



Centre for Inclusive Employment & Disability Employment Australia Lunch & Learn Session | Wednesday, 1 July 2026

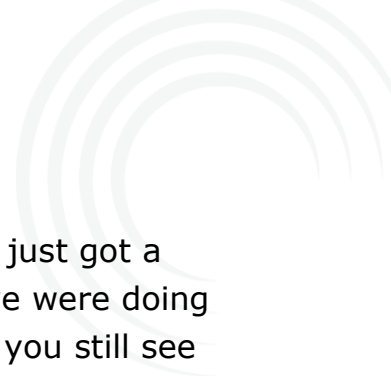
The Sibling Effect

Speaker:

Dr Shannon Schedlich, Chief Executive, Siblings Australia

Host: Sally Karandrews, IEA Policy Manager, Disability Employment Australia

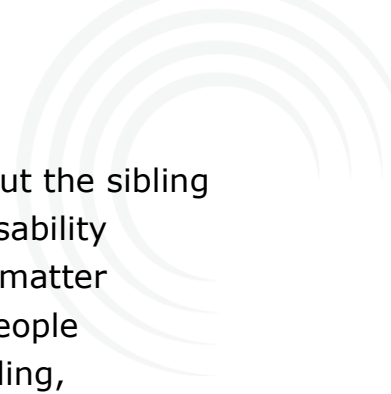
SALLY KARANDREWS: Hi everyone and welcome to this week's Lunch and Learn. My name is Sally, and I am the IEA policy manager here at Disability Employment Australia, and it is lovely to be here to host today's session. I would like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Custodians of the land from which each of us are dialling in from today, for me that's the Darkinjung people and I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging. Our Lunch and Learn sessions are delivered in partnership between the Centre For Inclusive Employment and Disability Employment Australia. The Centre For Inclusive Employment supports providers with practical resources, tools and training to support the delivery of high quality employment services and DEA is the National peak body representing Disability Employment Providers. The centre is delivered as part of a National consortium. It is led by the centre for social impact at Swinburne University and the other consortiums are Disability Inclusive Australia, NDIS Inclusion Australia, Family Advocacy and University of Melbourne. Today we are joined by Shannon Schedlich, she is the CEO of Siblings Australia and the topic for our Lunch and Learn is the sibling effect. Before I hand over to Shannon I did just want to let you know that there are captions available. Liv is going to pop the link for those who wish to use that into the chat. If you have questions please pop them in the Q&A box or into the chat. I'll keep a record of those and if there is time we will discuss those at the end of the session. The Webinar is being recorded, and a copy of that will be made available after today's session, along with any notes or resources that are shared. So I will now hand over to Shannon to take us through today's session. Thank you Shannon.



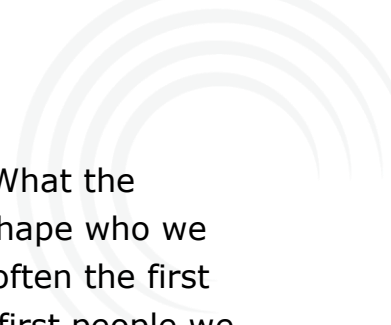
DR SHANNON SCHEDLICH: Thank you, I will start sharing. I have just got a little issue with the layout of my screen that was not here when we were doing our trial when we were getting started, so apologies for that. Can you still see the screen?

OLIVIA STAGG: Yep, we can see still it Shannon.

DR SHANNON SCHEDLICH: Okay, great. Thanks so much, sorry, it just changed the format that we had and thanks Sally and the Disability Employment Australia and the Centre For Inclusive Employment for inviting me today. Before I begin I would like to acknowledge the Kaurna people of the Adelaide Hills. I pay my respects to Elders past and present and I recognise the ongoing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the lands, water, culture and community. I also want to acknowledge and respect the cultural authority of any Aboriginal people joining us today. I would also like to provide a brief visual description of myself for anyone who is blind or has low vision. I am a middle-aged white woman with dark blonde hair. Today I am wearing a green woollen jumper. For those of you who don't know Siblings Australia we are the only National organisation dedicated to helping siblings with disability and chronic health. We work with people with disabilities through to adults navigating changing family routines, future planning and what it means to have one of the longest relationships in the life of a person with a disability. Our work provides for research, advocacy and working alongside services and systems to better understanding sibling relationship. Importantly everything we do is informed by siblings themselves. We have both adults committee...who work alongside us to ensure that our advocacy programs and priorities reflect good sibling experiences, not assumptions about what those experiences might be. That is where I want to start today because when we talk about employment outcomes for people with disability we often talk about services, systems, providers and formal supports. But there is another relationship that is often sitting there the whole time, sometimes shaping identity, confidence, expectations and what someone believes is possible and that is the sibling relationship. Before we talk specifically about employment I want to spend a little bit of time talking about why the sibling relationship itself matters.

