Improving assessment of functioning for all children: The new National Framework

DAVID:

Hello, and welcome to this webinar hosted by Autism CRC. My name is Professor David Trembath. I was the co-chair of the group that developed the National Framework alongside Amy Fitzpatrick. Also joining today is Dr Rachelle Wicks, who is centrally involved in all aspects of the development of the Framework. Rachelle is a neurodivergent Research Fellow, and in addition to being centrally involved in all aspects of the development of the Framework, is now leading the implementation of the Framework into practice.

So, welcome and thank you very much for taking the time to join this webinar today. I would love to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners and custodians of the different lands on which we're meeting today. So for me, that's the Kombumerri people, speakers of the Yugambeh language. And Rachelle is joining from the lands of the Wathaurong and Dja Dja Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging, and extend that deep respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including those joining today.

Just briefly, some housekeeping. So this session is being recorded. And if you've registered for the webinar, you'll receive a link to the recording in the coming weeks. Automated closed captions are available. So for that, just click on the CC button on your screen. We'll have the presentation first, and then follow up with time for Q&A. There's a Q&A function on the screen, if you'd like to use that to pose questions.

We have had thousands of people register for the webinar today and joining, so it's possible we won't get through all of the questions, but we'll do our very best and probably answer a number of them in a thematic way. We look forward to that. We'd greatly appreciate you taking time to leave some brief feedback at the end of the webinar as well. And we'll provide the link at the end of the final slide.

It's important to also make some acknowledgements up front. So this work was commissioned by Autism CRC with support from the Australian Government Department of Social Services Information, Linkages, and Capacity-Building Grant. And to make the Framework come to life, it was only possible because of all of the people who contributed, including individuals and organisations. Central to this, the children, the family and the community members who contributed their wisdom, their insights, experiences and ideas, as well as the organisations who supported the work, including Indigenous Allied Health Australia as a partner in the project, and members of the Reference Group.

In terms of today, what we'll do is we'll go through five main topics. So we'll talk about why a Framework is needed, how it was developed, what does it say, and then what does it mean for you. Then we'll go to the questions and answers. So Rachelle is going to answer the first

two questions, and then I'll take the second two and we'll come together for the questions and answers. So I'll hand over to Rachelle. Thanks Rachelle.

RACHELLE:

Thanks David. So why is a Framework needed? Every child deserves a happy and healthy start to life, which includes participation in childhood activities and life situations that are critical for their development. They also deserve to feel connected to people, their culture and community and have good quality of life.

Children are part of families which take many forms, and their bonds and relationships are precious, important and indivisible. Understanding and valuing each child and family as a unit is essential to working with them in ways that are individualised, helpful and respectful. All children have strengths and experience challenges, but some children experience additional challenges with their functioning that can arise from a combination of personal and environmental factors. A child's functioning refers to their health activities and participation and includes the influence of personal and environmental factors.

Challenges can vary on the time, place and situation and arise when there is a gap between what the child and family needs and what the environment provides.
When challenges exist, children and families may benefit from supports that are tailored to their own strengths and support needs, irrespective of whether a child is diagnosed with one or more conditions or not.

So the starting point for understanding children's functional strengths and support needs is assessment, to develop a holistic understanding of each child and family. Assessment first and foremost centres on input from the child and family and is typically carried out by health and/or education professionals, but can involve the input of a range of people. If a child has support needs, differentiation of those needs is often required. In schools, differentiation refers to the ways that teachers individualise learning support based on a child's individual needs.

In the Framework, this same individualised approach is applied by considering each child's strengths, support needs, and support options in a holistic sense across their life situations. This is done with the understanding that no two children and family are the same, and that it is not about prioritising one child and families over another.

In Australia, assessment of children's functional strengths and support needs is essential to accessing support services across health, disability, education, and community services and systems. However, there is currently a lack of quality and consistency in the approach taken in terms of high quality, culturally responsive, holistic assessment and different approaches being used across services, sectors, and systems. Institutional policies, processes and protocols can also discriminate.

For example, adopting approaches that only consider Western values and priorities, such as using non-reference tools with the assumption that "normal" is the standard to achieve, can

further marginalise and exclude children from different backgrounds and cultures. So these challenges often result in poor outcomes for many children and families, particularly those from marginalised groups. Inefficient, burdensome and unsatisfying outcomes for professionals, and inconsistent and inaccurate information being used by services and systems to make decisions about service access and funding.

Therefore, efforts to improve assessment of a children's functional strengths and support needs must be holistic and culturally responsive to address the complex interactions between individual professional practices and the services and systems in which they work.

