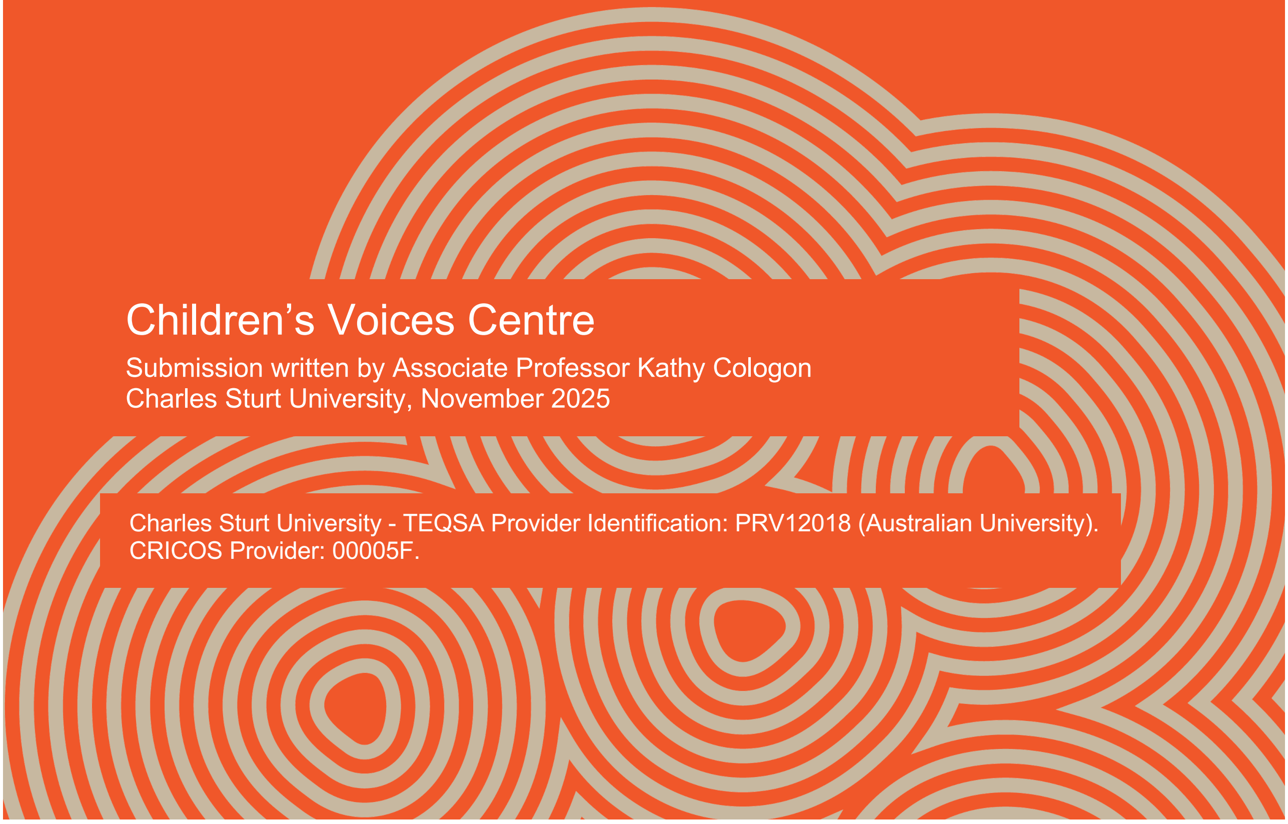
Charles Sturt
University

Submission to the Review of the Australian Disability Discrimination Act

Children's Perspectives on the Disability Discrimination Act: Barriers, Fairness and Belonging



Children's Voices Centre

Submission written by Associate Professor Kathy Cologon
Charles Sturt University, November 2025

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1. Acknowledgement and About this Submission

Acknowledgement of Country

In developing this submission, we gathered on Wiradjuri and Darkinjung Country. We acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the lands, skies and waterways across Australia. We recognise that this land always was and always will be Aboriginal land. We pay our deepest respects to Elders past, present and future, and to the continuing cultures, knowledges, languages and stories that have been cared for here for tens of thousands of years.

We especially honour First Nations children with disability, whose strengths, identities and ways of knowing are vital to their families, communities and to Australia. We acknowledge the long history of exclusion, discrimination and harm experienced by First Nations peoples, including children, and we recognise First Nations peoples' leadership, resilience and right to shape a future in which all children can thrive.

As some of the children contributing to this submission are Indigenous to Sápmi, we also acknowledge the Sámi people, the First Peoples of northern Norway, Sweden, Finland and the Kola Peninsula of Russia. We honour Sámi Elders, families and communities, including Sámi children with disability, and the continuing strength of Sámi languages, culture and connection to land and reindeer herding country.

We recognise that First Peoples across the world share deep relationships with their lands, waters, cultures and kinship systems, and that Indigenous children - whether Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, or Sámi - hold rights to safety, identity, belonging, and full inclusion.

We pay our respects to all Indigenous children who have contributed to this submission, and to the families, communities and ancestors who walk with them.

Who We Are

The authors of this submission are the children – in alphabetical order – Bijou, Chloe, Eirik, Finbar, Greta, Jocelyn, Knox, Nayantara, Roarke, Zac, and supported by Ella.

The children were supported by their parents, Belinda, Camilla, Goutam, Kathy and Shukla, and by Associate Professors Kathy Cologon and Tamara Cumming.

The submission is contributed by the Children's Voices Centre at Charles Sturt University led by its Director, Distinguished Professor Sharynne McLeod, along with Associate Directors, Associate Professor Kathy Cologon and Associate Professor Tamara Cumming, and Dr Carolyn Gregoric, Lorraine Bennett and a multidisciplinary group of affiliates and adjunct members.