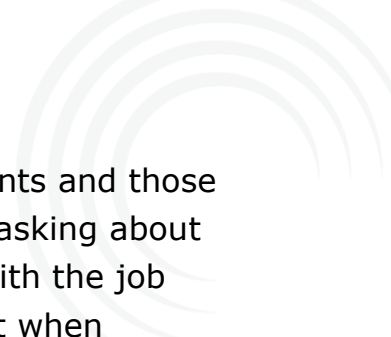


DR SHANNON SCHEDLICH: But as I was saying I want to talk about the sibling relationship itself because often when we talk about family and disability systems we are actually talking about parents. Of course parents matter enormously. Parents are often the first advocates. They are the people navigating diagnosis, therapies, education systems, services, funding, appointments and supports. But families are bigger than parents and the sibling relationship is different. For many people the relationship with their brother or sister will be the longest of their life. It often starts before relationships, before partners and before formal supports. For many siblings continues long after parents are no longer able to play the role they once did. Despite this, siblings have often largely been invisible in the systems built around people with disability. We see people as participants in families, but we don't often ask about the brothers or sisters in their family. We talk about supporting families, but we frequently ask about supporting parents. Then as people with disabilities move into adulthood systems often move from focusing on parents to focusing on formal services. Siblings can remain somewhere in the middle, deeply connected but rarely recognised. This matters because relationships are not just important. There is a growing body of research that tells us that sibling relationships have a real impact across the lifespan. Siblings have studied people with disability consistently highlighted a few key things. The first is longevity. Sibling relationships are often the longest family relationships any of us will ever have. They stand the test of childhood, adolescence, and that means siblings often see transitions that no family system will ever see. The second is identity. Sibling relationships help shape how we see ourselves in our place in the world. This is also true for people with disabilities. Brothers and sisters often play an important role in building confidence, encouraging independence and creating opportunities for ordinary life experience. The third is continuity. Because siblings often move through life alongside each other, they carry knowledge across systems that do not always communicate to each other, the school system, the health system, the disability system, employment services and community. Those services and systems can sometimes see separate pieces of a person's life. Siblings often see the connection between those pieces. Finally, relationships matter because social connections matter. We know that people who have strong informal networks and strong community connections have more opportunities. Not because family replaces formal supports, but because relationships create possibility. Most of us find opportunities through people, someone who encourages us to apply or tells us about a role or reminds us that we are good when we doubt ourselves, someone who says, "Actually, I think you could do that." These small moments matter because employment pathways are not built through systems, they are built

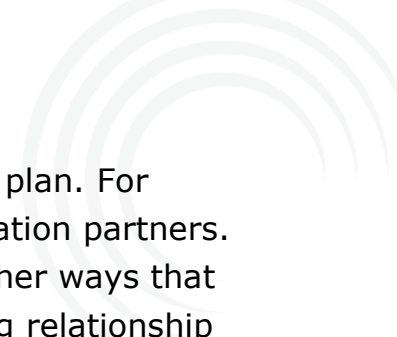


through confidence, relationships, expectations and opportunity. What the research tells us is that sibling relationships are influential, they shape who we become and that is true of all of us. Our brothers and sisters are often the first people we negotiate with and the first people we argue with. The first people we learn fairness, compromise, jealousy, humour and loyalty with and they are often the people who see versions of us that nobody else sees. That is exactly why this relationship can be so important to people with disability because siblings often know their sibling outside of employment, plans, reports and assessments because they know the person, they know their history, they know their personality and they know what matters to them. One of the things that siblings tell us again and again is they often feel they hold a piece of their brother or sister's story that nobody else has; not because they know everything and not that they should be responsible for everything, but because they have walked alongside that person through the ordinary life and the ordinary life matters because the goal of disability support has never been to build systems around people, the goal is to support people to live lives to their fullest with relationships, choices, contributions, lives with opportunity and that includes employment.