So how does a Framework help? Well, Frameworks are commonly used to set out a vision and approach for addressing complex issues where multiple complementary tools, resources, activities, and approaches may be needed. They are also particularly helpful and important when a single solution is unlikely to be appropriate for all people in all contexts, but where all solutions should reflect a common understanding, evidence base and guiding principles.

So the Framework was designed to sit in the middle of a range of initiatives that aim to improve assessment, differentiation and written reporting of children's functional strengths and support needs, and in turn, the quality and consistency of decisions, services, and supports that flow through it. And from it.

So how was the Framework developed? The process of developing the Framework started with the questions in relation to assessment, differentiation and reporting of children's functional strengths and support needs. So these questions were central

- What are the guiding principles and what guiding principles are important?
- What approach should be used?
- What information is most critical to consider?
- What tools are available?
- And what safeguarding should occur?

For more details about how these questions were answered and the information that was used are laid out in detail in the supporting information document that's available through the Autism CRC website. So the Project Team that developed the Framework included professionals with diverse knowledge, experience, skills, and perspectives that were relevant to the Framework.

This diversity included a range of professional disciplines, neurodivergence, cultural and linguistic diversity, human-centred and empathic design, and Framework and Guideline development. The Framework was co-produced in partnership with 23 community and professional organisations.

Organisations were invited to contribute to the co-production process because they brought views, perspectives and experiences that were directly relevant to the development of the Framework. Including those related to children's health, learning, participation and wellbeing, lived experience of disability and supporting people with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

The Reference Group included a range of individuals with lived experience of disability, family members of people with disability, and professional experience related to working with children and families. The project team acknowledges that there is an extensive community of organisations, not included in the list, that are highly relevant and important to the health, learning, participation, and wellbeing of children. Other relevant stakeholder organisations across the Australian community were eligible to participate and were warmly invited to share their views via the community consultation process.

So how are the research questions addressed? Addressing the research questions to develop the Framework involved an iterative process of evidence gathering, evidence synthesis, and consensus building involving organisations represented in the reference group. The activities included an environmental scan that encompassed a systematic review of research literature and review of grey literature, community consultation via an online survey, and yarning with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and professionals, and a co-production process with a Reference Group of community and professional organisations, associations and societies.

The approach to combining evidence from multiple research activities within a systematic co-production process was chosen for several reasons. One, to maximise the opportunities for multiple converging perspectives and sources of evidence to come together to address the research questions, to inform the content and presentation of the Framework, and to reduce the risk of bias that is a consideration whenever documents of this nature are being developed.

So why the emphasis on co-production? The development of the Framework presented a meaningful opportunity to build consensus across sectors and professions on such a far-reaching and important issue. The co-production process used was essential in considering the different and complementary views and experiences of those representing members of the community and professionals who work with children and families, in a way that was systematic, deep, and iterative.

The co-production with the Reference Group occurred via 14 online meetings across seven months that focus on an iterative cycle of consensus building. The online meetings focused on co-production points, which concentrated attention on individual elements of the Framework, for example, assessment. Using co-production points structured the process so that the gathering of information about each element was organised around the same set of questions that are listed on the slide here.

Online meetings broadly included review of previous co-production points, the project team sharing information and then inviting input; for example, via polls, and discussion, for example, in small groups, and Reference Group members being asked to provide any further information or feedback that they would like to share.

Reference group members were also able to share relevant information with the project team outside of meetings, and/or have follow-up discussions with members of the project team. So, in summary, the evidence gathered included 52 articles gathered through the grey literature

review, from which data were extracted. The research review included three articles, two quantitative research studies, and a research report that met the inclusion criteria.

We received feedback from 415 community members and 55 organisations who completed the community consultation survey. Six First Nations people provided insights guided by broad, open-ended questions to ensure the process was culturally responsive and adhere to Indigenous research principles. And the Reference Group co-production included 14 co-production points that generated 31 hours and 38 minutes of transcribed readings and recordings. And so this is what was produced, the Framework document. And so I'll now hand over to David to talk through the document and the next section.

DAVID:

Thanks very much, Rachelle. Okay, so let's talk through what the Framework is, in terms of what does it say and also, what does it mean for different people joining today.
Okay, so the Framework sets out an evidence-based, culturally responsive approach for assessment, differentiation, and the written reporting of children's strengths and support needs. And it's focusing on professional practice when working with kids in the age ranges 0 to 12 years and their families in Australia.

