



<sup>CCS</sup>  
**disability action**  
Including all people

TE HUNGA HAUĀ MAURI MŌ NGĀ TĀNGATA KATOĀ

Briefing for  
Hon Tracey Martin  
**Minister for Children**

20 November 2017

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## Executive summary

- Not every disabled child is a vulnerable child. Children with disabilities can face unique challenges, but also often have unique strengths. Likewise, while raising a disabled child brings unique challenges for whānau, it can also be uniquely rewarding.
- Some disabled children and their whānau are, however, vulnerable. In addition, as a recent Cabinet Paper acknowledges, vulnerable children with disabilities are some of the most vulnerable children in contact with Child, Youth and Family.
- Disabled children are more likely to live in poorer families. The 2013 Disability Survey found that 17.7% of disabled children live in households that earn under \$30,000 a year, compared to 11.5% of non-disabled children.
- Students with disabilities are also more likely to be attending a low decile school. Ongoing Resourcing Scheme students are becoming an increasingly large percentage of students at lower decile schools
- Despite how vulnerable some children with disabilities and their whānau are, Child, Youth and Family has often not been effective in responding to the needs of vulnerable disabled children. The relationship between Child, Youth and Family and the disability-specific parts of government departments has been difficult.
- There is a clear need for the Ministry of Vulnerable Children to be highly responsive to the needs of vulnerable disabled children and their whānau. All parts of Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Vulnerable Children should be expected to work well with children with disabilities and their whānau.
- There is a clear case for Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Vulnerable Children to have a strong focus on doing what it takes to prevent children ending up in residential services. Disabled children have a right to live in a family environment, rather than in the institution environment of residential service.

## Recommendations

That as Minister for Children you:

1. Set the expectation that all parts of Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Vulnerable Children will work well with disabled children and their whānau.
2. Ensure Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Vulnerable Children develops strong advocacy capabilities itself or contracts for them.
3. Ensure Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Vulnerable Children invests in building the capabilities of communities to support children with disabilities and their whānau, especially in more rural and provincial areas.
4. Ensure Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Vulnerable Children does what it takes to prevent children ending up in residential services. Primarily, this means providing support to the child's immediate whānau to allow them to keep their child at home. When a disabled child does need to leave the family home, the priority should be to place them in another family environment; a member of the extended whānau in the first instance and a foster home if this is not an option.
5. Ensure Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Vulnerable Children has a strong focus on transitioning young adults to independence, especially disabled young adults who are in residential services.
6. Ensure Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Vulnerable Children uses supported decision-making processes when working with children and young people, especially disabled children and young people.

## **Introduction**

As Minister for Children, you are in a powerful position to make a difference for children and their whānau, including children with disabilities. The purpose of this briefing is to provide you with a broad overview of the current situation with disabled children and their whānau. This briefing also aims to provide some general recommendations to ensure Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Vulnerable Children does a better job of responding to the needs of children with disabilities than its predecessor. We are always happy to provide advice to you, your office and officials on ways to address the barriers disabled children and their whānau face.

Disabled children and their whānau are diverse and have many strengths. Yet they face large systematic barriers in society from a lack of accessible services and infrastructure to negative public and professional attitudes towards disability. As a result, children with disabilities and their whānau are more likely to live in poverty. Disabled children are also at higher risk of abuse and neglect, by both their whānau as well as formal services.

Children with disabilities and their whānau often need support, but they also need to be empowered and to be given control over their own lives. This has been the dual challenge for government-funded support and there have been ongoing issues with both the availability of support as well as how that support is provided. Support needs to be adequate as well as delivered in a way that enables children and whānau to shape their own lives. Together with other government projects, including A Good Start in Life, the Learning Support Update and the Disability Support System Transformation, Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Vulnerable Children is a chance to break with the past and address these challenges.

## **About us**

CCS Disability Action is a community organisation that has been advocating for disabled people to be included in the community since 1935. As of May 31 2017, we were providing support to around 4,000 children, young people and

adults through our 17 branches, which operate from Northland to Invercargill. Our support focuses on breaking down barriers to participation. We receive a mixture of government and private funding.

