

Disappointment and discrimination

CYDA's surveys of the learning experiences of children and young people with disability in 2022 and 2023

*"We have a broken child that we are trying to piece back together..... we do not have a roadmap, there is no accountability and it feels like we have just been left on our own to work all of this out and somehow get our boy back." **



Children and Young People
with Disability Australia

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Detailed reports

1. Dickinson, H., Smith, C., Yates, S., Faulkner, A. (2022) *Taking the first step in an inclusive life – experiences of Australian early childhood education and care*. Report prepared for Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), Melbourne.
2. Smith, C., Dickinson, H., Faulkner, A. (2023) *“I think the teachers need more help” Voices of experience from students with disability in Australia*. CYDA Youth Education Survey 2022. Report prepared for Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), Melbourne.
3. Dickinson, H., Smith, C., Yates, S., Faulkner, A. (2023) *How deep does it go? Australian students with disability and their experience of entrenched inequity in education*. CYDA School Education Survey 2022, Report prepared for Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), Melbourne.

Acknowledgements:

Children and Young People with Disability Australia would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which this report has been written, reviewed and produced, whose cultures and customs have nurtured and continue to nurture this land since the Dreamtime. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and future. This is, was, and always will be Aboriginal land.

* Quote on cover page from family of male student from Victoria aged between 7-9 years old previously enrolled in a segregated setting and now attending mainstream setting in a regular class



Our surveys

Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) is the national representative organisation for children and young people with disability aged 0 to 25 years. CYDA has an extensive national membership of more than 5,000 young people with disability, families and caregivers of children with disability, and advocacy and community organisations.

CYDA conducted three surveys during 2022 and 2023:

1. Early Childhood Education & Care Survey 2022 – for families and caregivers of children in early childhood education and care settings
2. Youth Education Survey 2022-23 - for students with disability who are at school or who have recently left or finished school.
3. Education Survey 2022 - for families and caregivers of children and young people in school

CYDA partnered with researchers from the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne and Public Service Research Group, UNSW Canberra to analyse the data and prepare each of the three reports.

These surveys and resulting reports are part of CYDA's ongoing commitment to understanding the experience of children and young people with disability in Australia.



Taken together they give a comprehensive view into the experiences and challenges faced by children and young people with disability and their families as they begin their lifelong learning journey. The title of this document '*Disappointment and discrimination*', captures the need for urgent change. We have included the tools available for ensuring improved outcomes for children and young people with disability.



Disappointment and discrimination

Below we have included the headlines from all three surveys as reported by children, young people and their families.

Early childhood education and care settings

The early years of a child's development can impact their entire lives. While more than 80% of children and 78% of family or caregivers were made to feel welcome:

- 29% reported exclusion from excursions, events or activities
- 28% reported bullying from other children or staff
- One in five reported that their child had been refused enrolment
- Nearly a quarter said their child had been limited in the number of hours they were allowed to attend

School education settings

Students don't feel supported to learn and engage in activities at school.

- Only half (54%) reported feeling welcome and included
- 70% of students reported being excluded from events or activities at school
- 65% of students reported experiencing bullying and 13% preferred not to answer
- Only 27% reported feeling supported to learn at school
- Only 35% of families felt teachers and support staff have adequate training and knowledge to support the student

"What is clear from the data presented here is that students with disability face some significant exclusion in schools. This comes in the form of excursions and other events offered as rewards, but also from more common activities within schools..."

Dr Smith 2023 "I think the teachers need more help" Voices of experience from students with disability in Australia. CYDA Youth Education Survey Report



Need for urgent change

CYDA calls on National Cabinet to lead ministers for education, disability, early childhood and Indigenous children, to deliver and invest in the lifelong development, learning and education of children with disability.

Recommendation 1: Invest in national and state and territory level mechanisms that collect, prioritise and action the voices and views of children and young people with disability

- Invest in national data collection across education that informs targets and outcomes for a range of intersecting cohorts including correlation of enrolment, attendance and engagement information with input from children and young people to provide a clearer view of experiences in education settings.
- Improve the percentage of students with disability completing school level surveys and identify specific feedback mechanisms for each key transition and development stage

Recommendation 2: Drive and fund transformational change to ensure inclusive education across all life stages

- Develop a National Inclusive Education Plan aligned to Australia's Disability Strategy with legislation to support inclusive education from early childhood education through to tertiary level education
- Ensure the [National School Reform Agreement](#) (NSRA) and Commonwealth funding model supports and incentivises inclusive education, by holding states and territories accountable to deliver the full inclusion of all students in mainstream school settings
- Implement an independent oversight body to ensure that all levels of education providers are meeting their statutory and legal obligations and complaints can be independently investigated, monitored and resolved
- Co-design and implement a nationally consistent post school transition supports framework which focuses on career progression from school and provides earlier employment support to young people

Recommendation 3: Invest in training and support for educators, teachers and related professional and specialist staff working with and supporting inclusive education across all life stages

- Strengthen certificate and bachelor qualifications (across all levels of the education workforce) by including disability education in the curriculum, to ensure practical and theoretical knowledge and skills for supporting children with disability
- Incentivise public and private providers and funders to provide additional training and resources for all levels of the workforce so that educators are better able to identify and support children with developmental differences, and create environments that will set up children and their families to thrive



Tools for change

CYDA calls on all Australian governments – federal, state, territory and local - to utilise existing frameworks and legislation to improve the experience and outcomes of development, learning and education for children with disability. Below are the instruments available and the investment needed.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

- Underpin all revised or new education related policy frameworks or programs by the CRPD and documented as such

Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–31

- Invest in the early childhood Targeted Action Plan and develop Targeted Action Plans for lifelong learning to ensure all children and young people with disability are prioritised

