

# Assessing, differentiating, and reporting the functional strengths and support needs of children for whom there are developmental concerns: Final Report

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David Trembath, Rachelle Wicks

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**David Trembath**

Griffith University | The Kids Research Institute Australia

**Rachelle Wicks**

Griffith University | The Kids Research Institute Australia

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- The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members for engaging in the yarning sessions and providing invaluable and powerful stories that have informed this Framework.
- Members of the Reference Group representing 23 community and professional organisations, associations, and societies which have been listed as project partners on the preceding pages. Representatives included those with lived experience of disability directly as individuals and/or as parents/family members of individuals with disability.
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# 1. Executive summary

Children can experience challenges to their learning, participation, and wellbeing for a range of reasons, including developmental differences and delay. Environmental factors such as inaccessible settings can also play a part. When challenges exist, children may benefit from informal and formal supports that are tailored to their individual strengths and support needs, irrespective of whether they have a diagnosed condition.

The starting point for understanding children's functional strengths and support needs is assessment, to develop a holistic understanding of each child and family. However, there has been a lack of quality and consistency in the approach taken to assessing children's functional strengths and support needs in Australia.

The aim of this project was to develop an evidence-based and culturally responsive approach to address the current gap in knowledge and lack of consensus about how best to assess, differentiate, and report children's functional strengths and support needs.

The result was the development of the [National Framework for assessing children's functional strengths and support needs in Australia](#) (the Framework) (Fitzpatrick et al., 2024a). The Framework was developed in partnership with Indigenous Allied Health Australia and 22 other community and professional organisations.

The Framework focuses on professional practice when working with children aged 0-12 years and their families in Australia. It can be used across relevant health, education, disability and community services to support all children, irrespective of whether they have a diagnosed condition or may receive a diagnosis in the future. This includes, but is not limited to, children with developmental delay, neurodevelopmental conditions, acquired disability, other health and medical conditions that result in the need for additional supports.

The primary users of the Framework are professionals involved in assessing children's strengths and support needs across health, education, disability, and community services. Children and families can use the Framework to know what best practice looks like. The Framework can also be used by organisations that work with children and families, organisations that support professionals who lead or contribute to assessment of children's strengths and support needs, government departments and agencies and other professionals.

The key deliverables for this project were the development of the Framework, along with comprehensive Supporting Information (Fitzpatrick et al., 2023b), and an Easy Read Fact Sheet. These documents provide a comprehensive explanation of the project, including aims, methods, findings, outcomes, and recommendations. Attention can now turn to the implementation of the Framework across services and sectors, for the benefit of children and families.

## 2. Project summary

This chapter presents a concise summary of the project. For detailed information, readers are directed to the Framework, along with comprehensive Supporting Information, Easy Read Fact Sheet, that are freely available via the Autism CRC website at: [autismcrc.com.au/strengths-and-supports](https://autismcrc.com.au/strengths-and-supports).

### 2.1 Background

In 2023 Autism CRC commissioned the development of the Framework to address the need for an evidence-based, culturally responsive approach for assessment, differentiation, and written reporting of children's strengths and support needs.

Key requirements were that it must:

- Focus on professional practice when working with children aged 0-12 years and their families in Australia.
- Be relevant to health, education, disability and community services.
- Be relevant to all children, irrespective of whether they have a diagnosed condition or may receive a diagnosis in the future.
- Be developed using best practice methodologies, including co-production, that combine the best available evidence from research, practice, and lived experience.

The project team was co-chaired by Professor David Trembath (Griffith University and The Kids Research Institute Australia) and Amy Fitzpatrick (Griffith University) and brought together people with diverse professional and lived experience. The team was engaged to design and deliver this project based on experience designing and delivering projects with related requirements, including demonstrated commitment to, and engagement in, co-production.

A full explanation of the background to the project, rationale for the development of the Framework, and information about the team is provided in the Supporting Information documents.

### 2.2 Approach

The project was completed between October 2023 and March 2025.

#### 2.2.1 Guiding questions

The development process focused on first answering, and then translating into the Framework and Supporting Information, answers to the following questions.

1. What principles should guide assessment, differentiation, and reporting of children's functional strengths and support needs, in the age range of 0-12 years?
2. How should children's functional strengths and support needs be assessed, differentiated, and reported?
  - a. What approach should be used?
  - b. What information is most critical?
  - c. What tools are available?
  - d. What competencies are required?
  - e. What safeguarding should occur?