One of the privileges of my role at Siblings Australia is that I get to speak to siblings across the entire lifespan. I speak to young people who are starting to understand that their family might look different to their friend's families, I talk to teenagers who are thinking about their own identity and future while deeply worrying about their brother or sister. I speak to siblings who are looking over decades of walking alongside their brother or sister and the one thing that strikes me again and again is that siblings are so often holding two things at once. They see the barriers, they know the challenges, they have often seen first-hand where systems have failed their brother or sister, but they also often hold this incredibly strong sense of possibility. They can tell you about the strengths that other people missed, the interests that nobody knows about, the moments where their brother or sister achieved something other people didn't expect, and I think that perspective is incredibly powerful, because so much of disability employment is about seeing the possibility before it has been proven. It is about believing someone can succeed and working out what supports and opportunities need to exist around them to make that happen. I know I am speaking to people today who understand the importance of employment. Everyone knows that employment outcomes for people with disability in Australia are still not what we want them to be. For decades we have talked about improving employment pathways, we have looked at policy reform,



employer attitudes, workplace adjustments and funding adjustments and those things matter enormously. But I really want to focus today on us asking about another piece of the puzzle because employment does not start with the job application. It doesn't start with an interview, it doesn't even start when someone walks into an employment service. Employment starts much earlier. It starts with expectation. It starts with whether someone grows up believing work can be something that can be part of their future. It starts where people around them ask, "What do you want to do? What are you interested in? What kind of life do you want to build?" For many people with disability those conversations happen long before an employment pathway begins. They happen around kitchen tables or in cars, or they happen through watching the people around them go about their own life transitions and that is why the relationships around the person matter, because before someone gets a job they need the opportunities to imagine the job. They need people around them to see their strengths. They need people who recognise not just what supports they need, but what contribution they can make. Siblings can be a really important part of that ecosystem. When we talk about disability employment we are not just talking about jobs, employment is about so much more than just a position description or a payslip. Employment can provide financial independence, it provides purpose, connection, identity and belonging. It gives people opportunities to contribute to grow to take risks, to succeed, fail and learn. It is fundamentally connected to dignity. Siblings can be a really powerful partner in supporting that, because siblings often raise a different lens. Parents play a significant role in the life of someone with a disability, but it is understanding that after years of advocating and protecting and sometimes fighting for their child, they hold really real fears about their risk. Siblings sit in a slightly different place; they are more likely to have grown up alongside their brother or sister, sharing experiences, negotiating, challenging each other and imagining their futures together. Because of that siblings often bring not only a focus on both dignity of risk. They can be the people who gently raise the gaze. The people who say why not? The people who see the possibility before the limitation and that makes them an incredibly valuable partner when we are talking about employment. You'll all be familiar with the Australian disability strategy and particularly the 3 employment policy priorities. Including employment for people with disability, improving the transition of a person with disability and strengthening financial disability for people. Sibling relationships have the potential to contribute to all 3 of these priorities. Why? Because the siblings often know the whole person. They have known their brother or sister across different ages, environments and different stages of life. They know what motivates them. They know what they are passionate about. They know the

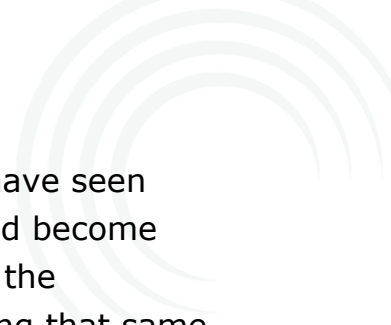


things that may never appear on a formal assessment or support plan. For some people with disability siblings are also important communication partners. They might understand things that are being communicated in other ways that people missed, through years of shared experience and the sibling relationship is different. Many relationships for people with disability can become vertical. Perfection for supporting...and systems making decisions, sibling relationships are much more horizontal. They are built on family jokes, compromising and growing up together. Supporting someone into employment is not just about finding something they can do, it is about recognising who they are. The research tells us that siblings can contribute to employment outcomes in really practical ways. They can draw on their local knowledge and network to identify opportunities that might suit their brother or sister, they can help navigate and activate supports and systems. They can provide practical assistance encouragement and problem-solving and sibling relationships often continue as parents age or pass away, they can be part of that long-term network that supports a person's goals across their life. There is another piece here too. Siblings are often living those same life transitions, getting their first home, moving out of home, studying and changing careers. Those ordinary milestones can sometimes act as a reminder to everybody with a disability to keep imagining what is possible to ask why shouldn't this person have those opportunities? Why shouldn't this person take the same steps towards adulthood an independence? Sometimes there is a...because your brother driving you to a job interview feels very different to your parent driving you. Your sister helping you pick an outfit for your first time of work feels different to a support worker doing it, not because one relationships matters more than the other, but because those relationships have different meanings. If we are serious about building employment pathways to see the whole person we need to see the whole person. What does the sibling influence actually look like? Because when we talk about the sibling employment we are not necessarily talking about one big moment or one formal role. Often it is the small things that happen across the lifetime. Sibling relationships can influence expectations, they influence confidence and the informal networks around the person. They can help transport logistics, decision-making, communication and understanding the strengths and preferences of the person over their entire lifetime. Again this is not about replacing the supports, it is not about shifting responsibilities on to families, but it is recognising that if the only people we build around a person are paid supports, they are missing something really fundamental about human connection because all of us rely on relationships. All of us rely on people who know us outside of the work, outside of the services we use and outside of one particular time of our lives and we know that broader networks matter, they