It's designed to be used to support all children, irrespective of whether or not they have a diagnosed condition or may receive a diagnosis in the future. And so this includes, but is not limited to, children with developmental delay and neurodevelopmental conditions, children with acquired disability, children with other health/medical conditions that result in the need for additional supports.

In terms of the questions, as Rachelle outlined, it's all about assessment, differentiation and reporting. And in each case, asking what are the guiding principles? What's the approach? What information is most critical? The tools that are available, and what safeguarding should occur? In terms of the target users: So, the Framework, the primary users of the Framework, are intended to be professionals who are involved in assessing children's functional strengths and support needs, but that's across sectors.

So we're thinking about people working in medical, nursing, allied health roles, in the health sector. We're thinking about early childhood educators and teachers in the education system. People working across disciplines in the disability services, and similarly in relation to community services. It's really quite an enormous undertaking to try to develop a Framework that works across all of these systems and sectors. And I'd say it's one of the greatest achievements of the work that's been able to do that.
In terms of other users though, it's broader.

Obviously, parents and children are intended to be the primary beneficiaries of the Framework in terms of better services and supports when it comes to assessment, differentiating, and that process of sharing findings. But it can be used by organisations that work with children and families, organisations that support professionals, including big bodies,

and tertiary institutions, and training providers, in order to know what to train and how best to support their members, as well as government departments and agencies.

When it comes to developing policies and operational guidance that helps work in the ways that the Framework outlines. So when you look to the document, and hopefully you've downloaded it, but if not, please go to the best practice portal within the Autism CRC website. You'll see that the first main section is around foundations. And the reason for it coming up front is that in order to establish the parameters for the Framework, kind of the foundations, it's important to cover a number of key concepts.

This includes human rights, the notion that all children and their families have human rights, and we have to work in ways that support, uphold and promote and advance these rights. This Framework is all about children and families. Therefore, it has to honour and respect and value that incredible bond and important bond within children and families, and family-like people in some situations, that is at the heart of understanding and then best supporting children and their families.

As a foundation, the Framework emphasises that children have a voice, they should be asked for their views and opinions to the greatest extent possible, which would be thinking about assent and consent, where possible. And when we say voices, we're talking broadly in terms of communication, including speech, but of course, communication in all ways. As a foundation for good practice, we need to concentrate on social and emotional wellbeing. That provides a foundation for a healthy and happy start to life and childhood.

When it comes to functioning, we're talking about internationally recognised, understood, and agreed ways of thinking about functioning, which in this case refers to the ICF, which talks about understanding the child, their activities and their participation in activities, including the environmental and personal factors, which impact on participation in everyday life.

The Framework adopts a developmental perspective. That includes in terms of understanding children's development, but also acknowledging that when it comes to assessing and differentiating supports, we have to be thinking about where a child is up to, what's developmentally appropriate in terms of the approaches that we take, but also recognising that strengths and support needs are likely to change and fluctuate over time in childhood. There is so much happening for kids and families in this period, developmentally and contextually and so forth. And so the process has to be responsive to that.

As a foundation, the Framework identifies that we need to acknowledge and work to work against exclusion. This includes understanding the biases and discrimination that can occur in systems and services where assessment is occurring, and to work proactively and responsively in order to improve and make the system safe and accessible, culturally responsive and appropriate for all Australians.

The Framework says that alignment is important. It's not meant to duplicate or replicate other important pieces of work that are out there, but rather align with them. And that includes in terms of the conceptualising, functioning, and disability, and working in ways that principles align with other key documents in this space, including other Frameworks and Guidelines.

And finally, when it comes to language and terminology, as a foundation, the Framework says that we need to use language and terminology that's accurate, respectful, and appropriate. And that may differ with different individual preferences and communities, but at the heart of it is that core commitment to that respectful, appropriate approach.

The second section of the Framework is about partnering with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families, and communities. And as we were developing the Framework, the group talked about, is there a section? Is it across the whole Framework? And where we landed is that it's absolutely critical to bring together a strong emphasis in terms of centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families and communities at the heart of the Framework.

But then, in doing so, ensure that those learnings permeate every aspect of the Framework, and what it suggests and recommends and implies. So what does culturally informed, culturally responsive approach look like? Well, it includes, based on the yarning sessions, the development of genuine, meaningful relationships with children, families, and communities, support and advocacy at each stage of the process of understanding, identifying, and working to support children and families in terms of addressing needs and understanding strengths.