### **Not all disabled children are vulnerable children**

From the start, we want to be clear not every disabled child is a vulnerable child. Children with disabilities can face unique challenges, but also often have unique strengths. Likewise, while raising a disabled child brings unique challenges for whānau, it can also be uniquely rewarding. It would be a grave mistake to label all disabled children or their whānau as vulnerable. Likewise, it is important that professionals working alongside whānau with disabled children have high expectations that those whānau and children will thrive.

When a child is labelled as having a disability and/or vulnerable, this should not be an excuse to have lower expectations of what they will achieve, especially with the right empowering support. Yet too often, it is.

It is clear that some disabled children and their whānau are, however, at increased risk of negative outcomes. As a recent Cabinet Paper acknowledges, vulnerable children with disabilities are some of the most vulnerable children in contact with Child, Youth and Family (Office of the Minister for Social Development, 2016, p. 8). Out of people receiving Ministry of Health funded disability support services, 19% of those aged between 19 to 28 and 15% of young people aged below 16 have had a finding of abuse or neglect. This is much higher than for the population as a whole (Office for Disability Issues, 2016).

Evidence from overseas also shows disabled children to be at very high risk of child maltreatment. One of the most comprehensive studies to date, which took place in the United States, found children with disabilities to be 3.8 times more likely to be neglected, 3.8 times more likely to be physically abused, and 3.1 times more likely to be sexually abused when compared with children without disabilities. Children with communication difficulties and behavioural

disorders had a much higher rate of maltreatment (Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect, Council on Children With Disabilities, Desch, & Hibbard, 2007, p. 1019).

There is a clear need for the Ministry of Vulnerable Children to be highly responsive to the needs of vulnerable disabled children and their whānau. We would caution, however, against the Ministry thinking all disabled children and their whānau need its support.

### **Disabled children are often disadvantaged in society**

In addition to the increased risk of abuse and neglect, disabled children are more likely to live in low-income households and experience serious discrimination in access to education and other services. Despite the barriers disabled children face, issues affecting them are seldom part of the public debate on vulnerable children or child poverty.

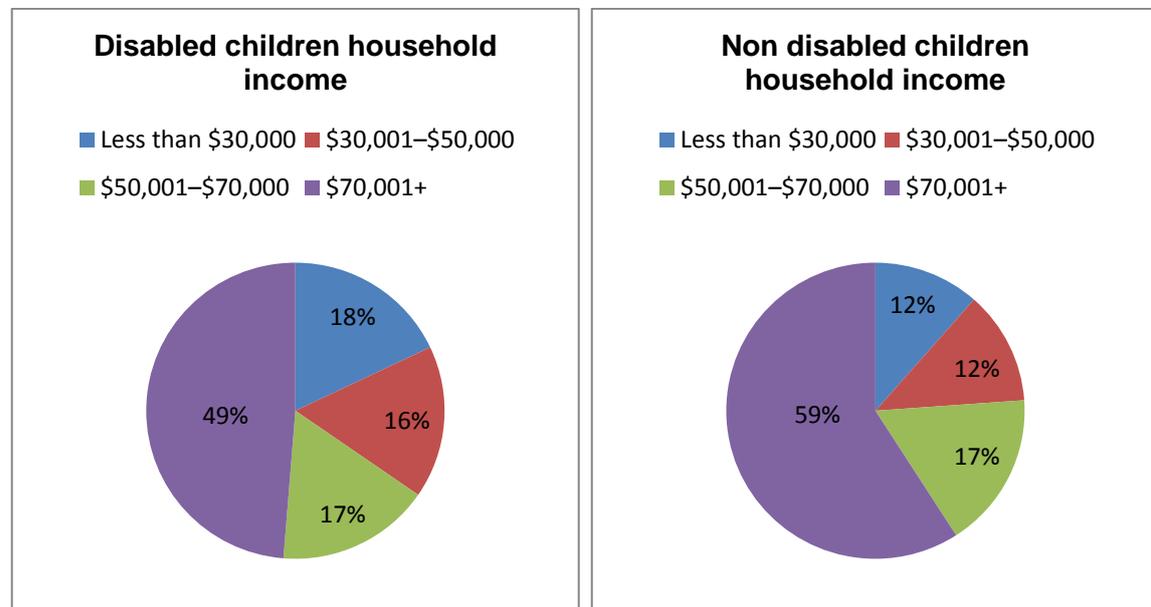
The 2013 Disability Survey estimated that disabled children were less likely to have done the following activities, in the previous four weeks, than non-disabled children were:

- had music, art, or other similar lessons;
- played a team sport;
- done other physical activity such as swimming or gymnastics;
- visited friends;
- been away on holiday in the last 12 months.

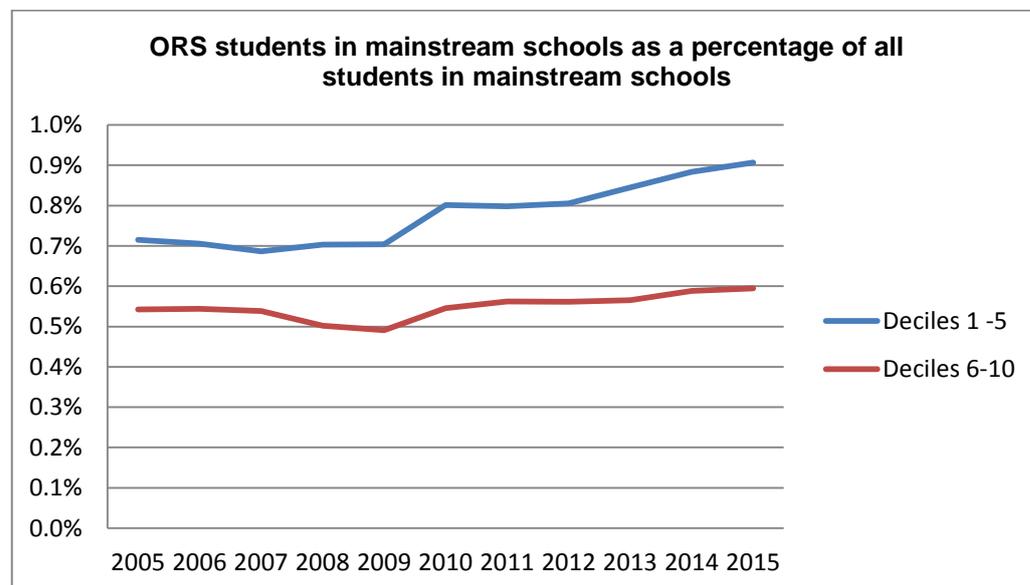
Only 77.8% of disabled children had visited friends, over the previous four weeks, compared to 92% of non-disabled children (Statistics New Zealand, 2014).

### Disabled children are more likely to live in poverty

Disabled children are more likely to live in poorer families. The 2013 Disability Survey found that 34% of disabled children live in families that earn under \$50,000 a year, compared to only 24% of non-disabled children.



Students with disabilities are also more likely to be attending a low decile school. Ongoing Resourcing Scheme students are becoming an increasingly large percentage of students at lower decile schools<sup>1</sup>.



<sup>1</sup> Information sourced from the Ministry of Education. All students attending special schools have been taken out, both out of the Ongoing Resourcing Scheme students and out of the all students groups. This gives a better picture of the decile ratings as special school are not evenly spread out across deciles (and they do not match the shifting of decile ratings in mainstream schools).

### **The challenges for whānau**

While raising a child with disabilities can be very rewarding, the child and their whānau can face complex barriers and challenges. Often these barriers are caused by society itself, such as the poor physical accessibility of buildings, transport and infrastructure. This can include facilities designed specifically for children, such as playgrounds and afterschool care (Spink, 2016).