The next National School Reform Agreement

- Ensure quality and public reporting on existing and new measures for students with disability and include measures to build accountability to existing standards and regulations

Disability Royal Commission

- Allocate additional funding to allow children and young people and their advocacy representatives to meaningfully respond to the recommendations outlined in the final report

National Disability Insurance Scheme - Independent NDIS Review

- Prioritise children and young people for co-designed NDIS reform to prevent another generation of inadequate support in their learning and development
- Ensure NDIS funding for co-design includes the engagement of children and young people on supports and services and their education experience

Australian Government's Early Years Strategy

- Invest in, and work with, Aboriginal community-controlled services to ensure culturally appropriate early education and care settings
- Integrate health and disability support services, so that children have low barriers to receive the support they need in familiar settings
- Provide additional training and resources to early childhood educators and early learning centres

Disability Services Act 1986 review

- Co-design any revisions to the Act with children and young people to set the vision and direction for the rights of people with disability for years to come



Case study – young person “Lee”

Male student from Queensland aged between 10-12 years old

I hated school. It was horrible and scary and I hated it from year 4 but it was always hard for me.

Now that I'm at home my mum looks after all my learning. She had to quit her job and I feel guilty about that.

I've never heard of the Disability Standards for Education.

Experiences at school: 1 star means 'not great' and 5 stars means 'excellent'

All rated 1 star:

- Support to learn and experience activities at school
- Feeling welcome and included
- Training and knowledge of teachers and support staff to support me in a way that suits my needs and preferences

The expectations were too high for me academically and socially.... Which is putting it nicely.

If you could make schools more inclusive for students with disability, what would you do? Where would you start?

A whole new system honestly. Schools as they are just don't work for me.... As I have a vision impairment, autism, anxiety and adhd

This information comes direct from a respondent to the Youth Education Survey and names have been changed.



Case study – young person “Chris”

Male student from Victoria aged between 16-18 years old attending segregated setting

I'm segregated from all my peers. I've never been on a school camp or any excursions with my peers.

I've never heard of the Disability Standards for Education.

Experiences at school: 1 star means 'not great' and 5 stars means 'excellent'

All rated 1 star:

- Support to learn and experience activities at school
- Feeling welcome and included
- Teachers and support staff have high expectations of me and my learning
- Training and knowledge of teachers and support staff to support me in a way that suits my needs and preferences
- Opportunities to get involved and do that same things as all other students

If you could make schools more inclusive for students with disability, what would you do? Where would you start?

Close all special schools. I went to a special school before going into mainstream. The special school put me in restraints every day..

This information comes direct from a respondent to the Youth Education Survey and names have been changed.



Case study – family of primary school student

Female student from New South Wales aged between 7-9 years old attending mainstream setting in a regular class

My daughter has ADHD and is gifted, the "Special Ed" teacher told me that the reason she is distracted was that she was not capable of completing work at her year level. This is despite the fact that we had an independent assessment and IQ test showing that my daughter was testing up to seven years above grade in some subjects. Her class teacher told me that the reason my daughter was distracted in class was because of poor parenting. She also told me that no teacher in her right mind would make a reasonable adjustment for her ADHD/dysgraphia. Requests for acceleration as recommended by external independent assessment were denied on the basis of ADHD/dysgraphia. There seemed to be no awareness of current research or best practice approaches, or of school's responsibility to make reasonable adjustments.

Experiences at school

- Disagree: The student receives/received adequate support in their education
- Strongly disagree: There is/was regular communication with the family/caregivers about the student's learning progress
- Disagree: The teachers and support staff have/had high expectations of the student and their learning
- Strongly disagree: The teachers and support staff have the training required to provide a supportive and enriching education environment for the student

Individual Education Plan (IEP)

The IEP did not reflect the advice we provided. The adjustments we requested that were recommended by the OT (pencil grips, movement breaks, alternatives to handwriting) were not included.

The school was keen to access funding and kept saying my daughter was Autistic, despite all external assessments saying clearly that she did not have Autism. Seemed like they just wanted funding rather than actually helping her.



Female student from New South Wales aged between 7-9 years old attending mainstream setting in a regular class (continued)

Bullying

My daughter experienced bullying for 18 months by another child. The child told other children not to play with her and would physically drag away any other child that my child attempted to play with. They were scared of her as she is an older and much bigger child. We repeatedly raised the issue with the school and they told us they were handling it. They tried to blame my daughter and said the reason she was playing alone was that she doesn't have any social skills. We disputed this because my daughter is very sociable and always make friends wherever she goes, is always invited on play dates and had always had friends at school.

The school tried to blame my daughter and said it was proof she was autistic (my daughter is not autistic she has ADHD). I always assumed the other child's parents were aware of what was happening and didn't care. Eventually after 18 months of inaction I texted the other parents directly, they hadn't been told about it and they pulled their daughter into line straight away and the bullying stopped. Since then my daughter has been able to play with her friends again and she is well accepted at school.

Complaints

The school is severely lacking in professional development opportunities for teachers around disability issues. Anyone who complains is seen as a troublemaker by the principal. We cannot afford to have my daughter expelled from school.

This information comes direct from a respondent to the Family Education Survey and names have been changed.



Reports and resources

Dickinson, H., Smith, C., Yates, S., Faulkner, A. (2022) *Taking the first step in an inclusive life – experiences of Australian early childhood education and care*. Report prepared for Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), Melbourne.

- [Full report](#) including PDF and plain text
- Disability and education in Australia, Ideas from families with young children, Summary, [Easy Read](#)
- [Auslan video](#) of Executive Summary

Smith, C., Dickinson, H., Faulkner, A. (2023) *“I think the teachers need more help” Voices of experience from students with disability in Australia*. CYDA Youth Education Survey 2022. Report prepared for Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), Melbourne.

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