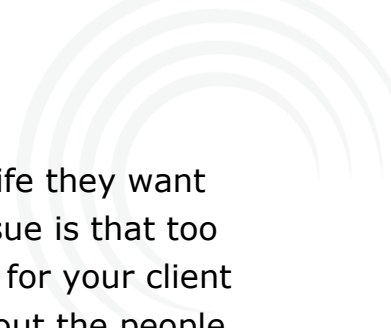
matter for opportunity, they matter for belonging and they matter because opportunities so often come through connection.

I want to spend a few moments specifically talking about what siblings themselves have told us and I want to pause here and acknowledge something important because when we talk about lived experience in the disability sector, we rightly centre the voice and experience of a person with a disability and that must always remain central. Around many people with disability are other people who have often lived the experience of the systems, barriers, expectations and change. The siblings have their own distinct lived experience, not the same experiences as their brother or sister, not a replacement for the voices of the person with the disability, but a different perspective that can help us understand the whole picture. Siblings often see the points where the systems connect or where they don't. They often see what happens after the appointments end, after the services leave, they see what happens when a goal written on paper meets their reality of everyday life. One of the things we hear consistently from siblings is they often feel they are holding information that can often help, but they are not sure where they can fit, they don't want to take over, they don't want to speak for their brother or sister, but they also don't want decades of knowledge, trust and understanding to be ignored. This is such an important distinction including siblings is not about asking how could this person help us to deliver support, it is asking is there a relationship here that matters to the person with disability and are we recognising it? Because sometimes siblings will know something as simple as he won't tell you he is nervous, he will just tell you he won't go in. Or, she loves being around people, but she needs a bit of time afterwards to reset. Or, that job looks good on paper but I know the environment is going to be overwhelming, but you have asked what work does she want to do. Employment outcomes are not only shaped by skills and opportunities, they are shaped by the confidence and expectations I keep coming back to, they are shaped around the people around believing it is genuinely possible. In preparing for today I reached out and asked them about employment about what had and hadn't worked. One of the strongest messages that came through was the need to think more broadly about what meaningful employment looks like, not asking what job can this person do, but asking what does this person love and what motivates them? What environments allow them to thrive and what contributions do they want to make, because meaningful employment might look different for different people. It requires creativity, it requires thinking laterally. It might require building opportunities around someone's strengths, rather than trying to fit them into a pathway that already

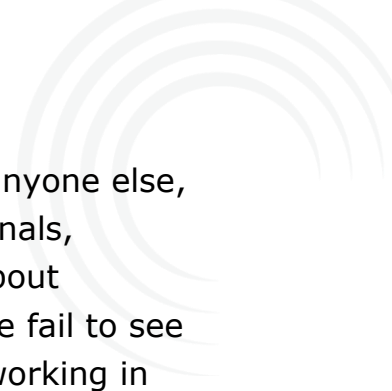


exists. Siblings have often had that understanding because they have seen those things grow over years. One person talked about...that could become pathways towards employment and she reflected that she wished the employment services supporting her own brother were able to bring that same level of creativity to look at what genuinely interested him and build from there. Siblings were also clear about something else, employment needs to be employment. It should not simply become a replacement for day activities or somewhere to go. People with disability deserves opportunities that recognise their skills, and their potential. I want to talk about someone who remains anonymous. She said she believes...an entirely different outcome would be possible but she was never part of those conversations. She wrote, "My brother was ultimately...due to behavioural challenges and it was no longer deemed a suitable workplace. My experience supporting him and my family to have conversations with him about work, in particular why he was being asked to leave highlighted that there was a lack of understanding from employers who knew about the ongoing needs in the workplace, but they seemed to assume that by providing adjustments the goal was for the person to no longer require supports in the workplace." I think there is an important message in that because inclusion is not just about opening the doors it is about creating opportunities. It is recognising what someone needs to remain there to succeed and grow there and sometimes people who can understand that the best have been the people walking alongside them for the longest time.