Negative attitudes towards disability can also be a prevalent barrier, preventing disabled children from accessing the same opportunities as non-disabled children. New Zealand research has found cases of parents planning to petition early childhood centres for the removal of children with disabilities (Stark, Gordon-Burns, Purdue, Rarere-Briggs, & Turnock, 2011, pp. 11-12).

A small body of research, including some New Zealand research, has found caregivers of disabled children to be at higher risk of stress and depression. Challenging behaviour creates a particularly high risk of stress and depression, due to the difficulties of managing that behaviour coupled with negative attitudes of other people, which can prevent caregivers from going out in public (Browne, 2010, pp. 15-20).

Aside from a higher risk of stress and depression, children with disabilities and their whānau often face what could be called friction, transaction or conversion costs (Service, et al., 2014, p. 9) (Sen, 2010, pp. 291-294). The higher support needs of their children combined with environmental barriers, which as mentioned, range from physically inaccessible buildings and transport to public attitudes; make everyday tasks more costly in time and sometimes money (Browne, 2010, pp. 20-21).

It is also far from uncommon for whānau to have multiple disabled children, which can increase the significance of these barriers. Further, although often overlooked, some parents and other whānau members have disabilities themselves, including experience of mental health conditions.

### **Diversity amongst disabled children and their whānau**

Also overlooked is the considerable diversity amongst disabled children and their whānau. There is diversity in terms of ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, gender identity, sex characteristics, income and employment, and religion and personal beliefs. This diversity can affect both the ability of whānau to manage their child's support needs and barriers in society as well as how they want to approach these support needs and barriers. For example, some whānau do not want to medicate their child and this can affect the type of support they need. It can also trigger negative attitudes from professionals who are used to a certain approach when managing a disabled child's support needs.

This diversity combined with the unique challenges having a disabled child can bring, makes it hard to predict which whānau will struggle and which will thrive. In our experience, general risk factors for vulnerability, while not irrelevant, have less predictive ability when it comes to whānau with children with disabilities (Statistics New Zealand, 2012). A well-off family with both parents in full-time employment can struggle to manage their disabled child's support needs and the barriers in society. On the other hand, a single parent with multiple general risk factors can be managing well.

### **Children with disabilities are part of their whānau and community**

Disabled children are part of a wider whānau, including siblings, parents, caregivers, extended whānau and, ultimately, their community. To effectively respond to the needs of children with disabilities, you need to see their place within their whānau and community. Often the best way to improve the wellbeing of disabled children is by strengthening and empowering their whānau as well as supporting the child to be included in their community. It is important to avoid becoming fixated on the child's disability and focusing solely on responding to the child's support needs in isolation of their whānau and community context.

**Child, Youth and Family and other mainstream child services have been reluctant to work with disabled children**

Despite how vulnerable some children with disabilities and their whānau are, Child, Youth and Family has often not been effective in responding to the needs of vulnerable disabled children. The relationship between Child, Youth and Family and the disability-specific parts of government departments has been difficult. There have been disputes over funding and eligibility, none of which is in the best interest of the child and their whānau (Carpinter & Harrington, April 2006, pp. x-xi) (Disabled Children Project, 2015, p. 14). Funding disputes between different parts of government are unlikely to have any impact on the overall government bottom-line and just delay, or prevent, support from reaching whānau. It is in the child's best interest to deliver support as soon as possible and worry about the funding later (especially when it is simply a question of whose budget it comes from).

In our experience, Child, Youth and Family and other children/whānau initiatives, such as the Children's Teams and Whānau Ora, have been reluctant to see providing support to disabled children as their responsibility. This matches previous research that has found mainstream services are reluctant to accept children with disabilities because of perceived hassle and resourcing challenges. This is especially apparent in education (Wills & Rosenbaum, 2013, pp. 34-35).

In general, children with disabilities are largely invisible within the wider debate on vulnerable children. Overseas research has noted that disability appears to be the inequality that some academic disciplines, such as public health, do not speak about (Sherlaw, Lucas, Jourdain, & Monaghan, 2014, p. 447). This tends to stem from both a lack of knowledge as well as fears about the complexity of disability. Child poverty researchers have also told us that disability is seen as a less interesting or "sexy" research area compared to areas such as ethnicity.