This submission was written by Associate Professor Kathy Cologon, based on the contributions of the children, who are aged between 4 and 13 years old. The children bring a wide range of experiences, identities and perspectives. They include children who do and do not experience disability, children who communicate using spoken language, sign, writing, drawing, emojis, and movement, and children who speak multiple languages, including Indigenous languages. Their insights reflect the diversity of ways children understand and navigate the world, and the many forms their communication and expression can take. These children engaged in this submission in the role of advisors to the Children's Voices Centre at Charles Sturt University.

Together, the children, their families and the academic team collaborated to ensure that this submission reflects children's perspectives authentically, respectfully and in their own words. The intention of all adults involved has been to create space for children to speak to what fairness, inclusion and discrimination mean in their everyday lives, and to ensure children's perspectives and experiences help shape reforms to the Disability Discrimination Act.

The children contributed to this submission through a range of methods designed to honour their preferences, communication styles and comfort levels. Their insights were gathered in ways that prioritised inclusion, flexibility and choice.

Online advisory group discussion:
Ten of the children participated in a group conversation held online, where they shared their experiences, ideas and reflections with one another in a collaborative environment.

Family-recorded group discussions:
Some families chose to record discussions at home. These conversations enabled children to express themselves within familiar relationships and settings, supporting relaxed, natural contributions.

One-to-one conversations and written reflections:
Some children offered their views individually through direct conversation recorded (with consent) by their parents and one child provided typed reflections, while another child typed in Braille alongside conversation. One child responded using emojis to express feelings within the group discussion. This allowed children to contribute in their own time and way.

Ethics, Consent and Safeguards

Ethical approval for this work was obtained from the Charles Sturt University Human Research Ethics Committee. All parents provided informed consent for their children's involvement, and all children provided assent. Children chose whether to be identified by their own name or a pseudonym.

At every stage, children could seek support, take breaks, or opt out at any time during or after the project. Care was taken to ensure that participation was safe, voluntary and respectful, and that children's contributions were represented in ways that honoured their intentions and perspectives.

How This Submission Is Structured

This submission is structured to clearly present the perspectives and priorities of the children who contributed, while also aligning with the themes and areas for reform identified in the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) Issues Paper.

The submission begins by outlining the children's core messages about disability, fairness and belonging. These messages are drawn from the children's own words and experiences, and they shape the way the subsequent sections are organised and interpreted.

Following this, the submission is structured to correspond with the major parts of the Issues Paper, including:

- Updating understandings of disability and discrimination,
- Positive duties to prevent discrimination,
- Inclusion in education, public spaces, transport, sport and community life,
- Access to justice,
- Exemptions and areas for modernisation, and
- Further options for reform.

Within each part, we present the children's insights, examples and recommendations, organised according to the everyday themes that emerged from their contributions. These include:

- what disability and fairness mean to children,
- school and learning,
- places and spaces,
- getting around and using services,
- sport, clubs and play,
- home and community life,
- communication and support,
- work and the future,
- safety and respect, and
- the children's "big ideas" for change.

By weaving together the structure of the Issues Paper with the lived experiences and priorities of the children, this submission ensures that children's perspectives are centred and directly connected to the specific areas of the DDA that require strengthening or reform.

The aim is to provide a clear, comprehensive and child-led contribution to the DDA Review. One that reflects both the practical realities children encounter and their vision for a fairer, more inclusive Australia.

2. Children’s Core Message and Key Principles

The children who contributed to this submission shared a strong, consistent message that disability is not the problem, barriers are. Across ages, communication styles, and lived experiences, the children described a world that often excludes people through its design, attitudes, rules and expectations. They also described the world they want to live in as one that is fair, kind, accessible and welcoming to everyone.

The children’s messages reflect a clear understanding of rights, inclusion and justice. They highlight the need for a Disability Discrimination Act that not only responds when discrimination occurs but proactively prevents it by requiring society to be designed for all people.

This section summarises the children’s key messages in their own terms, grounded in their words and perspectives.

2.1 Disability Isn’t the Problem, Barriers Are

Children emphasised that it is never the person or the disability that is the deficit or a “problem” to be “fixed” (the children used air quotes to emphasise these points). The children spoke about disability as a natural part of human diversity, and argued that the real challenges arise when environments, systems or attitudes fail to include everyone.

The children explained that:

- Many places, activities and systems are not built for all children, and this creates exclusion.
- Being excluded or treated unfairly makes children feel sad, disappointed, frustrated or unsafe.
- Fairness means changing the world, not changing the child.

One child summed this up powerfully:

- *“Disability is not a problem but the problem is the world’s not currently made for all of us. Australia isn’t made for everyone yet. This needs to change.”* Zac, age 9

Another child captured the spirit of inclusion:

- *“… you don’t have to change who you are to join in.”* Finbar, age 11

These messages align closely with social and human-rights models of disability. The children expressed an understanding of discrimination as something that arises from barriers – not bodies – and beliefs that the law should more clearly reflect that reality.

2.2 What Disability and Fairness Mean to Us

Across all responses, children shared what “disability” and “fairness” mean in their everyday lives:

- Disability means facing barriers such as stairs, loud environments, confusing instructions, narrow spaces, bullying, or assumptions about what people can or can’t do.
- Fairness means everyone gets to join in without being left out, judged, teased, or treated as a problem.
- Fairness also means helping each other, not blaming or excluding children who need support.
- Children defined fairness as feeling safe, welcomed, understood, and respected.

The children’s interpretations were practical and grounded, expressing that fairness is what happens – or needs to happen – in classrooms, playgrounds, buses, pools, crossings, sports fields and community spaces, not just in legal documents.

