

Specialised Early Childhood Centres For Children With Autism

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Federal Labor will establish specialised child care and early intervention services – six in the initial stage – for children with autism.

As a first step, there will be up to six specialised early childhood centres. Parents know that mainstream child care

environments can be overstimulating for children with autism, making it difficult for them to develop new skills. Children with autism are better supported in services that take an autism-specific approach.

Federal Labor would make sure that our specialist child care centres would provide programs delivered by staff with specialist training, and a physical environment which provides appropriate stimulation. The specialised child care and early intervention centres will be built on appropriate sites across Australia to provide dedicated early intervention and care for children with autism spectrum disorders.

Parents of children with autism have told Federal Labor that existing services do not cater adequately for their children's special needs. For too long, these families have been ignored and the uniqueness of their child's condition not taken into account. Raising a child with autism can be extremely difficult and few people understand the challenges that parents face. The Australian Advisory Board on Autism Spectrum Disorders estimates one in every 160 children is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

This initiative is part of Federal Labor's commitment to build up to 260 new child care centres on community land. This initiative will complement Federal Labor's \$450 million investment in early education for all four year olds. These specialised child care centres and early intervention services will also provide parents with support and respite in the care of their children. They will work with health services to help to improve the consistency of autism diagnosis.

Research indicates that early intervention can stem a decline in a child's intellectual advancement and improvements in many other areas of development. The Federal Government's current model of care is often not the most effective for children with autism, especially in the early years of intervention. An autism specific approach also involves teachers, psychologists, an occupational therapist and a speech pathologist in the child's development program.

Federal Labor's new autism specific centres would follow similar developmental methods to the AEIOU program that currently operates in Brisbane, and the Lizard Centre in Sydney. These programs are designed to develop the skills of the child in the following areas:

- Social interaction and play skills
- Cognitive development
- Self-help/tasks of everyday life
- Communication
- Sensory integration
- Fine and gross motor skills

Federal Labor is working with parental, expert and carer groups to determine the most effective operational arrangements for these services. The final service models will take into account existing child care subsidies, including the Child Care Benefit and Child Care Tax Rebate.

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