As a result, the current approach is often to refer children with disabilities to specialist services, despite the fact that mainstream services may be working with their non-disabled siblings and whānau. This deeply flawed approach needs to end. You will never deliver truly good outcomes for disabled children and their whānau by treating the child's needs in isolation. While more specialised service may be required at times, they need to work together with mainstream services. Mainstream services need to consider what they could do to help or how to make their services accessible to disabled children.

### **Social workers struggle to work effectively with children with disabilities**

At the frontline level, in overseas research, social workers have said they find it difficult to effectively communicate with some disabled children, which can lead to the underreporting of maltreatment and abuse. Social workers report a tendency to not see abuse with a disabled child. They may think such abuse is understandable (a natural response to behavioural, communication or support challenges) or just difficult to distinguish from impairment related effects (e.g. whether injuries are due to poor balance or abuse from caregivers) (Wyber , 2012, pp. 25-26).

Social workers need to be trained to work with disabled children, including children with communication and/or behavioural challenges. There also needs to be higher expectations that social workers will be capable of working with all children, including children with disabilities.

## **Breaking with the past; what Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Vulnerable Children needs to do differently**

### **All parts of Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Vulnerable Children need to work well with disabled children**

Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Vulnerable Children is a chance for a fresh start with supporting vulnerable children with disabilities and their whānau. Yet much will have to change, especially in terms of the culture and approach of the new Ministry to disability. Vulnerable disabled children should no longer be seen as just the responsibility of specialist services. Instead, the new Ministry must see its role as helping all vulnerable children and whānau to thrive, including vulnerable children with disabilities.

Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Vulnerable Children needs to see vulnerable disabled children as its responsibility. This does not mean establishing a separate part of the new Ministry dedicated to children with disabilities, which would just replicate the current issues. Instead, the Ministry needs to embed responsiveness and knowledge about the needs of disabled children across the organisation. All parts of Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Vulnerable Children should be expected to work well with children with disabilities and their whānau (not just automatically refer disabled children to specialist services, which often are overloaded or do not exist in some parts of the country).

We also need to look beyond just vulnerable disabled children to consider how the government can help all children with disabilities and their whānau to thrive and be included in society and their community.

### **Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Vulnerable Children needs strong advocacy and coordination capabilities**

Some of the barriers whānau with disabled children face can be offset through services or financial contributions, such as the Child Disability Allowance. Not every barrier can be dealt with this way though. Providing offsetting support at

an individual level is also inefficient compared to reducing, or removing, the barrier itself.

For this reason, we have a strong advocacy and coordination focus with our support to disabled children and their whānau. We advocate for children with disabilities to receive mainstream (universal) services or for infrastructure to be made accessible. For example, we recently surveyed our coordinators about the work they are doing under our flagship Supported Lifestyles service. We got data back on the work we have done with 611 young people and their whānau that we are currently supporting. Out of the 611 young people we have data on, 499 (82%) had received some sort of advocacy support from us. Our advocacy was about access to other services, especially education, transport and housing.

To provide effective and efficient support to vulnerable children with disabilities and their whānau, Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Vulnerable Children will need to develop strong advocacy capabilities itself or contract for them.

### **Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Vulnerable Children needs to invest in communities**

In addition to advocacy and coordination capabilities, in some cases Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Vulnerable Children will need to invest in building the capabilities of communities to support whānau, especially in more rural and provincial areas. At times, basic accessible services and infrastructure are lacking for disabled children.

For example, in rural and provincial areas whānau are sometimes notionally allocated respite support, but there is actually no one available and/or qualified to provide this support. At times, Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Vulnerable Children may need to step in and work with communities and other organisations to increase their capabilities to meet the extra support needs

children with disabilities can have. There may need to be flexible and creative solutions to capacity issues within smaller communities.