2.3 Key Principles Children Want Reflected in the DDA

From their insights, several clear principles emerged that children believe should guide reforms to the Disability Discrimination Act:

1. Every child should belong everywhere.

Children want inclusive classrooms, playgrounds, parks, clubs, teams, libraries, shops and transport systems, not separate or “special” spaces.

2. Inclusion must be built in, not added on.

Children stressed that ramps, quiet spaces, lighting options, clear signs, flexible rules, and sensory-friendly environments should be standard, not optional extras.

3. Adults must understand and respect all children.

Children spoke about the need for adults (such as teachers, drivers, coaches, shop staff, police and others) to recognise different needs, listen carefully, and treat all children with kindness and respect.

4. Bullying and harmful “kindness” must stop.

Children described bullying, teasing, pity, and patronising behaviour as forms of discrimination. They want stronger protection from emotional and social harm.

5. All communication is valid.

Children emphasised that there are many different ways of communicating and all of these need to be recognised, valued and included in everyday life. Children argued that Braille, sign language, communication devices, writing, drawing or emojis are ways of communicating that need to be recognised and respected.

The children emphasised that all forms of communication should carry the same weight as spoken words. Children stressed the need to listen to people who communicate differently or who are often overlooked.

6. Everyone should be able to join in the fun stuff.

A recurring message was that children with disability are often left watching instead of joining in - at sports, at the park, in games or on excursions. The children want accessible play, sport and recreation built into every community.

7. Children are changemakers.

Children described themselves as leaders who can help improve the world. They want opportunities to shape decisions that affect them, including through this DDA review.

3. Updating Understandings of Disability and Disability Discrimination

The children who contributed to this submission are clear that disability is not a problem located in a person. Instead, they describe disability as something that becomes difficult when environments, rules, systems or attitudes create barriers. Their understanding aligns strongly with the social and human rights models of disability, which are reflected in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). These models recognise that disability emerges from the interaction between a person's body or mind and the barriers society places around them.

The Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA) predates the CRPD and uses language centred on loss, damage and malfunction. This does not reflect how children understand disability, nor contemporary international human rights standards. The children's experiences demonstrate why the DDA must be updated to reflect disability as a natural form of human diversity and to recognise the ways that discrimination arises from barriers, not bodies.

3.1 Definition of Disability: Children's Understandings

Disability is not within the person

As Zac (9) put it earlier, disability is not the problem, the problem is that the world is not made for everyone yet.

Jocelyn (11) explains that the difficulty does not come from a person's disability, but from environments that have not been designed for everyone:

"If it's upstairs and there's no elevator or something, well that makes it hard for people… like people in wheelchairs or on crutches."

Knox (age 11) also identifies the problem as the environment rather than the child, noting:

"A lot of parks don't have things for kids who have wheelchairs."

These views mirror the CRPD's definition of disability, which recognises that disability arises when people with impairments encounter barriers that limit their participation on an equal basis with others. The DDA should be updated to reflect this understanding directly.

How disability feels in daily life

Children explain that unfair treatment and inaccessible environments make them feel sad, frustrated or excluded. Chloe (age 7) says:

“Disappointing. It’s so disappointing when it isn’t fair. Sad, it makes me sad.”

Jocelyn (age 11) describes how attitudes can harm dignity:

“It makes them feel like you think they’re stupid, or like they’re dumb.”

Their experiences reflect the principles in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which requires that children with disability live full and decent lives in conditions that uphold dignity, self-reliance and active participation in the community.

Children also emphasise mutual support. Chloe says:

“Everyone needs help sometimes. We need to help each other.”

Greta agrees:

“And we have to help each other.”

This aligns with the CRPD’s recognition of the role of family and community in supporting rights and participation.

What children want the definition to achieve

The children’s insights indicate that the definition of disability in the DDA should:

- avoid deficit-based language and understandings
- recognise disability as natural human variation
- focus on the barriers that create discrimination
- use clear and respectful language
- promote design and systems that include all people

Zac’s statement that “Australia isn’t made for everyone yet” is a direct call for the law to require environmental, attitudinal and systemic change, and not merely accommodate individuals after barriers have been created.

3.2 Intersectionality, Bullying and Stigma

Children describe experiences that demonstrate how disability intersects with age, school settings, cultural identity and social attitudes. The CRPD acknowledges that disabled children may experience multiple forms of discrimination, and requires States to ensure their full enjoyment of all human rights on an equal basis with other children.

Bullying and stigma are common experiences. Zac summarises one of his biggest priorities:

“No bullying.”

Finbar describes a real-life example of what he calls “harmful kindness,” toward his sister where adults misunderstand disability in ways that are embarrassing or disrespectful:

“They started talking really loud at her because they thought that was being helpful… and I was like, um, she’s blind but she can hear you.”

Children explain that even when adults intend to help, their actions can still diminish dignity and autonomy. This reinforces the need for the DDA to capture not only overt prejudice but also behaviour that creates humiliation, exclusion or unequal treatment.

The CRC prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability and requires protection from violence and degrading treatment. The children’s experiences show clearly that stigma and bullying must be recognised and addressed as forms of discrimination under the DDA.

3.3 Direct and Indirect Discrimination in Practice

The children provide vivid examples of both direct and indirect discrimination as they experience it.

Direct Discrimination

Jocelyn describes situations where people with prams or wheelchairs are told to wait or move rather than others making space:

“So there's a school …where, there was this little girl who had a wheelchair and she needed the footpaths to go through it, and people just kept telling her to wait, and that they were going there first, instead of just simply moving aside and letting her go. Which I think is kinda like... why? It's not that hard, just move aside. Don't, why do you have to make things so difficult for people? It's not that hard.”

This is experienced as less favourable treatment, based on disability or perceived disability.

