

Early connections

Quick summary: Early connections are part of our nationally consistent early childhood approach, to support children younger than 9 and their families. They are funded by the NDIS and available when you have concerns about your child's development, or if your child has a disability. Early connections make sure you get the right supports and services to help with your child's individual needs. We know that providing quality supports early in a child's life can improve their long-term outcomes and opportunities. Early connections can support your child's development, your family's wellbeing and help your child and family take part in the community.

You can get early connections through our early childhood partners. They can make recommendations about what early connections will be best for your child. Your child doesn't need to be an NDIS participant. They can get help with early connections even if they don't have a diagnosis. Early connections could include things like getting information and connection to community and mainstream services or help to apply to the NDIS.

When we say 'you', we mean anyone responsible for the care of a child. You may be a parent, carer, or legal representative.

When we say 'child', we mean children younger than 9.

When we say 'we', we mean the NDIA.

What's on this page?

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- [Early childhood approach](#)
- [Applying to the NDIS](#)

What do we mean by early connections?

Early connections are for children with [delays in their development](#) or with disability. It's all about giving quick access to supports that meet your child's needs. Early connections can help you support your child's development regardless of whether they're eligible for the NDIS.

Some early connections are available to families living in Australia regardless of their citizenship or visa status. However, your child would need to meet the residency requirements to be eligible for the NDIS. To find out more about residence requirements to be eligible for the NDIS go to the [Applying to the NDIS](#) guideline.

Early connections aim to build on your and your child's strengths. They can help you support your child to develop the skills they need to take part in everyday activities. Supports and services are different for every child because they're based on individual needs. If your child gets early connections, they might not need long term support funded by the NDIS in the future.

We funded the development of the National Guidelines on [Best Practice in Early Childhood Intervention](#). These guidelines support early childhood intervention providers across Australia to apply best practice approaches to early childhood intervention. The early childhood partner will deliver early connections according to those guidelines.

How do you get early connections?

To get early connections, you can contact an [early childhood partner](#) but it is often best to first contact your GP, child health nurse, health service or early childhood educator. They are a good first point of contact if you have concerns about your child's development and can refer you to an early childhood partner. The information in their referral will help the early childhood partner look at your child's development and what support has been provided.

We fund early childhood partners to deliver the early childhood approach. Early childhood partners are teams of early childhood professionals, such as early childhood teachers, educators, or allied health professionals. Using observations and assessments, they learn about your child's development, and find out how your child does everyday things. They then apply their knowledge and skills to work out the best types of support for you and your child.

Once you've made initial contact, or a referral has been made, an early childhood partner will contact you to discuss what to do next. They will help you find the right supports for you and your child. This may include a combination of services such as connections to:

- mainstream and community services

- practical information that's relevant to your child's development
- other families for peer support
- early supports
- apply to the NDIS.

Early childhood partners can make recommendations about early connections and the supports your child might need. Remember, if you have concerns about your child's development you should get information and expert advice as soon as possible. Early childhood partners can assist you without waiting for a diagnosis. Learn more about the [early childhood approach](#).

When you meet with an early childhood partner, they'll start by working with you and your child to gather some general information.

As part of this initial conversation, you can discuss your concerns about your child's development. Your early childhood partner will help you get the right level of support for your child's needs. To do this, your early childhood partner will ask you about:

- concerns you may have about your child's development
- your family or carer circumstances
- your priorities, including goals you would like your child to pursue
- the things you currently do to support your child and areas where you may need more support
- information from any screening tools, assessments, or reports if you have any
- current mainstream and community services
- early childhood supports you're currently getting
- how well the current supports and services meet your child's needs.

What if there are no early childhood partners in your area?

Early childhood partners are not located in remote and very remote areas. If you live in an area that doesn't have an early childhood partner, and you have concerns about your child's development or disability you should first speak with your doctor, child health nurse, early childhood educator or other health professional.

You can also [contact us](#) for further information.

How do early childhood partners work out the types of early connections suitable for your child?

Your early childhood partner will work with you and your child to gather information in different ways. This helps them work out which early connections are appropriate for you and your child.