### **Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Vulnerable Children needs to support whānau to keep their disabled child at home**

We note that the Ministry of Social Development acknowledges that the system currently does not provide sufficient intensive support to enable many disabled children and young people to be cared for in a family-based setting (Ministry of Social Development, 2016, p. 18). There have also been many examples of children being placed in full time extended residential care because access to shorter-term support was not readily available (Carpinter & Harrington, April 2006, p. 23).

Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Vulnerable Children needs to be proactive in providing adequate support early to avoid crisis and whānau breakdowns. Otherwise, large numbers of young people will continue to end-up in residential services at great cost to the government. Government data shows about 85% of people who enter residential services will remain there for life. Further, the largest group of people entering residential services are aged between 16 and 30. The lifetime costs to the government of someone entering residential services can be over \$1 million (Office for Disability Issues, 2016).

More importantly, disabled children have a right to live in a family environment, rather than in the institution environment of residential service. Residential services often have high staff turnover and are ultimately a workplace environment with paid staff. They are not the same for children as a family home.

Further, under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities children with disabilities have equal rights to family life. Government must also prevent concealment, abandonment, neglect and segregation of children with disabilities (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities).

There is a clear case for Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Vulnerable Children to have a strong focus on doing what it takes to prevent children ending up in residential services. First and foremost, this means providing support to the child's immediate whānau to allow them to keep their child at home. When a disabled child does need to leave the family home, the priority should be to place them in another family environment; a member of the extended whānau in the first instance and a foster home if this is not an option.

### **Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Vulnerable Children needs to take responsibility for transitions**

Recent research into Section 141 and 142 out-of-home agreements revealed that there was little transition planning around the young person's living situation when they reached the end of their out-of-home agreement. What transition planning did occur tended to focus on the schooling side. There was no involvement from a social worker or another independent person. The residential service itself was expected to have an annual plan for the person, despite the obvious conflict of interest if the young person wanted to move to another service or live independently. As a result, none of the young people who had entered a residential service in the research had left, despite their Sections 141 and 142 agreements having ended. (Mirfin-Veitch & Conder, 2015, pp. 25-28).

The number of children and young people entering residential services should drop overtime. Nevertheless, Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Vulnerable Children will need to have a strong focus on transitioning young adults to independence, especially disabled young adults who are in residential services.

### **Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Vulnerable Children needs to use supported decision-making**

Article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities requires the government to assist disabled children to have their voice heard on matters affecting them. Article 12 of the Convention requires the government

to provide support to ensure people with disabilities can exercise their legal capacity. Yet often a binary view is taken of a child's ability to understand and consent to decisions, they either can or it is not possible/practicable.

There is growing awareness in the disability community that some people previously thought to be unable to make an informed decision can with the right support (Office for Disability Issues, 2017). This is called supported decision-making and is contrasted with substitute decision-making, such as welfare guardianship and Enduring Power of Attorney (where someone else decides for the person). The government needs to move progressively to supported decision-making and away from substitute decision-making.

While the wellbeing of parents/caregivers and the wellbeing of children are often closely linked, this is not always the case. Sometimes what is best for a child with a disability can clash with the views of other whānau. It is vital in these cases to find ways to listen to the child.

The views of disabled children should also be sought for policy decisions. The views of children with disabilities can be particularly powerful for highlighting the hidden norms and assumptions that create barriers for them and their whānau. For example, Australian research into the views of students with learning disabilities revealed important insights into what teaching strategies and styles were more effective as well as the importance of the culture of the school (Watson, 2007).

There is a growing research base around engaging with children, including disabled children (MacArthur & McKenzie, 2013, p. 83). It is possible to have genuine engagement with disabled children. It will be important for both Oranga Tamariki and VOYCE – Whakarongo Mai to find ways to listen to the views of disabled children and young people.

## **Conclusion**

Thank you very much for taking the time to read this briefing. Just to reiterate, we are always happy to provide advice to you, your office and officials on issues affecting disabled children and their whānau. As the Minister for Children, we look to you to ensure Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Vulnerable Children breaks with the past and works with communities and whānau to create better outcomes for all children, especially children with disabilities.

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