



Beyond Blue submission to the next Victorian Autism Plan

July 2026

Introduction

Beyond Blue welcomes the opportunity to inform the next Victorian Autism Plan. While recognising the Victorian Autism Plan's whole-of-life and whole-of-community focus, this submission concentrates on opportunities to improve outcomes for autistic children and young people by strengthening and embedding mental health support within education settings across Victoria.

Children and young people who are autistic or experience developmental differences face persistent barriers across education, health, and community systems, including fragmented supports, workforce capability gaps and inconsistent access to timely, appropriate services. These barriers are associated with poorer mental health, reduced participation and inequitable life outcomes.

Autistic children face a higher risk of mental health difficulties, driven in part by experiences of exclusion, bullying and fragmented access to supports.¹ Autistic children are also more likely to experience adverse childhood experiences, which are strongly associated with later mental health concerns.²

The next Victorian Autism Plan presents a critical opportunity to move beyond fragmented initiatives toward a coherent, system-wide approach that strengthens inclusion, wellbeing and participation from early childhood through schooling. Early learning services and schools are critical touchpoints to deliver this shift, particularly as national reforms, including foundational supports such as Thriving Kids, increasingly position education settings as key delivery platforms for early and integrated support.

Recent Australian research highlights that improved outcomes are driven by educator capability to implement evidence-based, inclusive practices, particularly structured teaching and early childhood pedagogical approaches, visual supports and environmental adjustments delivered through coordinated whole learning community models.³ This is consistent with a growing evidence base demonstrating that whole learning community (or whole-school) approaches to mental health and wellbeing – engaging educators, families and systems – are more effective than isolated or individual interventions in improving student outcomes.^{4,5,6}

Be You

[Be You](#) is Australia's national mental health and wellbeing in education initiative, supporting early learning services and schools with free, evidence-based tools, professional learning and consultant guidance to embed mental health and wellbeing into everyday education from early years through to 18.

Funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health, Disability and Ageing, Be You is delivered by Beyond Blue in collaboration with Early Childhood Australia and headspace, and in alignment with state and territory education and health departments. Be You empowers and supports educators to promote mental health and wellbeing for every child and young person in Australia.

The next Victorian Autism Plan should use existing national education infrastructure to strengthen mental health and wellbeing support for autistic children and young people, avoiding duplication while enabling local implementation.

Be You provides an established national platform to translate evidence into consistent, scalable practice across Victorian learning communities, complementing inclusion and disability systems by strengthening educators' foundational mental health capability and confidence and supporting engagement with specialist services where needed.

Recommendations

The Victorian Government should:

1. Embed nationally consistent mental health support across the birth to 18 education continuum using existing mechanisms, including Be You.
2. Strengthen coordination of mental health support across education, health and social services through shared referral pathways, cross-sector planning and alignment between universal and specialist supports.
3. Invest in system-wide educator mental health capability and the conditions required for consistent implementation of evidence-based, inclusive practices.
4. Embed equity through co-designed and culturally responsive approaches.

Embed nationally consistent mental health support across the birth to 18 education continuum using existing mechanisms, including Be You

- Existing education infrastructure provides a strong foundation for implementation. Aligning the next Victorian Autism Plan with national frameworks and initiatives such as Be You will minimise duplication, support consistency across jurisdictions and enable effective local systems of support.
- Be You, Australia's national mental health and wellbeing in education initiative, has supported Victorian educators since 2018 with free, evidence-based tools and consultant guidance.
- As of June 2026, Be You is embedded in 37% of early learning services and 74% of schools nationally. Consistent with this, Be You is active across 31% of early learning services and 80% of schools in Victoria, with over 21,000 educators registered across the state.
- This established footprint provides an immediate opportunity to support implementation of the Victorian Autism Plan without creating new or duplicative systems and could facilitate a consistent approach from early childhood through to secondary education.
- Be You offers a scalable, implementation-ready platform that can support Victoria to deliver on the intent of the Victorian Autism Plan by:
 - building educator capability to support mental health and neurodiversity
 - embedding whole learning community approaches
 - strengthening partnerships between educators, families and services
 - supporting early identification, inclusion and referral pathways.
- This role is already reflected in national policy, with Be You explicitly identified in the Australian Government's [National Autism Strategy First Action Plan \(2025–2026\)](#) under Commitment 5, Action 4. It is referenced alongside the National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health (delivered by Emerging Minds), highlighting how complementary national initiatives can work together to strengthen workforce capability and system-wide coordination.