They will look at all available information then talk with you about the next steps. Your early childhood partner will not make a diagnosis. If you would like to find out how to get a diagnosis, they'll help you make contact with a health professional like your GP.

If your child is younger than 6 and there are delays in their development, the early childhood partner will work out whether your child is likely to meet the NDIS [developmental delay criteria](#). If they do, your early childhood partner may recommend that you consider applying to the NDIS on your child's behalf. If you decide to apply to the NDIS, your early childhood partner can support your family to apply.

If the information shows your child has [developmental concerns](#) your early childhood partner may offer early supports and they will continue to support your connections with mainstream services.

Your early childhood partner will support you, but they won't be able to decide whether:

- you should apply to the NDIS on your child's behalf – this is a decision you must make
- your child meets the eligibility requirements to become a participant of the NDIS – this is a decision we must make.

Remember, we take the collection of your personal information, and your privacy seriously. We keep all your personal information safe, and only collect what we need. We need to follow federal laws about how we look at your personal information, how we use it, and give it to other people. The [information handling](#) guideline explains how we collect, store, use and share information about you, including sharing information outside the NDIA.

If you don't understand the services available or feel like your child is not being supported the way you'd like, you should talk to your early childhood partner. If you can't resolve your concerns, you can always contact us to provide [feedback](#).

Parent information

Your early childhood partner will ask you about your child's day-to-day life to understand your concerns, such as how they:

- play
- talk with other children
- help take care of themselves
- tell you what they need and want.

Ecomap

Your early childhood partner will work with you to develop an ecomap. This is a diagram which shows a map of all the connections, supports and services that you and your child have. It includes all informal supports like friends and family, and mainstream and community supports, like childcare or school. The ecomap helps us to see how much support each of these areas is providing you and your child, and how they interact. This helps the early childhood partner to work out what other supports and services might be helpful. It also helps to paint a picture of what is important to you and your child's life.

Reports about your child

Your early childhood partner will look at information from doctors, therapists, and early childhood educators or school teachers if they are available.

Assessment tools

Your early childhood partner may use assessment and screening tools to help them learn more about your child's development and what they can do in everyday activities. These assessments and screening tools will show how your child's development is different from other children of a similar age.

An example of a developmental screening tool your early childhood partner may use is called the [Ages and Stages Questionnaire](#) (ASQ). The ASQ is used along with other useful information such as observations and reports from teachers, reports from your child's specialists who know them well, as well as other functional assessments that help to demonstrate you and your child's needs.

Observations

Your early childhood partner will observe your child in familiar places such as home and childcare. They'll see what your child is good at, their interests and the areas where they need more help. They'll use this information to assess your child's support needs.

What types of early connections are available?

Your early childhood partner will talk with you about the different ways you and your child can receive supports. This might include:

- [Connections with mainstream and community services](#)
- [Connections to practical information that's relevant to your child's development](#)
- [Connections with other families for peer support](#)
- [Connections with early supports](#)
- [Connections to apply to the NDIS](#)

Connections with mainstream and community services

Early childhood partners have strong community connections. They help link people with services and raise awareness in the community about developmental delay or disability.

Early childhood partners will help you and your child participate in mainstream or community services in your local area. This can include:

- early childhood educational services, for example childcare, preschool, occasional care, family day care and playgroups
- schools
- health services, for example GPs, paediatricians, child health nurses and vision and hearing services
- community health services for example dietetics, child mental health services
- family support services, for example peer support groups and counselling services.

For example, if your child is 6 years or older and you would benefit from substantial support to connect with community and mainstream services to support your child's development, your early childhood partner may help you make community connections. To learn more, go to [Our guideline – Community connections](#) and [Our Guideline – Mainstream and community supports](#).

Example

Isabelle is a 3-year-old girl who lives with her father, Raul, and younger sisters. As a busy working single parent, Raul relies on his elderly parents to care for Isabelle and her siblings.

