

6. Participants from birth to before starting school: specialist services

6.1 Key findings

Box 6.1: Key findings for participants from birth to before starting school: specialist services

- Use of specialist services is widespread amongst NDIS participants, and has increased significantly between baseline (72%) and review (90%). Increases are observed for both existing participants (those receiving services from State/Territory or Commonwealth systems before entering the NDIS) and new participants, but more so for new participants, suggesting that much of the increase is attributable to participants and their families receiving funding towards these specialist services for the first time.
- The majority of SF respondents feel that the specialist services they are using contribute positively to their child's learning and development, and assist them to support their child. The percentages who feel this way have also increased between baseline and review.
- Participants with a developmental delay, those living in South Australia, and those living in a high unemployment Local Government Area, are less likely to use specialist services.
- Early intervention participants are more likely to use specialist services, suggesting that that these services are viewed as an effective early intervention support for children with a disability or developmental delay. Investigation of the relationship between early intervention exits and use of specialist services may help quantify the effectiveness of these services in improving outcomes to a point where children no longer need individualised support from the Scheme.

6.2 Background and overall results

Specialist services such as speech pathology, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, psychology, and others can help children with a disability or a developmental delay to achieve better longer-term outcomes when delivered through an early intervention approach. Research has shown providing children and families with timely, comprehensive and well-integrated early intervention supports in early childhood can improve the child's inclusion and participation in their environment, and may reduce the cost and impact of the child's disability later in life²⁷.

In the Daily Living domain of the SF questionnaire, the parents and carers of participants aged 0 to before starting school are asked to respond to the statement 'My child uses specialist services (e.g. speech pathology, occupational therapy) that assist their learning and development'. The overall change in the reported usage of specialist services by children aged 0 to starting school was a significant²⁸ increase from **72%** at baseline to **90%** at review. This increase was largely driven by participants who were not in an existing State/Territory or Commonwealth disability program prior to entering the NDIS, as shown in Figure 6.1.

Figure 6.1 Use of specialist services, by Scheme access entry type

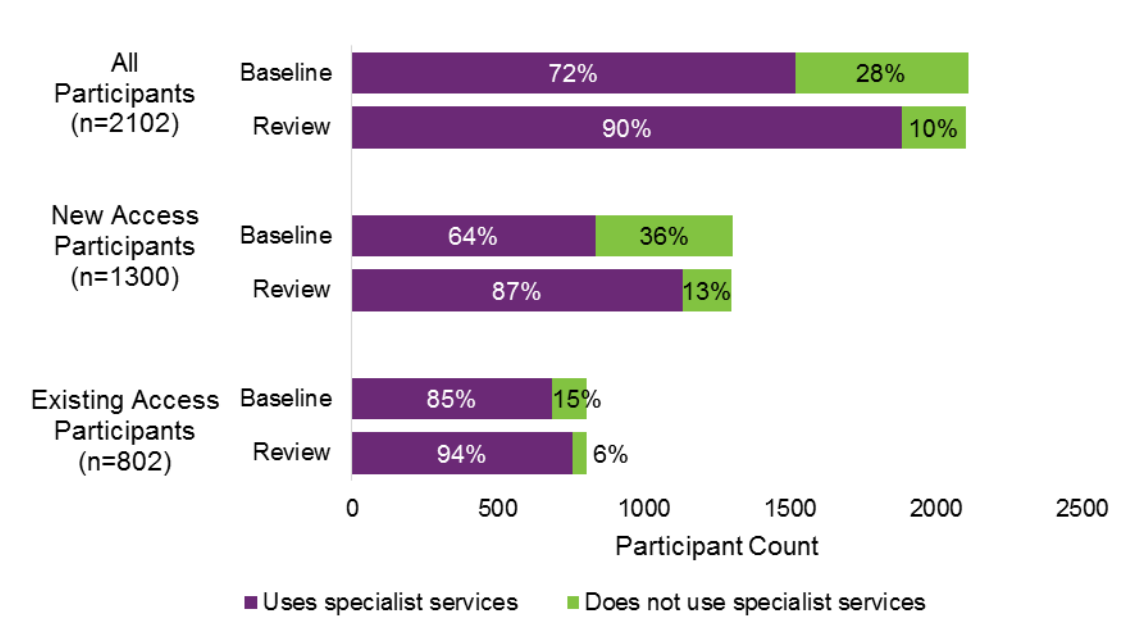


Figure 6.1 illustrates that, while the use of specialist services is increasing between baseline and review for all participants, there is a considerably higher proportion of new access participants who were not using specialist services at baseline (36%) compared to existing access participants (15%). The high overall change in specialist service usage thus likely reflects the large number of new access participants who are using specialist services for the