It includes addressing racism and transformational system change. So working towards a more safe, accessible, appropriate and responsive system. This brings us to the Framework overall. So it sets out this evidence-based culturally responsive approach, which includes the assessment, the differentiation, and the reporting of children's functional strengths and support needs. And I'll break that down a little bit.

So central to the Framework are a set of guiding principles. The Framework sets out that approaches should be child and family centred, culturally responsive, evidence-based, inclusive, equitable and coordinated. And in the document, you'll see explanations of each of these principles and how they permeate the whole Framework. When it comes to assessment, we're focusing on understanding the child, the family, the culture and context, through the lens of functioning, family, fitness, fun, friends, and future.

Those 'F words', as they're described, of childhood disability relate to the ICF. And you'll see those used in the Framework in order to provide a more accessible, plain language way of talking about what can be relatively abstract concepts. In the document, you'll see that there is the Framework and there's text to explain each of the elements.

But there's one of these figures for each of assessment, differentiation and reporting. And it summarises the approach, the critical information to consider, and the outcome. So for example, when it comes to assessment, it's all about understanding the child, the family, the culture, context, community, and so forth. And some of the critical information to consider, or *the* critical information includes the child and family's life situations.

So what happens in a day, in a week, in a fortnight, in a month? What are the places and spaces that they're in? The strengths, as well as the challenges, their aspirations, existing supports, and support needs where they exist. And so the outcome in this case should be a

clear and complete understanding, a holistic understanding of the child and the family. And in doing so, clearly identifying if there are support needs, and if so, what those are.

Differentiation is when, a child, family, when there are support needs, there's a question of, naturally of, which to focus on first, or in what combination, or at what point in time, and so forth. Differentiation is the word that's used to capture all of those decisions.
So it's really often quite challenging decisions that involves the weighing up for a whole lot of information in order to arrive at the best conclusion for each child and family.
So it involves working with the child and family to identify what is most important, taking into consideration the benefits, as well as potential risks of different options.

And if we look here at the approach, an important finding through that co-production process and looking at all the evidence, is that the approach should focus first on health and safety. That should be the priority when it comes to thinking about children's strengths and support needs. Because that health and that safety provides a foundation, then, for the activities and their participation in the whole range of childhood activities that are appropriate in their culture and their context and community.

It's not to say that these aren't interwoven. We know that increases in participation can have amazing benefits for health and wellbeing. But what it is saying is we do need to ensure that the health and safety is prioritised. Now, when it comes to the critical information to consider, as you can imagine, I'm sure, the child and family's preferences and priorities are essential to this. And the information collected during the assessment helps to understand these preferences and priorities and all of the relevant information.

What the Framework suggests is that it's really important to consider two key pieces of information. The first are the opportunities. What are the opportunities for the child and the family? If identified support needs are addressed, and what are the opportunities that might come from different types of support options? We're often weighing up one against the other. So we think about the opportunities that each can provide. But at the same time, we're thinking about the risks. So what are the risks for the child and family?

For example, the risk if a support that's currently in place is taken away. Or if a support need that's identified, if that need is not met. Or the risk if a support that is being provided could actually be better done using a different support. These are the questions and the challenges we're grappling with. And the Framework provides a way of systematically working through the different considerations. But it also provides a way of different people with different perspectives and understandings and insights of the child and the family.

That is, the people that they work with and they invite into this process, provides a way of us having a common language when thinking about the key question of differentiation. What are the child and family's preferences and priorities? What do we know? What are the opportunities and what are the risks? The outcome from this is a prioritised set of support needs. The final part that it covers, the Framework covers, is the written reporting. And now, we know that as part of any assessment process, understanding a child and a family and

strengths and support needs, communication happens all the way through from the very first moment in contact.

It's not like we get to the end and then we sort of share findings. Not at all. But we do acknowledge that the written reporting plays a key role. It's central to being able to share information in order to access supports and to coordinate and collaborate across systems and services and sectors. So the Framework focuses on the written reporting and it says that it should be done in a way that's individualised, respectful, and helpful to the child and family.

So it includes capturing the life situations and all of those aspects from the assessment. It summarises what was done in the assessment. How did it happen? What was learned? So a synthesis of that information and recommendations of what can happen next. The outcome should be child and family having a clear set of information to share, recommendations, and a plan to move forward.

If you recall the questions at the start of this section and also that Rachelle mentioned, there was a question around what tools are available, what competencies are required, and what safeguarding should occur. What we did in the Framework is we looked at those, and rather than report them separately for assessment, differentiation, and reporting, it became clear that there were common themes that cut across each of those areas. And so it's reported in that way. And it's clear that a range of tools may be used to support different aspects of the process. However, it's also equally clear that a lot of care needs to be taken to ensure that the tools that are selected are appropriate, they're culturally safe for the child and family. And they're relevant to the assessment and the purpose.

