



## **Investing for Australia's Children – Inklings**

### ***Background (The why)***

The first years of a child's life are a time of rapid growth and development, setting the foundation for lifelong health, learning, and behaviour.

Approximately 22% of children in Australia are considered developmentally vulnerable. While early signs of developmental conditions, such as autism, can be observed within the first year, the majority of children will not have access to evidence-based support within the first few years. This 'wait and watch' approach is entrenching disadvantage for developmentally vulnerable children. Telethon Kids Institute's [Inklings](#) is an innovative program that taps into this critical window of opportunity when the brain is rapidly growing, offering pre-emptive therapy for babies aged 6 to 18 months who are showing early differences in their social interaction and communication development while supporting caregivers to better meet their needs.

Inklings' goal is to ensure all Australian children have access, through both clinical and community settings, to high quality, evidence-based support that is foundational to building vital skills and improving future outcomes.

### ***The impact – current and potential***

Developed over two decades by an international team of health professionals and researchers focused on reducing disability associated with autism, Inklings is successfully providing transformative support for young children with developmental differences.

Over the 10-session program, short videos are recorded of a caregiver interacting with their baby, before these are reviewed with a practitioner. Pausing and discussing the video helps the caregiver to better understand the different ways that their baby communicates their thoughts and feelings and learn how to best support their development.

"During those first three years of a child's life, more than a million neural connections are formed every second, developing the 'bricks, mortar and wiring' of the brain," says Andrew Whitehouse, the Angela Wright Bennett Professor of Autism Research at Telethon Kids Institute and The University of Western Australia.

"Inklings aims to ensure all children are best supported during that critical window of development, which evidence shows has a far greater impact on developmental outcomes in later childhood, and as they go through life."

A clinical trial of Inklings in Australia in 2021, with more than 100 children showing early signs of autism, found that babies who participated in the Inklings program had fewer social communication difficulties characteristic of autism at age 3 and were two-thirds less likely to meet diagnostic criteria for autism compared to the group of children who did not receive Inklings. Parents were also better able to adapt their communication style to the needs of their baby.

These results, which closely aligned with findings from a UK trial, support Inklings as one of the best evidenced therapy programs in the field of early childhood and developmental delays.

An economic evaluation modelled for the NDIS system based on the outcomes of the Australian trial further highlighted its value, indicating a conservative saving of \$3.08 for every \$1 invested in Inklings. The cost of investing in Inklings at 12 months of age is recouped by the time a child is 5.3 years of age, through savings associated with reductions in child disability.

With a goal to accelerate the program's implementation, the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) is subsequently funding an implementation pilot of Inklings across Western Australia, expected to begin by early 2024.

The model, proposed for the Western Australian state health services, will support the delivery of Inklings therapy within the private sector by allied health professionals. The 2023 Federal Budget provided further commitment to implement the Inklings program in additional jurisdictions.

To address observable access barriers in the clinical model, Telethon Kids Institute is also being supported by philanthropy to explore adapting and piloting the Inklings program in community settings, specifically in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings.

"We see access as a critical issue that can only be addressed by developing multiple pathways for families to gain support," says Professor Whitehouse.

"ECEC settings provide huge potential to ensure that babies with developmental delays have timely access to evidence-based developmental supports within their local community."

### ***Growing impact through the Investment Dialogue for Australia's Children***

The Investment Dialogue for Australia's Children will enable philanthropic foundations and government to better plan and deliver coordinated and targeted investment, supporting early development programs and services like Inklings to strengthen the early childhood sector and achieve more for Australian children in the critical early years.

Philanthropic partners of the Investment Dialogue recently provided \$850,000 in funding to support Inklings explore and test its application in community settings.

The Investment Dialogue brings together government, philanthropic partners and community leaders to reduce overlap and better align investment, building on existing strengths and coordinating efforts to make a more meaningful difference.

For instance, the NDIA and government support is focused on the systemic delivery of Inklings' proven clinical model across jurisdictions to drive immediate and lasting support for young children with developmental differences. In comparison, the independence of philanthropic funding can simultaneously build on the growing evidence base by supporting the pilot of the Inklings program in community settings like ECEC to make the program accessible to a larger cohort of Australian families and further improve children's outcomes.

"Inklings is transforming the service model for babies and young children and leading the way in what is possible in terms of pre-emptive support for children experiencing developmental delays," says Bryan Foundation executive director Matthew Cox, speaking on behalf of Investment Dialogue philanthropic members.

“This is an important step forward in finding ways to ensure all Australian children start school developmentally ready and have the social and developmental tools to thrive into adulthood, which is a priority for government and philanthropy.”

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