




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR MOUNT OMMANEY

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PRIVATE MEMBER'S STATEMENT

Early Childhood Development Program

 **Mrs SMITH** (Mount Ommaney—LNP) (2.57 pm): I rise to highlight to the House how crucial the Early Childhood Development Program is. I will share excerpts of Bella's story, provided to me by her mother, Karen, to share her experience at Mount Ommaney Special School ECDP. She states—

Our experience at daycare was not always a happy one. There were some educators there who were amazing, and I will always be grateful to the directors who had to gently push me into getting a diagnosis for Bella ... But in her last year there, despite having funds allocated to provide a support person ... More often than not I would arrive at pickup time to find Bella sitting alone outside eating mud ... She was picked on by the other kids, and none of the parents were interested in talking to me as the parent of the 'naughty, weird kid'. I spent her 'graduation ceremony' fighting back tears as she was so obviously different to the other children and nobody did anything to try to include her.

When Bella was diagnosed with ASD at the age of 4, we were referred to the local ECDP—
at Mount Ommaney—

which was attached to the local special school. This was a free service and she was to attend for 2 mornings a week. There was a clear focus on preparation for school, as well as lots of support with her severe speech delay and high sensory needs. We had one year before she started school and she needed to be able to do basic, obvious things like keep her shoes on in the classroom, not hold her comfort toys in her hands every minute, not eat all the non-food items she could get her hands on ... and actually be able to sit still on a chair for more than 10 seconds. She needed to know how to interact with other children, that her name was Bella, be able to actually write her name—all things that most children take for granted by the time they reach school age.

Now Bella did also attend speech and occupational therapy, but this was in a one on one setting with her therapist. At Ecdp she was in a classroom with other children, and a teacher and an aide who gave her direction. She had to put her bag and lunchbox away when she arrived, and pack them up again at the end of the day. She had work time, playtime and food time—she learned to go by their schedule and rules and not her own.

This was an eye opener for us ... we started to see that she could be independent. She could pack and carry her own bag, she could put her own shoes on. She could follow instructions and complete tasks ... When she was very small we just thought she was a very difficult child. When we got her diagnosis we thought she simply couldn't and wouldn't be able to do any of these things, because she was autistic. The Ecdp taught us that there was so many more to her than the autism. That the diagnosis did not mean that she couldn't learn and grow just like any other child.

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Now let's consider what her transition to school would have been like without that foundation year at the ECDP. Without all the support and knowledge that her teacher shared with the school. It hasn't always been an easy transition but she has come a very long way from the little girl who couldn't talk, who would sit in the corner of the playground eating sand, who couldn't sit at a desk or hold a pen. And we owe all of that to the time she spent at the ECDP. If they get closed down, the Department of Education is failing all those children like Bella who deserve a fair start to their education.

I am pleased to say that Bella is thriving now at Jindalee State School.