So, for example, when thinking about tools that might be used to understand a child's strengths and support needs, or a tool that might be helpful in terms of differentiating or prioritising those support needs, or a tool to guide what information is shared, we have to be thinking about, is it appropriate? Is it fit for purpose? Is it reliable, in that if it's used at different points in time and by different people, it's likely to yield the same result? Is it valid, in that it's actually assessing or doing what it suggests that it's doing?

We need to think about the benefits and the risks. Everything we do in professional practice has some potential benefits and some potential risks. So, for example, we might be thinking about using a tool that's designed to understand a child's development. Now, is that experience for the child and the information it produces what's the way that the benefits and the risks there?

In terms of the interpretation, it's important that we know that often particular knowledge and skills and understandings are required to properly interpret the tools that are used. So we need to use them and then to interpret them. So we need to ensure that where tools are being used, that they're being done so appropriately by people with the appropriate capabilities. But also, when findings are being shared, it's important that the reader on the other end, they have the knowledge and the skills capability to make sense of those findings. We need to think about the tool's contribution to understanding the child and the family in a holistic way, in a way that's respectful and helpful to them.

And we need to think about the coverage. In terms of this assessment, differentiating and reporting, where does this particular tool fit in? Sometimes we see tools that are used, that are meant to be around gathering information, that more assessment piece, used to differentiate and vice versa. We've got to be really clear about what the tools are and how they're being used and ensure that they're appropriate.

Rachelle mentioned the Supporting Information earlier. So that's a separate document that you'll find on the Autism CRC website, alongside the Framework. You can think about the Framework as saying what should be done, and the Supporting Information as being the kind of "why" and "on what basis". So for any of the information we're covering here today, please do refer to the Supporting Information, which explains the "why" and kind of "on what basis", what the evidence is for what's presented in the Framework.

When it comes to professional competency and capability, it's really critical. Key finding was that people involved in assessing children's functional strengths and support needs, they need to have competencies and core capabilities that match their role and their responsibilities. And that's the key thing. The child and family centred approach that's been adopted places the child at the centre when determining what knowledge and skills professionals require to work with them in ways that are safe and effective.

So if you look to figure seven on this slide, right at the top, we have the requirements. "As a child, I need professionals who..." and there are three key elements. They understand me and my family and my life. They can help me and my family work out where I am now and where I want or need to be. And they know how to help me and my family get there. The Framework doesn't talk about a particular list of professionals. It's inclusive in that it's clear that a whole range of people in diverse professions and life situations, work contexts, can contribute to helping to understand the child and family's functional strengths and support needs.

But what it does say is where people are involved in the assessment, they need the foundations that come with being a part of the profession, where there's a scope of practice, ethical guidance, and legal requirements. And from that foundation, you then have core knowledge and skills. For example, knowledge about children's rights and their development, cultural and social determinants of health, and the services and support options that are available. And when it comes to skills, it's things like working in a child and family centred way, engaging in evidence-based practice, engaging inclusive and culturally responsive ways of working and working in equitable and coordinated manner.

But what also became very clear through the community consultation, the evidence gathering and co-production, is that it's not enough to just have the core skills, the core knowledge and the foundations, they have to be applied. We talk about capabilities as being the application of the knowledge, the skills and those foundations, in ways that are helpful and appropriate for children and families in practice.

So in the middle section of the competency Framework there, you'll see those described includes working with children and families in ways to formulate an appropriate and efficient and agreed plan for accurate assessment. Working to understand the child and family, moving

across to the middle, the responsible selection, administration and interpretation and reporting of different assessment tools, and drawing on all relevant bodies of knowledge and sources of information.

And to the right, we talk about identifying and differentiating support needs and being able to work with and walk with children and families during that process. And having the capability to formulate a plan, recommendations, and help children and families navigate support options with knowledge of services and systems. Now, it's clear within this that there'll be different people with different levels of capability.

And as part of implementing the Framework, we're thinking about the developmental, the professional development pathway, I should say, that can cater for different people at different levels of that capability. Coming back to the first point, though, it's critical that the capability matches the responsibility. And the final section and question that the Framework addresses is around safeguarding. And safeguarding refers to the policies and procedures and practices that mitigate and manage risks to ensure no child or family member is harmed in the work that we do.