Before I move into what this means in practice I want to be really clear about what I am not saying today, because whenever we talk about families informal networks and relationships there is a risk that the message is simplified. The message is not every sibling should be involved and it is not every sibling relationship is positive, it is definitely not. Sibling relationships are human relationships and like all human relationships they are complex. Some siblings are incredibly close, but some siblings aren't. Some siblings want to be actively involved and some need boundaries. Some people with disability want their sibling connected into their lives and other people do not, and all of that needs to be respected. A rights-based approach means the person with the disability remains at the centre always. What we need to do is...none of us live like that. Most of us make decisions with other people around us, we talk things through, we ask people who know us well and we get advice from friends, partners, colleagues and yes, siblings. Having trusted relationships around us does not reduce our independence and often it strengthens it. The goal is not to make siblings responsible, the goal is to recognise relationships that already exist and



ask whether those relationships could help someone achieve the life they want because the issue is not that siblings is always the answer, the issue is that too often nobody has asked the question. So what can we actually do for your client after you leave the session? Firstly, I'd like to ask you to think about the people you currently support and their networks. Do you know what those networks actually look like? I don't mean the paid supports, I mean the people who are there day in day out, the people who have known them across the different stages of their life and the people who know them outside of services and systems. Are you utilising those relationships? Have you considered how you might? What might you be missing because of this blind spot? Secondly, I'd encourage you to look specifically with siblings. Not everybody with a disability will want a sibling...but we also shouldn't make the opposite assumption, just because...doesn't mean they are important, ask the question. Does this person have brothers or sisters and what does that relationship look like? Are they people who understand this person's goals, interests and strengths? Are they someone that a person with a disability wants involved? Importantly, if siblings are involved, think about what they need, because strong and informed siblings are better placed to walk alongside their brothers and sisters in ways that... Thirdly, I want to talk to you about a program that Siblings Australia currently has on offer that can be used in this space. We are currently running a program called Life Changes, it is funded through the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing and is available for both people with disability and their siblings. Importantly people do not need to attend as a sibling pair, we run separate streams; one with disability and one for adult siblings, recognising that each person has their own experience, perspectives and skills they are building. Life Changes is about building skills knowledge and confidence for people with disability and their siblings to successfully navigate transitional life events. The program used strengths-based approaches including supported decision-making and person-centred tools to help people think through change, challenges and opportunities. Siblings, the workshops explore things like how they can champion and advocate alongside their brother or sister, building skills to navigate challenges and difficult conversations, understanding their own roles and wellbeing and creating practical action plans for the future. For people with disability the workshop focuses on things like managing relationships and communication, having conversations about things and asking for help, managing emotions during times of stress or change and building action plans that reflects their own actions and goals. If you are working with someone who could benefit from Life Changes, registrations are available and we can also work directly with your organisation. If you have a group of people, please reach out. We can organise a dedicated workshop either online or in-person.



Today has not just been about saying siblings matter more than anyone else, they don't. It is not about saying siblings should replace professionals, providers, parents and other supports, and they shouldn't. It is about recognising that every person exists within relationships. When we fail to see those relationships we miss part of the picture. For those of you working in employment you often meet people at a particular points in their lives when they are thinking about what comes next. Siblings have been there for all of the moments that came before; the first day of school, the interests, the things that worked and things that didn't. The moment when someone surprised everyone, the moment where everyone else underestimated them. And often they will be there for the moments that come afterwards, because getting the job is not the end job, the goal is building a life, a life with purpose and connection, a life where people with disability have the same opportunities as everyone else to contribute, to belong, to take risks, to change direction and decide who they want to be. If we want employment pathways that reflect the whole person we need to understand the whole person, their strengths, their goals, their history, their relationships, their people. So my challenge to you after today is a simple one, when you are working alongside someone with a disability ask, who knows this person, who sees something possible for this person that the systems might have missed? Sometimes the most powerful support for someone's future comes from someone who has been beside them all along. Thank you. That is the end of my sharing.