Indirect Discrimination

Children also describe rules or designs that apply to everyone but disproportionately disadvantage disabled people:

- Knox notes that many parks “don’t have things for kids who have wheelchairs.”
- Greta explains that people using wheelchairs would struggle in her house because “we have a lot of stairs.”
- Jocelyn describes the gap between the train and the platform and says, “They should make a little ramp.”
- Knox notes that some buses “don’t have a ramp so Riley can’t get on.”

These examples are consistent with the CRPD’s emphasis on accessibility and the removal of physical, communication and attitudinal barriers.

Roarke (13) highlights positive examples of universal design:

“They’ve got ramps everywhere… and an elevator to get to the second floor.”

Eirik (13) also notes meaningful differences between Australia and Norway, explaining that in Norway pedestrians have longer to cross the road, which helps “older people or people who walk slowly.”

These examples show the everyday relevance of indirect discrimination, and demonstrate that minor adjustments can have major benefits for everyone.

3.4 Interpreting the DDA in Line with Children’s Rights

The CRPD requires governments to closely consult with and actively involve people with disability, including children, in developing and implementing policies and laws that affect them. The CRC requires that children’s views be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.

The children participating in this submission are exercising those rights now. They are providing clear accounts of what disability and discrimination mean in their lives, and what they expect from government.

The emphasis on the part of the children of the need for change reflects the CRPD’s insistence that States remove barriers and promote inclusion. Jocelyn, Knox, Roarke and Chloe describe the emotional and social consequences of exclusion, reinforcing the CRC’s guarantee of dignity and participation.

Updating the DDA to explicitly reflect the CRPD and CRC would:

- ensure children with disability are recognised as rights holders
- require interpretation consistent with dignity, autonomy, inclusion and accessibility
- support courts and decision makers to recognise indirect discrimination and denial of reasonable accommodation
- embed children’s best interests and their own views into all disability-related decisions
- strengthen consultation requirements with children who experience disability, not only adults

The children’s insights clearly demonstrate that the current law does not yet deliver equality, dignity or belonging for all children. Aligning the DDA with the CRPD and CRC, and updating its definitions and protections, would bring Australia’s disability discrimination law into line with both contemporary human rights standards and the lived experiences of children themselves.

4. Positive Duty to Eliminate Discrimination

The children who contributed to this submission are clear that the DDA should not only respond when someone complains after discrimination has already happened. They want adults, organisations and systems to act early so that unfairness and exclusion are prevented in the first place. Greta (8) suggested that it is so unacceptable that people discriminate on the basis of disability that such people should go to jail, or at the very least to a school that will teach them to be kind and not discriminate. Jocelyn (11) describes fairness as "making sure that everything's fair for everyone, just doing little acts so everything is all right for everyone." A positive duty to eliminate discrimination would turn these "little acts" into everyday legal expectations for all duty holders.

The children's views align with Australia's obligations under the CRPD and the CRC, which require governments and others to take proactive steps so that children with disability can participate on an equal basis with others. Children are asking the DDA to reflect this by requiring positive, preventative action, not only complaint-based responses.

4.1 Children's Vision of a Positive Duty

As noted previously, Finbar (11) offered a "big idea" that sits at the heart of what a positive duty should be. He explained that:

"the big idea of this is you don't have to like change who you are to join in. Instead, we need to change the places, we need to change the rules, and we also have to change some of our attitudes."

For the children, a positive duty is about changing places, rules and attitudes so that barriers are removed before they stop anyone from taking part. It is about making sure that inclusion is built into the design of environments and decisions, rather than relying on individual children to complain or ask for "special" treatment. As Jocelyn (11) put it, it is about "just doing little acts so everything is all right for everyone."

Children also link positive duty to kindness, mutual responsibility and shared care. The children do not want charity. They are asking for a legal framework that expects everyone to do their part to make the world fair.

4.2 Everyday Examples of What Positive Duty Looks Like

The children gave many concrete examples of what a positive duty would look like in real life. These examples fall naturally into themes of places and spaces, transport and services, and homes and buildings.

PLACES AND SPACES

The children repeatedly returned to the need to design environments that work for everyone, not just some people. For example, Zac (9), when talking about public places, said simply: "Ramps instead of stairs." He expanded on this by suggesting changes to lighting. Zac explained that we need "less bright lights, and more bright lights where it is helpful… like less bright in quiet places and bright lights where people need to read things and see stuff clearly.” He also imagined friendlier, more comfortable environments: “More colours, more soft stuff, more tacos!”

These ideas are about universal design, not optional add-ons. These changes would make spaces more welcoming and accessible for many different children at once. Knox (11) highlighted the ongoing exclusion in many parks, saying, “A lot of parks don’t have things for kids who have wheelchairs.” Roarke (13) contrasted this with a place that is doing better, noting that “they’ve got ramps everywhere. They’ve also got an elevator to get to the second floor.”

In a positive duty model, these kinds of adjustments would not depend on whether a particular child complains. Instead, the law would require organisations to think in advance about whether parks, playgrounds, schools, libraries and other public spaces can be used by all children.

TRANSPORT AND SERVICES

Children also described what positive duty would look like in transport and public services. Knox (11) spoke about a local bus, explaining, “They don’t have a ramp on that bus… so Riley can’t get on.” Jocelyn (11) described the danger and exclusion created by train design: “There’s this gap between the platform and the train… It can be really hard if you’re in a wheelchair… They should make a little ramp.” Eirik (13), drawing on his experiences in Norway, pointed out that there, “it’s much more time to cross the road,” which helps more people to cross safely.

Zac (9) connected these ideas in a broader vision for accessible services returning to the ideas of: “Having ramps, having medium lights and bright where things need to be read, having nice comfy seats to sit on, having sensory things.” He described not just physical changes, but a whole environment that feels safe, comfortable and usable for different bodies, senses and ways of being.