And the Framework outlines a cycle, which is also reflected in other organisations that says, well, the starting point is about learning. It's about understanding the potential risks and the policies and the practices, the things that are in place when it comes to safeguarding. It includes identifying potential issues and risks that children and families may face in the organisation and the work that we do.

Preventing those risks wherever we possibly can, in terms of thinking about who is involved and also the policies and practices and ways of working that are in place to protect children and families. When an issue occurs, it's about reporting and ensuring that there are clear and consistent, appropriate processes for that. And that people who are responsible for those processes have this knowledge and the skills, the experience, the training to do so. Because that ties immediately into the response. It's being able to respond in ways that are appropriate, that protect the child and the family and others who may be identifying and reporting that risk as part of that process. Responding in a way that's appropriate and learning and ensuring that it does not happen again.

So we'll go to the final section now. What does the Framework mean for you? The way that we have approached this is to think about three groups of people who, in particular, who might be joining today. But please know that we know that exactly what it means for you as an individual person may be slightly varied. In terms of the- we're often thinking about, like, what's the mechanism? Why will something work? What do we think will happen? And in this case, the notion is that the Framework supports improvements in professional practice and the policy that supports that professional practice.

And in doing so improves children's health, activities, their participation and wellbeing. So, but how does it do this? Well, within the document, you'll see six different examples of how the Framework can support improvements in practices, including the approach, the experiences for children and families, and the outcomes through the phase of implementation. Rachelle

mentioned earlier, the Framework is designed to sit in the middle of a range of initiatives to improve assessment, differentiation, and reporting of children's functional strengths and support needs.

And on the right-hand side there, those are listed. But we'll break it down a little bit more and give some examples. So, for parents and caregivers, a key opportunity that comes with the Framework is to empower children and families to make decisions that are in their best interests. To have that agency, that control, as part of any process that considers the child's strengths and support needs.

So that includes things like thinking about, helping you to think about, organise, and make decisions about what information do you want to share with professionals? The Framework will help you get a sense of what professionals will be thinking about, but it empowers you to make that decision in terms of what you share. It helps you make decisions when it comes to prioritising supports. The Framework sets out the key information to consider.

So when you're in conversations with the people who are working to support you or you're seeking support from, or people who are seeking to understand your child's strengths and support needs, having that common language around your preferences and priorities. The information you know, the information you know about your child, your family, your situation, cultural context, etc. But also, the opportunities for your child and the risks that come with different supports and support options. That can level the playing field and give a common language for having those conversations. It can help you, I believe, to know what kind of best practice looks like, including what to expect from people you and your child are working with, and be empowered to make decisions in the best interests of your child and family.

For professionals, the Framework provides a common approach and language across different disciplines and systems and sectors. It can guide practice, including the selection and use of tools, as well as professional development. And again, I'd really encourage you to look at the Framework, but also the Supporting Information in that regard. When implemented as intended, this approach can help deconstruct exclusion through the emphasis of inclusive, culturally responsive ways of working. And it can provide a common focus in developing new and complementary tools and resources.

So it can support the improvements in professional practice, deconstruct exclusion, and develop new tools and resources, inform that development. There are two things that we have underway at the moment, again, supported by Autism CRC. The first is the development of the Strengths and Support Needs Tool. This is a consistent way to gather information about children's strengths and support needs from a range of relevant people based on the Framework.

And the second part, which I mentioned before, is a Professional Pathway with Foundational and Lead Practitioner training modules in the first instance. So it's all about capacity building resources for professionals, lead practitioners to implement the Framework in practice. And the final part is around policy makers. The final group we'll consider just as a broad group. I'd suggest that the Framework offers an unparalleled opportunity with community and

professional groups, interests, and efforts all aligned. There's agreement for the first time across systems and sectors around what good assessment, differentiation in that process of reporting looks like.

In doing so, it can provide a focal point, sort of a single source of truth when it comes to looking to harmonise systems. And allows for a vertically integrated approach from children and parents to practice and policy. And what do I mean by that? It's about getting back to basics there. When it comes to the assessment and understanding the child and the family. What are their life situations, strengths, challenges, existing supports and support needs, their preferences and priorities. And when it comes to differentiation. What are their preferences and priorities and aspirations? What do we know from the assessment, and what are the opportunities and the risks? When it comes to reporting, how can we ensure? Well, we know how to ensure it's a safe, helpful and appropriate, respectful process. What I'm suggesting here is that the Framework sets out these fundamental characteristics. And they can be reflected in each step.