## 2.2.2 Framework development activities

Addressing the questions involved an iterative process of evidence gathering, evidence synthesis, and consensus building involving organisations represented in the Reference Group. These activities are briefly summarised here, with a detailed description of activities and findings provided in the Supporting Information.

### 2.2.2.1 A systematic review of research evidence

The aim of the systematic research review was to identify: (i) existing frameworks, and (ii) tools that are relevant to assessing and differentiating strengths and support needs of children with developmental differences or disabilities (aged 0-12 years). The research review was conducted in accordance with the procedures outlined in the PRISMA statement (Page et al., 2021). The database search yielded 8160 records across databases and 6433 records once duplicates were automatically removed. Eighty-seven articles proceeded to full-text review, with three articles meeting criteria for inclusion.

### 2.2.2.2 Environmental scan and review of grey literature

The aim of the grey literature review was to identify: (i) existing frameworks, and (ii) tools that are relevant to assessing and differentiating strengths and support needs of children with developmental differences, delay, or disabilities (aged 0-12 years). The search was conducted using a systematic 'grey literature' search protocol, mirroring that successfully used in the Autism CRC synthesis of evidence for early supports for autistic children in 2020 (Trembath et al., 2023). For the purposes of this project, "grey literature" included publicly available sources of information via government and non-government organisations' websites (limited to Government departments and agencies, professional associations and societies, community organisations, and research institutions). Up to 100 search results from each of 193 United Nations Member States were reviewed. In total, data were extracted from 52 articles. Countries of origin included Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Fiji, France, Bulgaria, Greece, Ireland, Finland, the Netherlands, Croatia, India, and South Africa.

### 2.2.2.3 Community consultation via an online survey

The aim of the online survey was to understand the experiences, views, and preferences of the community regarding the assessment, differentiating and reporting of functional strengths and support needs of children with developmental differences or disabilities. The survey included speech-to-text and text-to-speech functionality as well as text responses and artwork/visual representation. The survey was open to individuals of any age for six weeks, from 23 February 2024 to 9 April 2024. All relevant stakeholders, across the Australian community, were eligible to participate in the online survey, including: (a) young people and adults living with disability, (b) parents of children with developmental differences and/or disabilities, (c) family members of children with developmental differences and/or disabilities, (d) practitioners who provide services to children with developmental differences and/or disabilities and their families, (e) other relevant stakeholders (e.g., researchers, educators, school principals) who support or otherwise provide care for children with developmental differences and/or disabilities and their families, and (f) members of organisations or services that provide support to children with developmental differences and/or disabilities and their families. There were 415 individual respondents including 115 people with lived experience, 218 parents/ family members, 276 professionals, 53

organisations, and 19 'other' (e.g., researchers, students, retired professional; participants sometimes had multiple roles). Three community members submitted one piece of artwork which reflect their responses on all survey questions around understanding children's strengths and support needs. Fifty-five organisations provided responses, including 37 professional service organisations, three professional bodies, one professional network, three school institutions, nine community organisations, and two government services.

#### **2.2.2.4 Yarning sessions**

The purpose of these yarning sessions was to inform the development of this Framework for assessing and reporting children's functional strengths and support needs that is culturally responsive. The development, ethics approval, running, and analysis of the yarning sessions was led by Tara Lewis representing Indigenous Allied Health Australia (IAHA), with Tara as a project team member and IAHA a project partner in the development of the Framework. The stories shared in the yarning sessions were analysed thematically, and used (a) to develop a section of the Framework focused specifically on partnering with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families, and communities, (b) to infuse these learnings across all aspects of the Framework, and (c) to commission artwork representing the core themes by an Aboriginal artist that conveys these learnings across the Framework.

#### **2.2.2.5 Co-production with a Reference Group of community and professional organisations, associations, and societies**

The project team invited and collaborated with representatives of key stakeholder organisations to address the research questions, including with reference to information gathered through other research activities conducted within the environmental scan. An initial introductory meeting was held in February 2024, to introduce the project aims, methods, and proposed outcomes, including consideration of governance, terms of reference, accessibility, workflow, communication and collaboration, and roles and responsibilities. From February to September 2024, collaboration occurred via 14 regularly scheduled online meetings with a focus on an iterative cycle of consensus building. Before the meetings, Reference Group Members received information pertaining to the co-production points (CPPs), which concentrated attention on aspects of the Framework (e.g., Assessment). The online meetings focused on the CPPs, reviewing previous CPPs, the project team sharing information (e.g., findings from the environmental scan activities, drafts of the protocol and associated documents), and inviting input and discussion. Reference Group Members were further invited to provide feedback (e.g., feedback on the co-production process, suggestions for future CPPs).