For the children, a positive duty in transport and services would mean, for example, that buses must have ramps as standard, that platforms and crossings must be designed so that children using wheelchairs or moving more slowly can travel safely, and that information is presented in ways that different people can perceive and understand.

HOMES AND BUILDINGS

Children also spoke about where they live and visit. Greta (8) said, “People in wheelchairs wouldn’t like… get around our house… we have a lot of stairs.” Zac (9) again pointed to concrete changes that should be required: “Stairs… We need ramps instead of stairs, more quiet alarms and flashing alarms for people who are deaf, but not too bright lights.”

These examples show that children are thinking about accessibility across all the places they move through in daily life. A positive duty would mean that builders, landlords, planners and service providers are expected to consider these issues up front, instead of waiting for a child or family to be excluded and then needing to fight for change.

4.3 Children’s Perspectives on What a Positive Duty Should Require

From the children’s perspectives, a positive duty under the DDA should have at least three key elements: 1) proactive barrier removal and universal design; 2) mandatory training and culture change; and 3) genuine, ongoing consultation with people who experience disability, including children.

PROACTIVE BARRIER REMOVAL AND UNIVERSAL DESIGN

The children consistently described disability in terms of barriers rather than deficits. The children want the DDA to require duty holders to identify and remove those barriers in advance. Jocelyn (11) spoke about the kinds of design changes that help blind people and wheelchair users participate safely. She suggested that, “if there was a blind person, you can make little bumps and little indicates which they could feel coming up, so they don’t trip over or hurt themselves. And with wheelchairs, just maybe moving things around, putting in a ramp… just to make things a little easier for people.”

These are exactly the kinds of anticipatory steps that children consider a positive duty should mandate. Rather than waiting for harm, the law should require organisations to ask, “Who might be excluded here?” and to design “bumps,” ramps and other features so that everyone can use a space safely and confidently.

MANDATORY TRAINING AND CULTURE CHANGE

Children emphasise that attitudes and behaviour matter as much as physical design. Several children described how adults and peers can unintentionally cause harm because they have not been taught how to interact respectfully with people with disability. The children provided many examples from their school experiences where teachers do and do not treat children with respect.

The children shared that adults can act in ways that feel patronising, embarrassing or unsafe. Children are clear that the DDA should require training that ensures adults understand respectful communication, disability rights and inclusive behaviour. Greta (8) recommended that:

“if adults do not understand and behave in ways that are directly or indirectly discriminatory, they should be sent to a school for adults and receive mandatory training to understand disability, discrimination, respect, and kindness. “Some people have to change …maybe you should make a kindness school? Make a kindness. school and then, people who are mean, they'll be sent there by the government … And then when they come back, they're nice, or they have to go do it again.”

Exploring this idea within a small group discussion, the children concluded that this mandatory training might be incorporated into workplaces all over Australia.

Importantly, the children also link culture change to teaching kindness explicitly in schools. “Help people know how to be someone's friend” (Greta, 8). The children recommended a strong focus on teaching all children about disability, racism, sexism and respect. Jocelyn (11) “But we do need to teach people about that… Teach it in school. … Or maybe adults who've already passed school … we need to teach other people as well to be kind.”

These statements reflect a broader expectation that teachers, school leaders and other professionals must both model and teach inclusive, respectful approaches.

Children also spoke about the importance of learning the communication tools needed for inclusion. Jocelyn (11) shared:

“I know sign language and I know a little bit of braille … I think that schools should, I think there should be classes that teach braille and sign language. … I think to everyone … So, we'd be more equipped, so if kids come to our school who are deaf or blind, we'd be able to speak to them. I think we should make, like, little classes that teach us, some different, like, languages, like sign, Braille, so we can be a more inclusive school in general. …because if we learnt those things, that means we could start including kids who are deaf and blind, and we could change the curriculum a bit more to suit them, and that means we'd be a more inclusive school altogether. So if I could change one thing, is to make sure that all schools are more inclusive, and that we all learn everything to help be more inclusive, like sign language and braille and things like that.”

These examples demonstrate that children see communication as a key part of culture change. They value learning across communication modes because it helps everyone participate. This aligns with Zac’s (9) broader suggestion that we need shared learning across all ages: “Teaching kids, adults learning too. Teaching everyone.”

Children are clear that inclusion must be taught, not assumed. They want teachers, bus drivers, police, health workers and other adults who hold authority to be trained so they understand disability, communicate appropriately, and act with respect and fairness. They also want kindness, awareness and inclusive communication to be part of the curriculum in schools, so that all children learn early how to ensure everyone belongs.

A positive duty within the DDA should therefore require:

- mandatory disability inclusion training for adults who interact with children and the public
- training that includes communication methods such as Auslan, braille basics and respectful interaction
- school-based teaching about kindness, fairness, diversity and inclusion
- ongoing professional responsibility to uphold dignity, not just avoid overt discrimination

This reflects the children’s core message that changing attitudes and behaviour is essential for changing the world so that *everyone belongs*.

GENUINE CONSULTATION WITH PEOPLE WHO EXPERIENCE DISABILITY, INCLUDING CHILDREN

Finally, children want the DDA to require that governments and organisations listen to and act on the views of children, and make sure this includes ALL children. Roarke (13) was very clear: “Ask the quiet kids… the kids who don’t have a voice.” This is a direct reminder that consultation must reach beyond the most confident or loudest voices, and must include children whose communication is non-spoken or who are often overlooked.

Nayantara (4) participated in the discussions using heart emojis to show her agreement and feelings during the discussion. The children listened to and valued this as genuine participation. The children emphasise that a positive duty model should recognise that children communicate in many different ways and should require decision makers to create accessible, child-friendly processes for recognising/hearing children’s views.