From the conversation with children and parents, through to the practice of the professional supporting them, to the policy that in turn supports those professionals. But it must be implemented responsibly. There are probably two key things here. One is that it's important that the Framework is taken as a whole. It's important not to just pick and choose different parts of it to support different decisions. Good decisions will be made when all of the Framework is considered in a holistic way.

And the second part of it is to ensure that when we set out best practice, that where current practice might fall short of that, due to a whole range of factors. For example, within the co-production process, colleagues talked about the challenges in rural and remote areas in terms of resources and so forth. Where current practice might fall short in certain areas. But the approach then is to support it. To properly resource and support practice to get to that standard. Not the other way around.

So, to summarise. The Framework addresses a number of important issues. Front and centre are the issues of quality and consistency when it comes to assessments for children and families. It sets out an evidence-based, culturally responsive approach. And it was developed through a rigorous process. It can now sit in the middle of a range of activities to harmonise services, systems and sectors. And implementation is underway to inform policy and practice. Including through the development of the new tool and professional development pathway. And these are two of what we expect will be a whole wide range of initiatives to support best practice. Alright.

Thank you very much for allowing me the opportunity to take us through that information. What I'll do is I'll invite Rachelle, would you mind coming back online as well? As we have some questions from the audience that we'll now do our best to get through. I'll just be referring over to my other screen as I pick these up. Okay, so a couple of questions have come through around the Framework and the NDIS. "How do you see this assessment Framework will fit with regards to access to NDIS and recent changes? Are you involved in the current assessment work being done by the NDIS?

The second question is, could the Framework be used to determine whether children would benefit from functional supports or the NDIS? For example, an assessment tool that determines how much, what kind of supports the child needs." And there are other questions in this same space. As we mentioned, the Framework is intended to sit in the middle of a number of different important issues. It provides that North Star or that common focal point of that single source of truth. When it comes to reforms within the NDIS and thinking about assessment and access and so forth, the Framework can absolutely have an important role in that.

Because it tells us what good practice should look like, what's important to consider. And it addresses things like the use of tools and what's appropriate and what's not appropriate, as well as the competencies and capabilities that are required. So it's absolutely a foundation for that. The Framework isn't intended, though, to be used as an assessment tool as such. It's to inform the ways of working, including the use of tools.

An important, critical feature of the Framework is, you'll notice when you read it and when we talk about it, we're not talking about diagnoses. A diagnosis can be really helpful in terms of understanding or explaining why a child might be presenting the way they are in terms of their strengths and support needs. But diagnoses rarely tell us much about the exact strengths and support needs of that child.

So the Framework is all about function in daily life, day-to-day activities. And I think it's fair to say, in fact, we're seeing this conversation broadly in the community. If we can focus on functioning, we're in a better position to understand and then, where children have support needs, to address those. In terms of language, Rachelle, I might throw to you if it's okay, what would you recommend... Sorry. Would you recommend clinicians use the language in the guide within assessment reports to make it more accessible to the reader?

RACHELLE:

I think the first answer comes to mind is yes. I guess that was part of the intention of the Framework, is it's providing that common language with an aim to facilitate shared understanding and coordination between professionals and with children and families as well. So we know that if we're using the same terms and we have the same understanding about something and using that language can only help to facilitate better outcomes and communication more broadly.

David, is there anything you wanted to add?

DAVID:

Yeah, no. Thanks, Rachelle. We've got another question here around safeguarding. "How are families, supporters, and most importantly, children protected from harm from trusted professionals that provide expert advice that results in poor long-term outcomes for children? For example, lifelong mental illness and shorter lifespans."

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I think the Framework plays a role in this, as does, you know, a whole range of systems, settings and so forth. I'll be more explicit. So what the Framework does is it sets out a way of working and I guess a benchmark, a standard, an expectation of what assessment should look like. And it deals directly with safeguarding, but not just in terms of safeguarding, but not just saying what shouldn't happen and what needs to happen in that space, but outlining the process to help ensure that the process is appropriate, it's safe, it's respectful, and helpful.

The capability Framework is essential here. And I think a key part of that is that differentiation or differentiating between having foundational knowledge and skills, core knowledge, skills and so forth. And then being able to actually apply them in ways that are safe, effective, desirable to children and families. And that's through capabilities. So I think it does play an important role. Where I was saying it's part of one of many things, that also includes within professional bodies, having strong ethical standards, professional training, development, continuing professional development programs, proper scope of practice, having that clearly identified, and all of the regulation that can wrap around professionals.