#### **2.2.2.6 International review**

The Draft Framework was reviewed by Peter Rosenbaum, Olaf Kraus De Camargo, Marilyn Wright, Rachel Teplicky, and Kinga Pozniak at CanChild who provided independent review of the Draft Framework and Supporting Information documents. Prof Rosenbaum has led seminal work translating the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF; World Health Organisation, 2001) into the F-word in Childhood Disability (Rosenbaum & Porter, 2012) which underpinned the Framework.

## 2.3 Outcomes

The main deliverables of this project were as follows.

### 2.3.1 The Framework

The Framework addresses the project aim and adheres to all requirements, including purpose, target users, scope, and methodology. It is 68 pages in length and addresses:

- Foundations of best practice
- Partnering with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families, and communities
- Guiding principles
- Assessing children's functional strengths and support needs
- Differentiating children's support needs
- Communicating outcomes in a written report
- Use of tools
- Professional competency and capability
- Safeguarding
- Recommendations for implementing the Framework.

### 2.3.2 Supporting Information

The Supporting Information presents a detailed summary of the approach used to develop the Framework, and the evidence which supports it. It is 186 pages in length, and contains the following information:

1. Introduction.
2. Project overview. This chapter provides information about the project's purpose, scope, target users, and intended outcomes.
3. Project administration. This chapter provides information about project governance, organisation, and coordination.
4. Project methodology. This chapter provides a summary of the methodology used to develop the Framework.
5. Guiding Principles. This chapter provides detail about the information considered, and key findings from research, community consultation, and co-production that informed this aspect of the Framework.
6. Assessing children's functional strengths and support needs. This chapter provides detail about the information considered, and key findings from research, community consultation, and co-production that informed this aspect of the Framework.
7. Differentiating children's functional strengths and support needs. This chapter provides detail about the information considered, and key findings from research, community consultation, and co-production that informed this aspect of the Framework.
8. Communicating outcomes in a written report. This chapter provides detail about the information considered, and key findings from research, community consultation, and co-production that informed this aspect of the Framework.

9. Use of Tools. This chapter provides detail about the information considered, and key findings from research, community consultation, and co-production that informed this aspect of the Framework.
10. Professional competencies and capabilities. This chapter provides detail about the information considered, and key findings from research, community consultation, and co-production that informed this aspect of the Framework.
11. Safeguarding. This chapter provides detail about the information considered, and key findings from research, community consultation, and co-production that informed this aspect of the Framework.

### 2.3.3 Supporting resources

The following resources have been developed to support sharing and implementation of the Framework:

**Easy Read Fact Sheet.** Describes the work we did to make the Framework and uses words and pictures to explain some ideas.

**New Co-Production Methodology.** As presented in the Supporting Information, the project team designed, implemented, and evaluated (see below) a new methodology for organising and supporting co-production, focusing on *co-production points*. This presents an innovation that can support future co-production initiatives.

**Co-Production Evaluation.** Presents a research study, conducted at the conclusion of the co-production process, to evaluate the approach, experience of participants, and outcomes. The findings can inform future co-production activities.

**Framework Presentation.** Presents an overview of the Framework, and is designed for use in raising awareness and supporting implementation of the Framework across health, education, disability, and community services and systems.

## 2.4 Recommendations

Key recommendations for implementation are presented within the Framework, and address:

- Improving professional practice
- Deconstructing exclusion
- Harmonising services and systems
- Development of new tools and resources
- Empowering children and families
- Appropriate use of the Framework.

Readers are directed to the Framework to review these recommendations in full.

## 2.5 Conclusion

The aim of this project was achieved, resulting in the development of the Framework, Supporting Information, recommendations, and practical resources and a plan to support next steps. The approach taken, which centred around co-production with community and professional stakeholders, with support from Government, was successful in delivering a Framework that can

make a meaningful contribution to improving assessment, and in turn support, for children with additional support needs. The learnings from the evaluation of the co-production process will in turn support the positive evolution and further enhancement of co-production activities in the future. Critical to the success of this project has been close collaboration with project partners and the generous contributions from community members, to whom the project is most grateful.

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## Our values



### **Inclusion**

Valuing lived experience



### **Innovation**

Solutions for long term challenges



### **Evidence**

Truth in practice



### **Independence**

Integrity through autonomy



### **Cooperation**

Capturing opportunities together



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