The children’s vision of a positive duty is therefore practical and deeply rights-consistent. They are asking for a DDA that requires proactive barrier removal, builds universal design into everyday practice, mandates training and attitude change, and embeds ongoing consultation with people who experience disability, including children, in all disability-related decisions. In Finbar's words, "children can be changemakers" and the children want the law to help adults and systems change too so that "everyone belongs" and "the world's not currently made for all of us" becomes a thing of the past.

5. Encouraging Inclusion in Education, Employment and Public Life

Children consistently describe inclusion as something that must be built into everyday life. For example, at school, in parks, on buses and trains, in sport, and in the opportunities they hope to have when they grow up. The children recognise that belonging is created through relationships, environments, attitudes and rules. They also identify how systems and structures can get in the way. Their views underline why the DDA must move beyond preventing discrimination to actively requiring inclusion.

5.1 Education "Every Learner Belongs in Every Classroom"

Finbar's (11) central message about education sits at the heart of children's expectations for the DDA: *"Every learner belongs in every classroom."* This reflects an uncompromising belief that separation is harmful and unnecessary, and that schools must change so that all children can participate, learn and thrive together.

What Helps Us Belong

Children explained that the most powerful source of belonging is *friendship*. Zac (9) said, *"Peggy and my other friends make me feel most welcome… when I'm playing with my friends. When I'm doing work with my friends."* Eirik (13) agreed simply: *"Yeah… and having friends."* Nayantara (4) shared love heart emojis in response.

A second key element is *feeling safe*. Jocelyn (11) described this as *"feeling like you can go to a safe space without worrying what people might say about you… where you can do what you want without worrying about people judging you unnecessarily."*

Children emphasised the importance of *teachers who understand different ways of learning*. Roarke (13) put it plainly: *"Maybe if he actually came over and talked to you."* Jocelyn added ideas about practical support: *"He could learn sign language. Or write something in braille."* These suggestions show how children see inclusive communication as an everyday part of good teaching.

Several children explained that belonging grows when everyone learns together, including learning new communication tools. Across these reflections, children see inclusive classrooms not as an adjustment for some, but as an environment where everyone gains skills and understands one another.

What Gets in the Way

Children were clear that *segregation* undermines learning and belonging. Knox (11) said: *"Maybe instead of grouping all the kids with disabilities into one class… maybe you should put them into the classes with kids who have no disabilities. They should all be together, like preschool."*

They also described how harmful assumptions in schools affect not only learning, but later opportunities. Jocelyn (11) reflected on an adult she knew whose *“teachers and stuff underestimated her… and it made it hard to get a job.”* This shows children already understand how school cultures shape their futures.

Underestimation, exclusion, and a lack of belief in children’s capacities are experienced as discrimination. As Knox put it, *“Just because they have some disabilities doesn’t mean… they’re not as important as you… and that they didn’t have a right to learn the same things as you.”*

What the DDA Should Require in Education

Children want the DDA to require genuine inclusion, not optional or discretionary efforts. Their ideas point towards several core duties:

- Inclusion as the default: As Knox (11) said, children *“should all be together.”*
- Barrier removal built into school design and teaching: *“Make the school easier to access… and everywhere.”* (Knox, 11)
- Curriculum that equips all children to communicate and connect: *“Teach braille and sign language to everyone.”* (Jocelyn, 11)
- Teaching that adapts to different ways of learning: *“…change the curriculum a bit more to suit them… and that means we’d be a more inclusive school altogether.”* (Jocelyn, 11)
- Support that is respectful, not separating: *“So no one’s getting left behind.”* (Knox, 11)

Children see schools as places where inclusion can be learned, not just enforced, and they want the law to require changes that make this real.

5.2 Public Places & Community Spaces

Children connect inclusion in education with inclusion in the wider community. They want public buildings, parks, playgrounds, halls and libraries designed so everyone can use them.

Zac (9) described this simply: *“Ramps instead of stairs.”* Knox (11) highlighted playground barriers: *“A lot of parks don’t have things for kids who have wheelchairs.”* Roarke (13) pointed to good design when he said: *“They’ve got ramps everywhere… an elevator to get to the second floor.”*

Children imagine community spaces that are sensory-friendly, accessible and welcoming. Zac said he would add *“more colours, more soft stuff…”* while Jocelyn (11) explained that inclusive design helps everyone: *“Even if you don’t have a wheelchair, you can use ramps.”*

The DDA should require councils, community organisations and service providers to design and maintain public places that welcome all children, not only after complaints, but as a duty of inclusion.

5.3 Sport, Play, Clubs & Teams – Belonging Means Playing With

Sports and play are central to children’s experience of inclusion. The children want activities adapted so everyone can join. Bijou (8) enthusiastically spoke about the importance of sport for everyone *“it’s great for everyone.”* Zac (9) suggested *“balls that make noise and wheelchair sports.”* Chloe (7) contributed ideas for equipment, saying: *“The rattle balls. Bounce, bounce, forehand.”*

Jocelyn (11) described how to replace inaccessible cues: *“Maybe… you could put something bright up… or raise your hand so everyone knows to stop.”*

Children also identified that kindness and respect are essential in play. Greta (8) said: *“You could be nicer to everyone.”* Through these ideas, children show that inclusive sport is both a design issue and a cultural one.

5.4 Pathways to Work and Future

Children are already thinking about their futures and their worries about fairness now carry into how they imagine work later. Zac (9) said that when things are unfair he would feel *“frustrated, sad and angry.”* Jocelyn (11) spoke about how discrimination in school ripples forward: *“All her teachers… underestimated her… and it made it hard to get a job.”*

Greta (8) connected unfair treatment to broader injustice, saying: *“It’s basically being racist.”* Children see discrimination, whether about disability, race or any difference, as part of the same system of exclusion.

