

MEDIA RELEASE

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New Australian pilot program offers lifeline for families of children with disabilities



Australian families are facing a disturbing gap in equal access to childcare services, with families of children living with profound disability left unable to pay out of pocket costs up to 11 times higher than the average household for equivalent care. To fulfil the gap in support a new pilot program is launching, the ***RippleAbility Respite Program***, providing respite for parent carers of children under five with complex conditions, with appropriate care for their children and siblings, with the aim of a future nationwide rollout.

There were 567,000 children in Australia aged 0-4 with total profound or severe core activity limitation². Despite this, no centre or service is available with accessible and adequate infrastructure and staffing expertise to cater to the high needs of children living with profound disability¹, creating significant challenges for parents of children in this cohort looking for support.

According to paediatric disability consultation service, RippleAbility, families of children living with disability are primarily supported by the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), with over 167,000 children aged under nine receiving NDIS assistance. However, these budgets are reserved for critical therapeutic interventions and equipment, not childcare opportunities, increasingly forcing parents to sacrifice their income, health, and identity to step into full-time care roles.

While the average Australian family uses around 28 hours of subsidised childcare each week⁵, families of children with profound disabilities don't have that option. Instead, they're only option is to self-fund specialist in-home care, given childcare centres aren't sufficiently equipped to meet their duty of care to medically complex children.

For parents caring for children with complex needs, this often means stepping away from their career, navigating relationship strain and separation, and managing ongoing mental health challenges—consequences that often have lasting impacts on the entire family unit.

Aiming to address the concerning gap in support for the families of these children, an Australian-first pilot program launches from **RippleAbility** with support from **Carers WA**. The ***RippleAbility Respite***

Program will see its first trial commence in October, providing these families with the respite, connection and educational support they need, and the critical early childhood exposure and support their disabled child needs.



Founder and Director of RippleAbility, Monique Power, says the launch of the new program marks a significant step towards bridging the gap between support for parents of ‘typically developed’ children, and children living with profound disability.

“Mainstream early childhood and education care centres (ECEC’s) are not designed to provide the unique support children living with profound disability need, both physically and developmentally, and place already medically vulnerable children at risk of infections and safety concerns that can have devastating consequences,” Ms Power says.

“While centres which provide some specialised care do exist, we often hear they are at capacity or unable to accommodate the care ratios, staffing qualifications, and equipment specifications these children need. Sadly, at a system level, we even hear of families being told carer-responsibilities are ‘normal parental responsibilities’, resulting in a lack of subsidised support for parents.

“We developed the *RippleAbility Respite Program* with the aim of providing these families with the specialised support they are lacking, so that carers, siblings and the children themselves have equal opportunity to thrive during their early childhood years.

"Current schemes are simply not enough to support these parent carers, and this pilot is just the beginning of our mission to create change. There are thousands of families across Australia who need this kind of support and are let down by the system. It is our hope that, with the success of the pilot, we can demonstrate the tangible impact respite programs like this will have for these families, and see

the rollout of support like this nationwide. It is a dream of ours at RippleAbility to see the families we service adequately supported in ECEC settings in the future,” Ms Power states.

Carers take on the roles of providing support and assistance with various aspects of life, which can include personal care, mobility and education. The value of informal care is estimated at \$77 billion a year, but the personal cost is far greater - exhaustion, mental health challenges, and deep social isolation⁶.

Caroline Horlock, Head of Service Delivery WA shares “When parents and families step up into the carer role, they face significant emotional, financial and logistical challenges which see them, sadly, putting their own wellbeing on the backburner.

“Over 80% of carers of children with disability are women, many of whom are forced to leave the workforce entirely, sacrificing lifelong earnings and superannuation⁷. This gives rise to carer fatigue – a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion from long periods of caregiving without a break.

“Following the recent NDIS cuts, vital services like allied health, support coordination, and travel will be reduced, leaving families under even greater strain. Now more than ever, we need targeted programs, flexible respite options, and sustained investment to ensure carers aren’t left to manage alone.”

The *RippleAbility Respite Program* launches in Perth from Saturday 4 October. The initiative offers a unique, family-centred approach to respite care, with wraparound support provided to carers and siblings of children under five with complex and life-limiting conditions, complementing the early development support children will receive.

Following further trials and reviews, it is hoped that the program can act as a demonstrated, successful model for centres across Australia to emulate, and drive change within the paediatric disability sector.

To learn more, visit rippleability.org.