²⁷ NDIS Early Childhood Early Intervention Approach. 2016. <https://www.ndis.gov.au/about-us/information-publications-and-reports.html>

²⁸ McNemar's test, $p < 0.0001$.

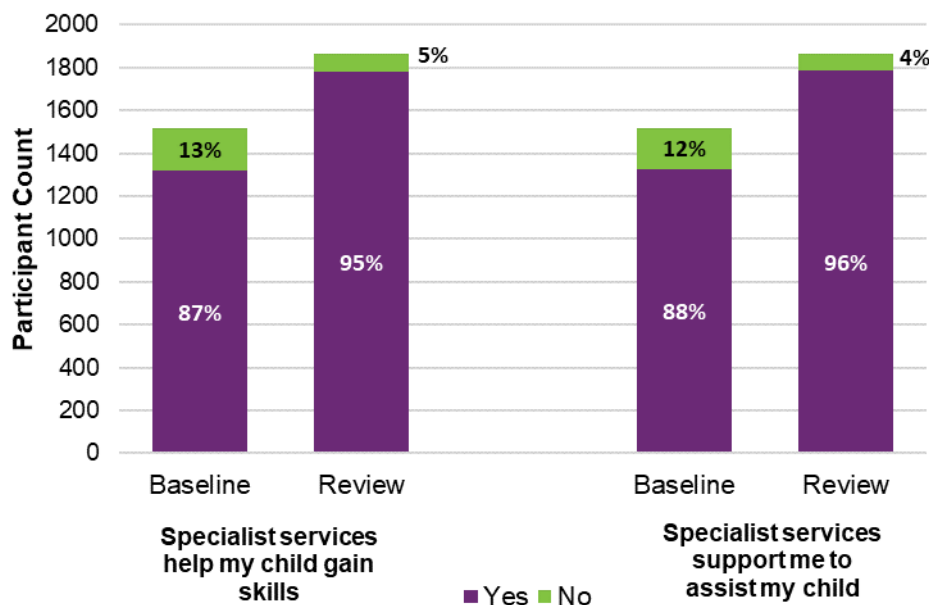
first time after entering the Scheme, due to either the age of the child or because this is the first time they have received funding to access these services.

For the parents/carers who report that their children are using specialist services, there are two other questions included in the SF questionnaire related to the effectiveness of these services. They are:

1. 'These services help my child gain the skills she/he needs to participate in everyday life (e.g. go to preschool)'
2. 'These services support me to assist my child'

The response to these questions for parents/carers who reported that their child is using specialist services at either baseline or review is given in Figure 6.2 below.

Figure 6.2 Effectiveness of specialist services for participants who are using specialist services at baseline or review



As the number of child participants using specialist services increases, there is also a corresponding increase in the parents and carers who report that these services are helping their children to gain skills and/or support the parent/carer to assist their child.

The detailed transition rates between usage of specialist services at baseline and review are given in Table 6.1 below. Where the parent or carer reports that their child uses specialist services, this has been further broken down into those who report that the services help (either with the child's skill development or with assistance to support child), and those who report that the services do not help.

Table 6.1 Transition rates for usage of specialist services*

Baseline Specialist Services	Review Specialist Services		
	Yes, and it helps** (n=1815)	Yes, and it does not help (n=70)	Does not use specialist services (n=217)
Yes, and it helps** (n=1367)	99% (n=1351)	0% (n=1)	1% (n=15)
Yes, and it does not help (n=145)	65% (n=94)	34%²⁹ (n=49)	1% (n=2)
Does not use specialist services (n=590)	63% (n=370)	3% (n=20)	34% (n=200)

* Excludes participants where specialist service usage is unknown at baseline or review

** Parent/carer reports that services help their child to gain skills to participate in everyday life OR the services support them to assist their child

For participants who were already accessing specialist services at baseline, there is very little change in usage at review, regardless of the reported effectiveness of these services. There is also a considerable increase in use of specialist services at review by the participants who did not use them at baseline.