Children want a future where their access to work is not limited by early bias or by systems that separate or underestimate them. Their words reinforce why the DDA must ensure that job requirements, recruitment and workplace design do not disadvantage disabled people, and must create strong duties for employers to adjust, include and respect.

6. Improving Access to Justice

Children told us that justice is not only about what happens after harm occurs. The children understand justice as being about safety, fairness, being listened to, and being treated as a whole person, not a “problem” to be managed. The children’s experiences show why the DDA must ensure that processes, systems and people responsible for justice understand disability, prevent harm, and communicate respectfully with all children.

6.1 Bullying, Harassment, and Harmful “Kindness”

Children described experiences of bullying, teasing and exclusion that make everyday environments feel unsafe. For the children, these experiences are not “minor”, they are forms of harm that undermine children’s dignity and rights.

Several children explained that what makes them feel protected is the presence of *friends* and safe people. Chloe (7) captured this clearly when she said that what helps her feel safe is *“play with the friends.”* Jocelyn (11) explained that safety also comes from having a space where you do not have to worry about what people might say or about being judged.

Children also emphasised that harm sometimes comes disguised as “help.” Children want the DDA to recognise bullying, harassment and patronising behaviour, including well-intended but harmful actions, as discrimination when they reduce safety, dignity or belonging. They want the law to support environments where adults actively prevent harm and step in early, rather than leaving children to manage bullying on their own.

6.2 What Justice Should Feel Like for Children

Children were clear that justice should never make them feel like a “project”, a “burden” or an “example”. Zac (9) expressed this sentiment directly when he said children should not be treated like *“a problem to fix.”* Instead, children want to be seen, heard and understood as people whose feelings and rights matter.

For children, justice processes must be accessible in every sense - physically, emotionally and communicatively. They recognise many valid ways of expressing themselves. Jocelyn (11) gave an example of how communication needs vary widely, saying that some children might communicate through *“writing, drawing, typing, or using devices.”*

This means justice systems must:

- allow and respect communication beyond spoken words
- provide time and support for children who communicate differently
- ensure information is available in formats children can understand
- avoid processes that intimidate, shame or overwhelm children

Justice, as the children describe it, should make children feel safe, supported and taken seriously.

6.3 Systems & Services (Including Police) that Understand Disability

Children made it clear that systems responsible for safety and justice, including police, teachers, community workers and other authority figures, must understand disability, recognise their own assumptions, and respond with empathy and respect.

In their discussions, children consistently pointed to the need for training and attitude change across all services. Knox (11) explained that part of fairness is *“making sure basically everyone is technically heard.”* Jocelyn (11) emphasised that adults need to learn how to communicate accessibly, suggesting that professionals should know at least basic tools such as *“sign language… or braille,”* because this helps everyone, not only disabled people.

Children often linked justice to how adults behave in everyday situations. Eirik (13) reflected on how systems in other countries can feel more respectful and safer. This shows that children understand justice not only as rule-based, but as something built into the design of environments and the actions of adults.

The children want police, court staff, complaint handlers, school principals, and all frontline workers to be trained in:

- disability awareness
- respectful communication
- recognising different forms of discrimination
- understanding children’s rights
- supporting children without judgment

For children, a justice system that understands disability is one where adults do not make assumptions, where communication is accessible, and where children feel listened to and protected, not blamed, excluded or ignored. As Zac (9) expressed “Just because my uncle has Down syndrome does not mean he is stupid. No one should assume or treat him like he is stupid. He’s not. He’s really smart and I love him.”

7. Stronger Powers, Clearer Law, and Real Accountability

Across all their discussions, children made it clear that laws only matter if they work in practice. The children want a Disability Discrimination Act that does more than respond when things go wrong, they want a law that *prevents* discrimination, requires inclusion, and ensures that adults, systems and organisations follow through. The children expressed disbelief that discrimination is already illegal since it is still happening. The children's experiences show why the DDA must have stronger, clearer duties, better enforcement, and structures that put children's rights at the centre.

7.1 A Law that Works Before Harm Occurs

Children repeatedly emphasised that exclusion, unfairness and inaccessible environments should not happen in the first place. Whether they talked about buses without ramps, classrooms that don't include everyone, adults who underestimate children, or playgrounds with barriers, the message was consistent: problems should be fixed before children are excluded, not only after someone complains.

This is exactly the kind of proactive, preventative approach reflected in the CRPD (particularly Articles 4, 9 and 24) and the CRC (Articles 2, 12, 23 and 28). The DDA should reflect these obligations by requiring:

- positive duties for inclusion
- proactive removal of barriers
- anticipatory obligations, not reactive ones
- assessments of accessibility built into planning, design and service delivery

Children want systems designed to protect everyone's rights as a matter of course.

7.2 Clearer Rights and Responsibilities

Children described confusion about rules, expectations and fairness, especially when adults apply rules inconsistently. Jocelyn (11) noted that some rules are applied in ways that punish children with disability, and Knox (11) pointed out that children can be seen as "less important" when they learn differently.

To address this, the DDA needs:

- clearer definitions of discrimination, including subtle forms such as harmful "help," patronising behaviour, and misdirected discipline
- explicit recognition of communication rights, including non-spoken communication
- stronger guidance for schools, transport providers, councils and services about what inclusion requires
- standards that keep pace with children's lived realities, not outdated assumptions

Children’s experiences show how silence or ambiguity in the law enables unfairness to continue. A modernised DDA must remove that ambiguity.

7.3 Enforcement That Children Can Trust

Children consistently expressed that adults in power (e.g. teachers, principals, bus drivers, police) do not always understand disability or listen to children. For the children, accountability is about making sure everyone acts in ways that are safe, fair and inclusive.