“Be You is a great resource, especially for educators who may be lacking some experience or understanding of children's social and emotional wellbeing and the importance of family relationships.”

- Early learning services educator, Be You evaluation (2021–2023)⁷

Strengthen coordination of mental health support across education, health and social services through shared referral pathways, cross-sector planning and alignment between universal and specialist supports

- Fragmentation across education, health and social services continues to result in duplication, inconsistent access, and service gaps for children, young people and families.
- Coordinated, multi-component approaches are associated with improved outcomes for autistic children and young people, particularly when supports are aligned across systems and delivered consistently over time.⁸
- Place-based initiatives identified in the current Autism plan play an important role in providing school-level coordination and direct support, and are demonstrating positive outcomes in wellbeing.
- Be You complements and strengthens these initiatives by providing a consistent, national framework that connects and enhances existing efforts, providing a unifying layer that:
 - strengthens referral pathways
 - supports collaboration between educators, families and service providers
 - enables connection across universal, targeted and specialist supports.
- This approach aligns with national reform directions, including the Thriving Kids model and the National Autism Strategy First Action Plan (2025–2026), which emphasise coordinated, tiered systems of support and the role of education settings in delivering early and integrated responses.

Invest in system-wide educator mental health capability and the conditions required for consistent implementation of evidence-based, inclusive practices

- Improving outcomes for autistic learners depends on consistent implementation of evidence-based, inclusive practices within everyday learning environments.
- Education systems are increasingly expected to support children with a broader range of developmental, behavioural and mental health needs. To be effective, this support must be embedded in daily practice and delivered consistently across early learning and school settings.
- This is particularly important in early learning, where early capability building and inclusive practice have a significant influence on long-term developmental and mental health outcomes.⁹
- Research consistently highlights that effective approaches include structured teaching and developmentally appropriate pedagogical strategies, combined with supports such as visual tools, routines and environmental adjustments.¹⁰
- These findings reinforce that improving outcomes is primarily a question of how consistently these practices are implemented at scale.
- This requires:
 - system-wide capability uplift, not reliance on individual expertise
 - coherent frameworks, not fragmented programs
 - alignment with day-to-day practice.
- Embedding these practices at scale also requires the conditions that enable educators to apply and sustain them. Without adequate support, reforms risk increasing workload without improving outcomes.
- Systems must therefore:
 - provide time and support for professional learning
 - ensure tools align with everyday practice
 - support adaptation to individual learner needs
 - address educator wellbeing.
- Findings from the 2026 Mental Health in Education Survey revealed that educators in Victoria who self-report engagement with Be You's tools and support within the last 12 months show high awareness, confidence and capability in supporting mental health and wellbeing:
 - 87% report feeling equipped to initiate a supportive conversation about mental health with a child or young person

- 78% report feeling confident that they can recognise the signs and symptoms of different mental health problems
- 82% report that Be You has improved awareness about how to respond appropriately to children and young people's mental health concerns.¹¹
- Be You places an intentional focus on educator wellbeing, recognising that caring for children and young people starts with supporting the adults who teach and guide them. Through a whole learning community approach, Be You acts as a support mechanism that enables educators and leaders to embed wellbeing across leadership, culture and everyday practice in education settings, moving beyond a reliance on individual self-care strategies.
- Delivering both capability and enabling conditions at scale requires structured professional learning, practical tools and ongoing implementation support. This can be supported through Be You as a unifying layer within the national mental health system – connecting and aligning existing initiatives, and translating them into a consistent, practical approach that educators can implement in everyday practice.

Embed equity through co-designed and culturally responsive approaches

- Autistic children and young people from First Nations communities, culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and rural and remote areas face additional barriers in accessing supports and achieving positive outcomes, including reduced access to culturally appropriate services, workforce and geographic constraints, and systemic inequities.^{12,13,14}
- The existing research also highlights significant gaps in the research base, including limited Australian classroom-based evidence, minimal research relating to First Nations learners, and insufficient understanding of how evidence-based practices translate across diverse cultural and community contexts.^{15,16,17}
- This reinforces the need for:
 - genuine co-design with communities
 - culturally responsive, place-based approaches
 - flexible models that can be adapted to local context.
- Addressing these barriers requires targeted investment to support the design and delivery of culturally responsive, community-led models that can be implemented effectively across diverse contexts.

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