For children aged 0 to before starting school who enter the Scheme to access early intervention supports, there is an expectation that many will receive these supports and then exit the NDIS³⁰. Analysing Scheme exits along with the reported outcomes for these participants will help the NDIS to understand the effectiveness of early intervention supports in helping children to improve their long term outcomes and transition to support in a mainstream or community setting.

6.3 Key drivers of specialist service usage

The key drivers of whether participants aged 0 to before starting school access specialist services have been analysed using a multiple logistic regression analysis approach. The regression analysis models a binary response (dependent) variable of one if the parent or carer responds at review that their child uses specialist services and zero otherwise. A stepwise regression approach is used to determine the statistically significant predictors from a number of different variables expected to influence the desire and/or ability of a parent or carer to access specialist services for their child.

²⁹ Of particular concern are these 49 parents/carers who reported at both baseline and review that specialist services do not help them or their child. These reported outcomes should be linked into the plan review process, prompting the planner to have a discussion with the parent/carer on the effectiveness of the services being purchased, and whether they are yielding an outcome for the child

³⁰ NDIS Operational Guidelines – Early Intervention Requirements. 2018.

<https://www.ndis.gov.au/operational-guideline/access/early-intervention-requirements.html>

Table 6.2 outlines the variables that were found to have a significant relationship to usage of specialist services at review, based on the multiple logistic regression analysis. The direction of the relationship is also given.

Table 6.2 Key drivers of usage of specialist services at review

Variable	Relationship
Parent/carer reported that participant used specialist services at baseline plan	↑
Scheme access reason is 'benefit from early intervention'	↑
Participant has a developmental delay at their baseline plan	↓
Average unemployment rate in participant's local government area over plan period	↓ with increasing unemployment rate
Participant lives in South Australia	↓

Participants who are already using specialist services at baseline or who entered the Scheme under early intervention requirements³¹ are found to be more likely to use specialist services at review. Children aged under 6 years may access the Scheme through early intervention if they have a disability or developmental delay which results in the need for early, individualised supports that can reduce the impact of their disability in the long term. It is expected that many of the children who meet the early intervention access criteria will receive early intervention supports and then exit the NDIS. The higher usage of specialist services by this group may suggest that specialist services are viewed as an effective early intervention support for children with a disability or developmental delay.

Children who have a primary disability of developmental delay when they enter the Scheme generally do not have a diagnosis of a specific disability, such as autism or intellectual disability, but have a substantial reduction in functional capacity in one or more areas of life activity. While many of these participants will enter the Scheme under early intervention requirements, which are associated with higher usage of specialist services, they are found to have lower rates of specialist service usage than participants who have a specified disability regardless of Scheme access type. The potential reasons for this outcome could be that parents/carers are less certain of the appropriate specialised services for children who do not have a diagnosed disability, or that they find other supports more effective.

The impact of the unemployment rate on specialised service usage likely reflects accessibility issues for parents and carers. Those who are located in areas with high

³¹ Note that this cohort entered the Scheme in the early stages of the rollout of the Early Childhood Early Intervention (ECEI) gateway. As a result, only a small number of these participants would have entered through the gateway, and data is not readily available to identify the ECEI participants in this cohort.

unemployment rates, such as regional or rural communities³², may have fewer specialist services available in the local area. Alternatively, participants who live in an area with high unemployment rates may come from a lower socioeconomic background and their parents/carers could face additional hurdles accessing specialised support, such as out of pocket costs, lower education levels, housing instability etc. Similarly, the lower rates of specialised service usage in South Australia could represent access issues in this state, but this should be continued to be monitored over time as the Scheme is fully rolled out to children in all States and Territories.

The impact of specialist service usage on key participant outcomes was also investigated using multiple logistic regression analysis. However, given the large proportion of participants engaging in specialist services at review and the single year timeframe over which outcomes are measured, the results were not conclusive. The impact of specialist services on participant outcomes will continue to be monitored as more data is collected.

³² The Accessibility and Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) corresponding to participants local government area was allowed for separately in the regression analysis, but was not found to be significant