

**In 2008 The Australian Government provided \$190 million in funding for the Helping Children with Autism (HCWA) package.**

**The funding package has enabled development of the following initiatives provided and accessed by families of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders across Australia.**

### **Information on HCWA package programs**

#### **Autism Advisor Program**

The Autism Association in every state and territory is funded to provide a program of Autism Advisors, in both urban and regional areas.

In Tasmania - Autism Tasmania Inc. is responsible for the Autism Advisor Service.

Autism Advisors are funded to assist families and carers of children who are diagnosed with an ASD by providing information about appropriate early intervention services. The Advisors provide a link between the clinical diagnosis and access to early intervention programs and support services. They also assist eligible families to access the Australian Government funding for early intervention services and grants to support families from rural and remote areas. Please refer to "About Autism Tasmania" – "Need help?" for Autism Advisor contact details.

#### **Early Intervention payments**

This funding is aimed at providing increased access to a range of early intervention services including one-on-one intensive activities and tailored group and individual programs that can be delivered in a range of settings.

All eligible children up to their sixth birthday will have access to the early intervention funding of up to \$12,000 (up to \$6,000 per financial year) regardless of whether or not they have commenced school.

From the child's sixth birthday until their seventh birthday, special consideration may be given which would allow continued access to the funding. This will be determined by an Autism Advisor on a case-by-case basis using nationally consistent criteria.

Once a child turns seven years of age they are no longer eligible to access funding under the early intervention component of the package.

Families can use this funding to choose the early intervention services that best suit their child from an approved panel of service providers. Eligible early intervention services under the package have a multidisciplinary focus.

Families in rural and remote areas may also be eligible for an additional one off payment of \$2,000 in recognition of the additional challenges they face in accessing services.

### **'Early Days' Workshops**

'Early Days' is a national program of workshops for parents and carers who are in the early days of assessment and diagnosis of their child. The workshops provide support that will assist families to effectively manage the pressures they face during the early diagnosis stage. They offer opportunities for families to create links within their local ASD community and provide support and relevant, up to date, evidence based research and information about ASD that will assist them to access early intervention and other services. The content for the Early Days workshops was developed by a professional team that includes experts in ASDs and adult education.

Early Days also offer half day workshops that focus on developing skills in particular areas such as behaviour management, toilet training, play skills, daily care skills and working together as a family.

Workshops are delivered nationally through local early childhood intervention services by qualified professionals with expertise and experience in ASD. These are conducted across Australia in small groups to maximise participant interaction. Where participation is not possible due to rural isolation or time constraints other options, such as on-line learning, are being offered.

Early Days has been developed to complement other available services in the ASD field and provide a resource for families who are just coming to terms with their child's ASD or who are waiting for early intervention services.

Families and carers are able to receive information and book their attendance to the Early Days workshops by either calling the free call 1800 334 155 national number or via the Early Days website at [www.earlydays.net.au](http://www.earlydays.net.au).

### **ASD Website**

The ASD Website ([www.raisingchildren.net.au/autism](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au/autism)) has been developed through the Raising Children Network, which has created an additional ASD landing page as part of their existing website. The Raising Children Network is an award winning site that provides information and support to parents of young children.

The Website provides an independent, non government avenue for finding information on ASDs. All the information on the site is carefully screened by RCN to ensure it accurate and up-to-date. The site provides:

- evidence based information articles eg *What causes autism spectrum disorder (ASD)? and How is autism spectrum disorder (ASD) diagnosed?*
- a guide to ASD therapies, based on evidence based research
- a 'My Neighbourhood' function that shows relevant ASD and other services in a local area

- a 'pathways' tool that assists parents to negotiate the complex service system
- available assistance in each state and territory
- a discussion forum for parents.

The Website is designed to cover all aspects of ASD related information regardless of its jurisdiction or how it is funded. The site contains information on Australian Government programs, state and territory government programs and community based and private services. The Autism Associations and the Australian Government funded Autism Advisors program are prominently listed. Information on the HWCA package, and the three Australian Government departments involved in its implementation, are also included on the site.

### **PlayConnect Playgroups**

PlayConnect Playgroups are designed to help families with children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). It is about connecting with other families. Families that have a child aged from 0-6 years with ASD or ASD like symptoms are welcome to join a PlayConnect Playgroup. Children do not need an ASD diagnosis to join. Siblings aged 0 to 6 years old are also welcome to attend.

PlayConnect Playgroups meet weekly for two hours. During playgroup sessions, caregivers and children participate in a variety of play activities suited to the needs of children with ASD.

Sessions are initially run by a Development Worker, for between 6-24 months, until they are able to transition to become community, parent-run playgroups. Families will also receive information about other services for children with ASD.

Numerous studies have shown the value of playgroup on young children's social, cognitive, emotional and language development. Parents and caregivers say playgroups are useful because they help them connect with other families in similar situations.

PlayConnect is not therapy based however the PlayConnect Worker can provide families with information about strategies for play and specialist services in their local area. Families can also contact the Playgroup Australia's ASD Advisor for advice about children with ASD at playgroup on 1800 790 335.

### **Other HCWA initiatives**

The **Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations** (DEEWR) is delivering two school aged initiatives:

- professional development for teachers and other school staff to support school students with ASD to achieve better educational outcomes

- funding for parents and carers of school students with ASD to attend workshops and information sessions and to access online workshops and information.

This support will help improve the educational outcomes for school-aged children with ASD.

These initiatives are being delivered through a consortium of organisations. The program is named **Positive Partnerships**. More information can be obtained by visiting [www.autismtraining.com.au/](http://www.autismtraining.com.au/)

The **Department of Health and Ageing** (DoHA) has introduced new Medicare items for children with ASDs. These new items are for:

- consultant physicians (paediatricians and psychiatrists) to diagnose and develop a treatment plan for children under 13 on referral from a GP
- psychologists, speech pathologists and occupational therapists to provide up to four services in total per child to collaborate with the psychiatrist or paediatrician on the assessment where required
- psychologists, speech pathologists and occupational therapists to provide early intervention treatment following diagnosis (providing up to 20 services in total per child).

Further information on the Medicare items can be obtained by calling the Department of Health and Ageing on (02) 6289 4297, or the Medicare Australia Patient Enquiry Line on 13 20 11.

### **The Autism Specific Early Learning and Care Centres (not part of HCWA package)**

Six Autism Specific Early Learning and Care Centres are planned across the country. These centres will be in:

- South Western Sydney
- Brisbane
- Adelaide
- North West Tasmania
- Melbourne
- Perth

Negotiations and planning is underway for these centres.

The centres will provide early learning programs and specific support to children with ASDs in a long day care setting and will provide child care for children aged zero to six years with ASDs. They will provide parents with support in the care of their children and give them the opportunity to participate more fully in the community. Through their affiliations with universities or hospitals, the centres will have a research and workforce

training component which will help achieve a better understanding of ASDs and build workforce capability.