Second part of that, I'd say, is that the strength of the Framework is that it's included a lot of community consultation through the survey, yarning, and also the co-production process. And I've seen in this project and other projects, other pieces of work in recent times, that the community consultation is the single best way to hear the concerns, the experiences, and the insights from community that can inform improvements in practice. So when it comes to safeguarding, ensuring that we're engaging in approaches that are listening to community concerns and acting on those is really important. Rachelle, would you like to offer any further or different thoughts?

RACHELLE:

No, I think you've covered everything that I was thinking of, David, thank you.

DAVID:

Cheers. Okay, the question around education. "How do you envisage teachers using the Framework with children in their educational care?

RACHELLE:

As they are not directly involved in assessing children, is this more about how they can engage with families around assessment and how they devise supports and partnerships with families and other support professionals involved with the child?"

DAVID:

Yeah. Rachelle, would you like to offer some thoughts?

RACHELLE:

I'm happy to, sure. I think my first thought was that it's a bit of both, actually, in terms of providing that guidance in terms of assessment that happens within the education context. But also providing, again, coming back to that language and terminology, that shared way of understanding the assessment process, communicating with families, working together with other people who support the child and the family within the school context.

And which then ultimately makes the support and the process stronger with people working together. That were my thoughts, David.

DAVID:

Yeah, thank you. When I read the question, one of the things my mind goes to is, you know, that critical kind of juncture of the transition to school, and working in a number of different sort of transition programs and seeing others roll out in the community over time. And one of the things that strikes me is central to every one of those programs seems to be the sharing of information. And the clearer the communication between childcare, early childhood education staff and the teachers, school principal, vice principal, deputy teachers in the prep or kindergarten classes, the better that communication is, the easier the transition process is. But then I see different types of information shared in different places in different programs. And it's what the Framework would do.

A very practical example is it would say, well, when it comes to sharing information or thinking about what the child's strengths and needs are, these are some of the key pieces of information to consider, the critical information. But it also can potentially, I think, empower and support teachers in that by having that common language.

Yes, the childcare, early childhood educator, can share that information and of course, parents and caregivers and family, family-like people.

By having the common language then opens up the sharing of similar information where it's appropriate, always with consent and only where it's appropriate, but sharing from different perspectives from different other people involved in supporting that child, the medical, nursing, allied health professionals, etc. So communication, common language, common concepts, which then opens up channels of communication, allows conversations around these really critical pieces of information, such as what are the opportunities for the child and what are the risks?

"In terms of the rollout of the tool and the training, just looking at the time, will the strengths and support needs tool be tailored for different contexts, such as school education and early childhood care? And when can we expect this tool and the professional training to be rolled out?" Rachelle?

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RACHELLE:

So I'll go to the second question first. The project is underway and we anticipate, I guess, release sometime in 2026, Once the project is finished, and there's a few other things that kind of need to happen in the interim and so in terms of... sorry, can you repeat that first part of the question, David?

DAVID:

Yeah. "Will the strengths and support needs tool be tailored for different content?"

RACHELLE:

Mm-hmm. So the tool itself will be... I think it's consistent. What's important, important element of the tool, I think part of the most important element, is the guidance in how to use the tool. And it will be... the administration will allow for- and the tool itself and how it's created. We're aiming to... then it allows for flexibility across different contexts and across different groups in the community, in terms of embedding that culturally responsive, inclusive, equitable principles into the tool itself. So it's the way that the tool will be used that is very flexible, that we're aiming to be very flexible and that can be used in that way.

DAVID:

Yeah. Thanks, Rachelle. We're right on the hour. And so I'd like to bring the webinar to a close, but a couple of quick things. One, thank you. Thank you for making the time for engaging with the Framework. And, I hope, for using it in practice. If you haven't already, please consider registering with Autism CRC for updates about the Framework and other activities that are happening.

I hope it's been informative and encouraged you to keep learning more about the National Framework and we're really keen to hear feedback. So a survey will follow, I understand. There was a final question which said, what would you do differently if you were to do it all again? One thing to note is Autism CRC has been working in this space for quite a number of years now in terms of developing guidelines and resources and support.

And I've been privileged to be involved in a number of those processes. We are absolutely learning every time we go and evolving in our approaches. The one thing I'd say is that we just can't have enough co-production in these processes. I think we've gone a long way further than any other process to date, but there's always room for more. When children and families, community, come together, that's what's really powerful. And particularly more and more work to bring children into that community consultation process. So thank you very much again for coming together today. I hope it's been helpful and look forward to coming together again soon. Thank you, everyone.