Once a week Raul takes Isabelle to playgroup. During the playgroup sessions, Raul notices that Isabelle's speech is not as well developed as other children her age. The playgroup leader suggests Raul connects with an early childhood partner.

During the appointment, the early childhood partner asks Raul questions, observes Isabelle and uses the [Ages and Stages Questionnaire](#) to better understand her development. The early childhood partner notices that Isabelle has met most of her developmental milestones but seems to have a mild speech delay. The speech delay doesn't seem to have had a big impact on Isabelle's other developmental areas. Her behaviour, social skills and physical development are all at the same level as other children her age.

The early childhood partner recommends that a mainstream service is best placed to help with Isabelle's speech delay. They discuss referral options with Raul. Isabelle is referred to the local community health centre where a speech pathologist supports her speech and language development.

The early childhood partner also supports Raul to connect with community supports. This includes information and assistance to enrol Isabelle at a local childcare centre where she can go 2 days a week and practice her speech. After this period of early connection finishes Raul knows he can contact the early childhood partner again in the future if Isabelle's needs change.

Connections to practical information that's relevant to your child's development

Depending on your child's individual support needs, your early childhood partner can give you practical information that's relevant to your situation. This may include practical advice on typical child development topics, and helpful strategies you can include in your child's daily routine. Typical child development topics include:

- play
- communication
- behaviour
- best practice in early childhood intervention.

You may be given information about different supports and other services that you may find helpful.

Connections with other families for peer support

Early childhood partners will connect you to local support networks and services so you can meet other people with similar experiences or situations if you want to. These parent-to-parent and community-based support systems allow for sharing of information that can build your confidence and knowledge and help you navigate the road ahead. They can also provide a safe space to talk about your family's experiences and celebrate your child's uniqueness with others with a similar experience. It's a good way to build community with other families.

Peer supports can be one-on-one or in groups. They may be delivered through an online platform or in face-to-face sessions and programs. Early childhood partners will work with you to understand what you are seeking from peer supports and connect you with the most appropriate supports for you and your family.

Early childhood partners may also provide group information sessions or parent workshops which include peer support opportunities.

Connections with early supports

Your early childhood partner may recommend early supports if your child is younger than 6 and has [developmental concerns](#). Early supports build capacity in you and your child across natural settings. They promote everyday learning in your home and other environments. Early supports provide a goal focussed approach to address specific concerns about your child's development.

Your early childhood partner will work with you to better understand your child's strengths and needs. They will determine what kinds of supports may meet your child's needs, including how long your child may need early supports for. During this time, they will work together with you and relevant mainstream and community services to make sure your child is included and able to participate in everyday settings. For example, if your child goes to childcare, your early childhood partner may work with you and the education staff. They can support your child's inclusion and participation in this setting.

Your [early childhood partner](#) may offer a short period of early supports. This will usually be 3 to 6 months, or up to a maximum of 12 months, where required. They will work with you to determine:

- where the supports will happen
- what your goals are for your child
- how you and your child will be supported to pursue these goals
- who will provide the supports

- when early supports will end
- [what happens after early connections](#).

We will write down the information we talk about, including your goals for your child, likely support needs including possible resources or strategies, what is happening now for you and your child and next steps. We can update this information as your goals or priorities for your child change. We will give you a copy of this information so you can provide this to other important people in your child's life if you choose.

Early supports follow the principles of best practice as outlined in the National Guidelines on [Best Practice in Early Childhood Intervention](#).

To work out whether your child younger than 6 will be offered early supports, your early childhood partner will look at whether:

- their observations of your child, and your parent report, show concerns about your child's development
- the assessment and screening tools show your child's development is outside the typical range for their age
- there are [developmental concerns](#) that don't fully meet [developmental delay](#)
- there is any evidence from relevant professionals to show there's a significant impact on your child's function or the impact isn't yet known
- the support required is the responsibility of mainstream and community services.

Your early childhood partner will work closely with you to set clear expectations, goals, responsibilities and expected outcomes of the early supports. To support you and your child with measuring progress towards your goals in early supports, your early childhood partner will use an outcome measure. It is important to measure outcomes during early supports to ensure the service has been effective and met your child's needs. We will talk to you about this and the process for measuring outcomes when the time comes to see how you and your child are progressing.

