a sense of belonging at their local swim centre or sports club. We have co-delivered modified, inclusive, water-safety and water familiarity programs with various aquatic centres in metro-Melbourne where there are high levels of cultural and linguistic diversity and socio-economic disadvantage in the local community.

We have worked with these centres to help increase their inclusion capacity. We provide financial support to alleviate initial barriers to participation as well as program co-design and co-delivery with the goal of helping our Welcome to the Game participants and their families to develop life-saving water-based skills, increase their physical activity levels and improve their mental health by nurturing trusting relationships and increasing their sense of social connectedness.

Our program is funded by the Information, linkages, and capacity building program (ILC) meaning it is short-term and time limited. We provide inclusion capacity building, best practice delivery modelling, resource provision and short-term, kick-start funding for participation for people in our cohort and their families. However, we know that water safety and familiarisation participation needs to be long term and consistent to be effective in preventing drowning.

Sadly, many families despite having NDIS plans and funding cannot use this funding to help them continue with their activities after the support we can provide finishes. Even though the centres we work with are often happy to continue with the inclusion pathway programming we help them establish and are also happy to invoice NDIS for the participation fees if the families would like. If people want to do these programs, they should be able to choose to use their NDIS funding for social and community participation to pay for these activities so their participation is sustainable. It is absurd this this has been denied to so many families because it's not considered "therapy". Yet the evidence-based benefits of community connection, physical activity, skill

development and achieving new goals and challenges are well documented - inclusive community sport provides all those benefits. Plus, it does so in a much more holistic, age-appropriate, and fun way than being isolated in therapy sessions ever could.

I see many families with children with quite severe support needs and disabilities unable to get NDIS funding because they can't afford or access private assessments and diagnosis for their children or they are not familiar with the system. Language barriers prevent them from using the required NDIS jargon to get the support they need. Parents have told me that NDIS made them wish they never had children. Parents have also told me that an interpreter hired by NDIS for an assessment told them they would have their children taken away if they disclosed the full extent of their children's disabilities and past traumatic experiences. Incidents like this have led to a deep mistrust and fear of the system by so many families.

I constantly see people from refugee and migrant backgrounds in lower socio-economic cohorts receiving far less NDIS funding than white privileged children whose families understand the system and are well educated. Yet the children have the exact same disability! That is, if they can get on the scheme at all. It is deeply unfair.

Another frequent request I get from parents is, can I help them change their LAC as they simply don't support them or care to understand their children's needs. I've met a single mother of a severely autistic non-verbal child, who often refuses to leave the house, the family broke-up because the child's father could not cope with the child's support needs, yet the mother does not get even one hour of support work or respite for her child in their NDIS plan.

Intellectual disability, autism and psychosocial disabilities are the most common disabilities that children and young people experience by far.

Engaging in inclusive community sport, physical activity, and water safety activities can be life changing experiences for these children.

Drowning is the leading cause of death for children with autism. Children with autism are 160 times more likely to drown than their neuro-typical peers. Yet they

can't use their NDIS funding to pay for swimming and water safety lessons to mitigate this risk?

Getting enough exercise is an important factor in maintaining good physical and mental health and wellbeing. 65% of adults with disability aged 18–64 do not do enough physical activity, compared with 48% without disability. People with disability currently experience social isolation at significantly higher rates than people without disability. (Double the rate of people without disability) Yet they can't use NDIS funding to pay for sport and active recreation participation which will lower their risk of social isolation and chronic health issues?

These activities can provide much needed social connections, sense of routine and belonging, sense of achievement, improved physical and mental health. Parents report to me that the only day of the week their child eats their dinner and goes to sleep peacefully are on the evenings that they get to do inclusive sport because it regulates and connects them to others so much. This can be life changing for families in terms of their daily living routine.

It is a shame that these children and young people who stand to benefit the most from inclusive sport have the least access to it. We need dedicated modified disability inclusion programs being run at every community club and swim centre. Not short term, grant funded programs but permanent, reliable programs. Just like everyone else gets to expect and rely on.

Full inclusion in competitive sport is great, but that is not realistic for everyone especially those with more severe autism and intellectual disabilities. For these kids to thrive, we really need specialised, dedicated programs with trained staff that are simply focused on their participation, development, and enjoyment and not competition in the traditional sense. This should be the starting point from their everyone should be able to choose the best sport pathway for them.

We must acknowledge that these programs are more difficult to run as you need dedicated skilled coaches and teachers (more skilled than mainstream coaches), you need lower ratios of coaches to players, it's harder work than just coaching

mainstream sport so the coaches need to be paid, you need dedicated courts, pitches and swimming lane spaces and sensory equipment to create sensory safe environments, and you need awareness and education for the wider sport club community. I see a lot of awareness training happening, but it is not translating to participation for these kids especially those with the most common disabilities mentioned above. There is a large focus on supporting people with physical disabilities to engage in competitive sport, but this is not the experience of most children with disabilities.

Let kids with disabilities and autism be kids. Fund inclusive, participation, skill development, non-competitive focused community sport and water safety/swimming lessons.

Let kids and families who have NDIS funding for social and community participation pay for those activities through their funding if they want to without having to justify why – the stats are already there as to why they should be able to do this:

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports-data/health-conditions-disability-deaths/disability/overview>.

Require LAC's to help and support families to use their funds how they would like, in a simplified way, not hinder and scare and limit them which is what is currently happening.

It's a simple request that will have lasting positive benefits for these children.

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Welcome to the Game Coordinator Vic
Welcoming Clubs, Welcoming Australia

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