A child-centred enforcement system must ensure that:

- complaints processes are comfortable and accessible for children
- children know they are allowed to speak up
- adults cannot ignore or dismiss concerns because a child communicates differently
- consequences for discrimination are real, not symbolic
- organisations must demonstrate compliance, not wait for complaints

Justice, from a child’s perspective, is measured in trust. Trust that adults will listen, respect and respond. The DDA should build accountability systems that earn that trust.

7.4 Independent Monitoring with Children’s Voices Built In

Children want their experiences and ideas to shape how systems improve. They offered detailed suggestions about what inclusion looks like in schools, public transport, parks, sport and health services. Their insight shows why independent monitoring and review must include:

- regular consultation with diverse children, including children with disability
- accessible participation methods (drawing, typing, devices, Auslan, Braille, emojis)
- transparent reporting on progress
- mechanisms for children to give feedback safely

Both the CRPD (Article 33) and the CRC (Article 12) require ongoing participation of people with disability, including children, in the monitoring of laws and policies that affect them. A strengthened DDA should embed these requirements by design.

7.5 A DDA That Grows with Children’s Lives

Children repeatedly linked inclusion now to their hopes for the future. They spoke about friendships, learning, safety, job chances, unfair rules, play, communication, and the systems that shape their daily lives. Their experiences show that discrimination is not a single event, but a pattern that can begin early and follow children into adulthood.

A future-focused DDA must therefore:

- require environments that allow all children to grow in confidence and independence
- recognise children’s rights to play, learn, move and participate
- ensure early experiences of discrimination do not limit later opportunities
- support inclusive transitions from school to training, community life and work

Children want a world where their future possibilities are not constrained by inaccessible systems or low expectations. A strengthened DDA is a crucial part of creating that world.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

Children across this project were clear, consistent and thoughtful in describing what inclusion means, what discrimination feels like, and what must change to build a fairer Australia. Their experiences confirm that the Disability Discrimination Act must not simply prohibit discrimination but must actively require inclusion, prevent harm, and support participation in all areas of life.

Children's perspectives also align closely with Australia's obligations under the CRC and the CRPD. These treaties affirm children's right to non-discrimination, to express their views, to be heard in matters affecting them, and to have environments, systems and services designed for their inclusion. The children's insights make clear how these rights should be realised in practice.

Together, the children's perspectives inform clear priorities for reform.

8.1 Key Messages from Children

Across their reflections, children consistently emphasised that:

- It is not the person that is the problem, but rather the barriers around children.
- The world must be built so everyone can participate.
- Belonging matters.
  Friends, safe places, kind adults and inclusive environments allow children to thrive.
- Systems need to adapt, not children.
  Inclusion requires places, rules, communication and attitudes that respond to diversity.
- Support must be respectful.
  Patronising behaviour, harmful "kindness," bullying and low expectations are forms of discrimination.
- Communication must be accessible.
  Children communicate in many ways — through speech, writing, devices, Auslan, Braille, emojis and gestures — and justice systems must respect this.
- Inclusion must be proactive, not reactive.
  Accessibility cannot depend on individual goodwill or complaints after harm occurs.

These messages illustrate the urgency of modernising the DDA so it reflects contemporary understanding of disability, aligns with international obligations and responds to the realities children experience today.

8.2 Recommendations for a Stronger, Modernised DDA

Based on the children's perspectives, it is recommended that the modernised DDA include:

1. A Positive Duty to Include

A clear, enforceable duty requiring organisations, services, schools, employers and public authorities to:

- anticipate and remove barriers
- design inclusive environments
- prevent discrimination before it occurs
- regularly review accessibility

2. Updated Definitions of Disability and Discrimination

Including:

- acknowledgment that disability arises from barriers in society
- recognition of harmful stereotypes, “help” that causes harm, and unjustified separation as discrimination
- explicit protection for diverse communication methods
- recognition of intersectional discrimination (e.g. racism and ableism together)

3. Stronger Standards Across Key Areas of Life

Particularly in:

- education
- transport
- public spaces
- housing
- digital environments
- services and health settings

Standards should be mandatory, up to date, and enforced through audits, reporting and compliance mechanisms.

4. Accessible Justice Pathways for Children

Justice systems, including within schools, complaint bodies, police and tribunals, must:

- provide child-friendly, trauma-informed, accessible complaint processes
- accept and support multiple communication methods
- ensure children can seek help safely and confidentially
- prioritise resolution that promotes dignity and learning

5. Mandatory Training for Adults in Positions of Power

All frontline workers interacting with children (e.g. teachers, police, bus drivers, support workers, council staff, sports coaches and more) should be required to undertake regular, evidence-informed disability inclusion training.

6. Inclusion in Education as a Legal Default

Including:

- prohibition on exclusion, segregation and punitive responses to disability
- strengthened duties for reasonable adjustments and universal design
- requirements for inclusive curriculum, teaching and communication
- accountability measures linked to school culture, safety and student wellbeing

7. Independent Monitoring with Meaningful Participation of Children

Embedding structures that ensure:

- regular consultation with diverse children, including disabled children
- inclusive participation methods (drawing, devices, Auslan, Braille, emojis)
- public reporting on progress
- correction of systemic issues, not reliance on individual complaints

8.3 Final reflections

The children's perspectives make it clear that inclusion is not an optional add-on, it is fundamental to their safety, wellbeing, learning, confidence and sense of belonging. They described a future in which all children can move around their communities, join in play, learn side by side, ask for help without fear, and trust that adults understand their rights and needs.

A modernised DDA must help create that future.

Children have shown what is possible when we listen deeply: a world where everyone belongs, where barriers are removed before they cause harm, and where fairness is not optional but expected. Their insights are practical, principled and grounded in lived experience. They show us not only what must change, but how to change it.

Their vision is clear. Now the law must meet it.