



# 2026 Early Childhood Education & Care February Report

## ECEC Portfolio Update

No doubt you have become aware that Mark Butler (Minister for Disability and the National Disability Insurance Scheme Minister for Health and Ageing) has been a leading supporter and driver of the Thriving Kids idea as part of federal disability and child support policy in Australia. As the Minister for Health, Disability and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), announcing and championing the Thriving Kids program as a national initiative to support children with developmental delay or autism with low to moderate needs, aiming to provide support outside the NDIS framework.

So, what is the difference between NDIS and Thriving Kids?

A Thriving Kids approach is different from — and in some ways broader than — a National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) funding model.

The NDIS is an individualised, deficit-based system. It provides funding once a child meets specific eligibility criteria based on diagnosed disability and assessed need. It is vital and life-changing for many families, but it is designed to respond to identified impairment rather than to build universal capacity.

A *Thriving Kids* approach, by contrast, is strengths-based and preventative. It focuses on creating the conditions in which all children can flourish — not only those who meet disability thresholds. Rather than waiting for a diagnosis, it invests in early support, inclusive education practices, community capacity, accessible services, and wellbeing initiatives that reduce escalation and long-term disadvantage.

Key differences include:

- Universal vs eligibility-based: Thriving Kids supports all children; the NDIS supports those who meet strict criteria.
- Preventative vs responsive: Thriving Kids aims to prevent challenges from compounding; the NDIS responds once a significant need is established.
- Community capacity vs individual packages: Thriving Kids strengthens schools, families and communities; the NDIS funds individualised supports.
- Equity lens: Thriving Kids can address systemic rural and remote disadvantage, where access barriers may exist even without formal diagnoses.

Importantly, this is not an “either/or” comparison. The NDIS remains essential for children with significant disabilities. A Thriving Kids framework complements it by ensuring early intervention, inclusive environments and equitable opportunity — so fewer children fall through gaps and more are supported to reach their potential.

For further information: <https://www.health.gov.au/our-work/thriving-kids?language=en>