

CYDA's Response to the Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

*"I'm in [REDACTED] and I can't afford to get sick ... I feel like I've been abandoned by health measures that are supposed to protect people like me".
– young person with disability, 2022*



Content note: e.g. Discussion of death/ isolation

Children and Young People with Disability Australia
December 2023

Executive Summary

Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) is the national representative organisation for children and young people with disability aged 0 to 25 years. Our vision is that children and young people with disability are valued and living empowered lives with equality of opportunity; and our purpose is to ensure governments, communities, and families, are empowering children and young people with disability to fully exercise their rights and aspirations.

CYDA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Commonwealth Government's Covid 19 Inquiry.

Key issues: Children and young people with disability have encountered an elevated degree of risk throughout the global pandemic, not due to their impairments, but as a result of discriminatory, limited, or inappropriate policies implemented to manage infections in the community. The absence of a coherent national strategy in Australia has exacerbated the exclusion, uncertainty, and distress experienced by these individuals. Our extensive Covid-related policy work outlined in Table 1 below, sheds light on the inadequacy of targeted responses spanning vaccinations, education, community support services, and other health impacts.

Terms of Reference (ToR) addressed: In this submission, CYDA seeks to specifically address the Terms of Reference outlined below.

- Key health response measures (for example across COVID-19 vaccinations and treatments, and public health messaging).
- Community supports (across early childhood education and care, higher education).

Key recommendations: Our overarching recommendation to the Inquiry is to protect children and young people from the developmental, social, and economic scarring effects of the COVID-19 and any future pandemics. To achieve this imperative goal, CYDA strongly urges the government to prioritise the development of a *National Children and Young People Recovery Plan*. Such a plan should be comprehensive and designed to mitigate the long-term consequences of COVID-19 and any future pandemic crises on the life trajectory of this demographic that experiences increased vulnerabilities.

CYDA also wholeheartedly endorses the policy recommendations articulated in the collaborative report by Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) and UNICEF titled "[Kids at the Crossroads: Evidence and Policy to Mitigate the Effects of COVID-19](#)." We encourage the government to adopt the key recommendations from this report on 1) supporting economic recovery and strengthen systems, 2) protection against deepening and widening inequalities, 3) promoting resilience and mental wellbeing and 4) fostering citizenship and fighting disempowerment, as the foundation to a robust National Recovery Plan. Furthermore, we recommend the inclusion of a targeted focus in the recovery plan on groups of children and young people, including those with disability, who have been routinely excluded from government policy both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The following response (Table 1) is informed by CYDA's consultations with children, young people with disability and their families conducted during the pandemic and also our previous policy work on this topic. Direct quotes from these consultations are italicised and have been amended for clarity and brevity.

Table 1 - Response to the ToR and CYDA recommendations

Terms of reference	CYDA's recommendation	Supporting quote from children/young people with disability/families	Relevant CYDA submissions and page numbers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key health response measures - COVID-19 vaccinations and treatments - key medical supplies such as personal protective equipment - public health messaging 	<p>Under a National Children and Young People Recovery Plan</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide appropriate information – The Australian and state and territory governments need to ensure that relevant and accessible information is available and targeted towards children and young people with disability and their families and caregivers. • Reduce fragmentation – Support jurisdictions to work together to deliver consistent, evidence-based advice and messaging to children and young people and their families and caregivers. This includes defining the responsibilities of different jurisdictions and service systems and maintaining accountability for the delivery of supports. • Respond to lived experience – Build the voices and experiences of children and young people with disability and their families and caregivers into emergency planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Covid-19 Vaccines <i>“The [vaccination] process itself is broken and not set up for easy engagement for disabled people, children, or anyone with a history of trauma from the medical system.” (young person with disability, 2021)</i> <i>“There is a real lack of coherence between what the Federal government say/put out & what happens on the ground with the people administering the vaccinations ... The Federal government say disability is a priority but in reality, is not really recognised by the vaccine administrators. No one cared that should my daughter get COVID, she would have a HUGE chance of dying and so should be protected faster. I had to fight to get her vaccinated ... Worth it but so unnecessarily hard and stressful”. (parent/caregiver, 2021)</i> • Provision/access to medical supplies <i>“Throughout pandemic, rushing in and queuing for ages to get masks, RATs, etc has been very hard, due to social distancing needs and also physical access issues. [It is an] enduring issue.” (Parent/caregiver, 2022)</i> • Lack of public health messaging <i>“No specific instructions have been given from medical places nor the government to keep our</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report “Locked out: Vaccination discrimination for children and young people with disability”. See pages 28 and 29. • Report “More than isolated: The experience of children and young people with disability and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic. See page 28-30. • Response to the Disability Royal Commission’s Omicron issues paper. See page 3 • Submission to the Inquiry into the Australian Government response to the COVID-19 pandemic. See pages 2 and 3

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	and response at the national and state levels.	<i>disabled children safe from harm. Not unusual to be forgotten.</i> (parent/caregiver, 2020)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community supports (across early childhood education and care, higher education). 	<p>During any disaster (floods, fire or pandemic), with careful planning and effort by education systems and educators, students with disability can thrive by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensuring they are made to feel part of a learning community through connecting them with their peers Ensuring education materials and curricula are accessible and customised to the different needs of students, and that reasonable adjustments are provided by the educators in partnership with children and families – this should not be left to families or students themselves to negotiate Providing timely and well-planned support Breaking down the barriers between the NDIS and educational support to ensure both systems are complementary by consulting families, children and young people. 	<p><i>“Over the longer term the only way to prevent these issues arising in future waves of the pandemic or during other emergencies is to genuinely implement inclusive education practices.” (parent/caregiver, 2020)</i></p> <p><i>“The school was terrible at disability support and inclusion before the pandemic and have remained uncaring and disinterested during it. They are doing the absolute bare minimum to support my child and others with disability, are not teaching at school or online, no aide time has been offered and there is no support.” (parent/caregiver, 2020)</i></p> <p>A young person explained why social supports are so important: <i>“There has been no phone call or communication from the school regarding how I am coping. I have regular meltdowns and feel anxious and depressed as I need contact from my friends but my friends don’t need it from me. It would be extremely helpful if they had set up communication with friendship groups during lunchtime”. (2020)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Report “Not even remotely fair: Experiences of students with disability during COVID-19”. See pages 39-41 Submission to the Review of the impact of COVID-19 on school students with Disability. See pages 3-7 & 7-8. Report “How did COVID-19 impact post-school transitions for young people with disability and how can these be better supported?” See pages 29-32