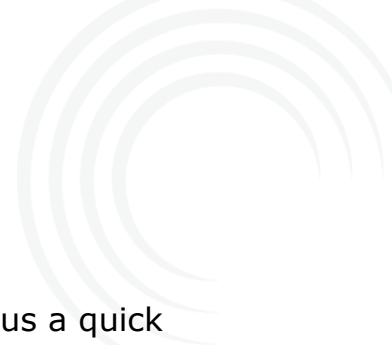
SALLY KARANDREWS: Thank you so much for that, Shannon, especially amidst those tech challenges. As one of - I have got three sisters myself and it has been lovely to hear and reflect on the role that they have played in my employment journey in particular, and I am very grateful and aware of the role that they have had in my life as a whole, but in that narrower context and thinking of some of the times that they have been there, or even some of the times we have had conversations around all of those career dreams I had as a young child that they very quickly, but somewhat rightly shot down because they were probably not possible. Yeah, it has been lovely. So thank you.

DR SHANNON SCHEDLICH: Thank you so much for having me.

SALLY KARANDREWS: In terms of questions the main theme that has come up in a couple of questions is around practical steps and whether there is

experiences or maybe anything that you can draw on that might help people in frontline, like those employment consultant kind of roles, that they might be able to draw on when they are engaging with a person with disability to bring the notion of bringing a sibling into the conversation and how they might be able to go about that.

DR SHANNON SCHEDLICH: Sure. I keep coming back to that main point that it is really, it sits with the person with the disability about whether they want the siblings in those discussions. So my first point would very much be about having that conversation about the comfort level, not all relationships are good and we don't stand here as Siblings Australia and assume that siblings are always going to do the right thing and always have their brother's or sister's best interests at heart, but if the people who is seeking support does have a positive relationship with their brother or sister and is willing to have them as part of the conversations I would be saying to those frontline staff, if there is an opportunity to have the conversation with the person with the disability and their brother or sister in the room, try and do that. One of the people I was speaking to in preparing I spoke to a few adult siblings about their experiences and there was a gentleman who was telling me about issues he had had and his brother wasn't able to communicate to the service providers about what the actual barriers were for him in the workplaces that they were describing. He never actually had an opportunity to be part of those conversations. He said to me, he was like, "I could have really clearly articulated to them, these are the sorts of things that he needs and these are the sorts of things that won't work." Because he understood so much of the context of his brother's life because he understood so much of the underlying subtext of the communication that was happening, he could very clearly state it is this problem with this particular workplace that we are talking about, or this is the actual modification he needs. And him saying he doesn't want to do it or he is not interested, it is not that he doesn't want to do that particular sort of work, it is just that the way they are describing it isn't working for him and if they had had that conversation then they would have realised, that okay, it is not huge modifications we are talking about here, this person does want this sort of work, they are just not fitting into what the workplace looks like at the moment and we can make those modifications there. So obviously talking to your client first is number 1, 2, 3 through to 100, and making sure they are comfortable with bringing in those support networks, but where they are comfortable with doing it recognising that having those conversations can give you so much more context that you'll perhaps ever get from just speaking to one person I think is really, really



important. So that would be my number 1 piece of advice.

SALLY KARANDREWS: Absolutely, thank you. Could you just give us a quick refresher, and we can share these details again after today, just where people could find out a bit more about the Life Changes program that you mentioned?

DR SHANNON SCHEDLICH: Sure. This is information on that on our website. So if you go to www.siblingsaustralia.org.au, I am also going to get Liv to pop my direct email address into the chat as well so if people want to speak to me about that, like I said we have groups that sort of run where individuals can join with other people, but if there is a provider out there who thinks, actually, this would be fabulous for my clients and I would like to have one that just runs as a cohort with just people who know each other with just people we are working with, we are very happy to facilitate that and we can talk about whether that's online or in-person as best suits the providers. Very happy to do that. As I said, it is completely funded through the Federal government so there is no cost to participants or providers in that program.

SALLY KARANDREWS: Thank you. It looks like we have got through the questions. I am just checking. So there are a couple here, but they were all along that same kind of line of questioning, and I think we have got back to all of them. If anyone has any questions post today please feel free to reach out either to Liv, myself or to Shannon who has very kindly offered her email address there. In closing I would just really like to thank Shannon for coming along and sharing that knowledge and expertise, but also the Life Changes program that Siblings Australia is running. A huge thank you to Liv and everyone in the background who makes all of these sessions work. I say thank you to all of you for coming along and giving up your time today and we will be back next fortnight with another session, and details of that session, possibly the resources and link information today will be made available to you very soon. But until then thank you and have a lovely rest of your day.

(END)