Early supports can be provided in individual or group settings, and may include:

- parent workshops on child development topics such as behaviour, feeding or toileting
- building the skills and capacity of mainstream services, such as early childhood education and care services, to support your child's needs

- strategies to help your child build their skills and participate in everyday routines – such as visual supports for communication, or changes to your child’s environment to support their participation
- support to build your confidence and knowledge to use the strategies and skills in everyday routines
- working with you and mainstream services to prepare for upcoming transitions, such as starting school or preschool.

When the period of early support finishes, your early childhood partner will do a final review. They will look at the goals you have been working on with your child and what was achieved. This will help other important people in your child’s life, for example your family, GP and your child’s early childhood educator, to understand and support your child in the future.

During early supports there might be evidence that your child needs additional support and could meet the NDIS criteria for [developmental delay](#). Your early childhood partner will help you to [apply to the NDIS](#) if you want to. If your child becomes an NDIS participant early supports will stop and your early childhood partner will work with you to develop your child’s NDIS plan.

Connections to apply to the NDIS

While you’re being supported by your early childhood partner with early connections, you may decide that you want to apply to the NDIS on behalf of your child.

If you decide to apply to the NDIS on your child’s behalf, your early childhood partner can support you to put together information and evidence to help work out if your child is eligible. This includes evidence of how your child’s functional capacity is affected.

To find out more about being eligible for the NDIS go to the [Applying to the NDIS](#) guideline.

If your child transitions from early connections to become an NDIS participant, then we’ll use information gathered about goals, assessments, and connections with community and mainstream supports to help create your child’s NDIS plan. You can read more about how we make decisions about your NDIS plan in Our Guidelines – [Creating your plan](#), [Your plan](#) and [Reasonable and necessary supports](#).

What happens after early connections?

Your journey through early connections may be very short or could be up to several months. Early connections will give you more capacity and confidence to support your child’s needs.

After you move on from early connections, you can reconnect with an early childhood partner at any time in the future if your child is younger than 9.

If you are likely to need continued support after your child turns 9, you can [contact us](#), or your early childhood partner can give you information about your local area coordinator. Your [local area coordinator](#) will become your new partner in the community.

Local area coordinators can help you learn about, and connect with, services and activities available in your community. They can also help you to understand the NDIS, and if your child is, or becomes, a participant they may help to develop the plan. To learn more go to [Our Guidelines – Community Connections](#).

Example

Khalid is 3 years old and has a small vocabulary. He recently started to combine words into short sentences. Fatima, Khalid's mother, is concerned about his speech and social skills. She also finds it difficult to manage his behaviour at home. Khalid goes to his local preschool, where he enjoys playing outside, especially in the sandpit. His preschool teachers say that sometimes Khalid has trouble understanding what they are asking him to do. They also report that he finds it hard to share toys with other children, or to transition to new activities.

Fatima seeks advice from her GP who refers her to an early childhood partner. The early childhood partner meets with Fatima and Khalid at their home. The early childhood partner discusses Fatima's concerns and observes and assesses Khalid playing. They also work with Khalid at preschool and observe that his behaviour stems from frustration and not knowing what is expected of him or what is coming next.

Based on observations and assessments, the early childhood partner recommends Khalid receives early supports to address the developmental concerns. The early childhood partner works together with Khalid's family to record their goals, likely support needs, strategies, and next steps. Next steps include:

- The delivery of early supports at Khalid's home and his preschool.
- Giving his family and teachers strategies and resources to support his speech and language development and manage his behaviour.
- Recommending that Fatima and Khalid attend an 8 week social skills group run by their early childhood partner. As part of this group, they can connect with other families and children in a supportive setting.

After a couple of months, Khalid's speech and understanding of instructions continue to improve. Khalid's preschool teachers report that his behaviour is improving. Khalid and

Fatima no longer require early supports, however Fatima knows she can connect back with the early childhood partner if she needs to.