

Starting school for children with disability: helpful things to know





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About this handbook

This handbook was co-designed by Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA), in partnership with families caring for a child with disability.

The handbook gives practical ways to support and empower us, and our children, in the transition to primary school. We will discuss sensitive subjects, including topics like ableism and bullying.

It is intended to be a handy reference guide before our children enrol at a school, as well as providing information for any questions that may arise in the early years of our children's schooling.

We hope that this booklet is a helpful companion for life of our children's education journey.

It is also available digitally and in Easy Read at cyda.org.au.

Children and Young People with Disability are the national peak body for children and young people with disability aged 0-25 years. Our vision is that all children and young people with disability across Australia can fully exercise their rights, realise their aspirations, and thrive in all communities.





Choosing a school

Starting primary school is an exciting time for families. But for children with disability it can also be a time of uncertainty.

While we know that our children, by law have a right to be educated, not all schools will have the understanding, or resources, to support the specific needs of our children.

Primary education is a long journey, so it is important to find a school we can sustain a strong partnership with – to build a positive space of safety and belonging for our children where they can grow their strengths and flourish.

How do we find a supportive school for our children with disability?

We can't always anticipate what a school will be like. However, doing some simple preparation can help us to find a school that is likely to be a good match for our children with disability.

While it can help to ask the school directly about their attitudes on disability and inclusion – what they think, feel and believe – sometimes what a school says and does can be different.

A good starting point before our children enrol at school is to learn about the experiences of other families.

We may want to:

- talk to therapy providers and early childhood services who have regular exposure to feedback about local schools
- post questions about a school on local social media pages to hear from other families about their experiences
- read about activities and initiatives to support and celebrate diversity on a school's website, or in their magazines
- network with friends, family, or other people who know the local schools
- get advice from your child's therapy team or doctors about what you should look for to suit your child

What can we ask a school to help us decide?

Following our 'homework', if we think the school may be a good match we can request a meeting with the school principal or disability support leader to have a detailed discussion.

There are important clues we can miss if we do a remote meeting (on computer) so it can be helpful to request a face-to-face meeting. This is a great opportunity to get a first impression of the school environment.

In the meeting, it helps to take a strengths-based approach – introducing your child's interests and strengths first. You might then follow up with details about diagnosis, specific needs, and challenges.

We may ask questions like:

- How many children with disability attend the school?
- What does inclusion look like at the school?
- How do they organise and agree on reasonable adjustments?
- Are they able to support our child's specific needs?
- How is bullying discouraged and handled?
- How do they actively encourage staff and children to be inclusive?
- Can our child access a plan tailored to their specific learning needs?
- Is our child able to get extra learning support in the classroom?
- Do they support personal therapists in the school or appoint their own?

School



What are the signs that the school is a good match?

Following a meeting with the school, it may not be clear whether it is a good match or not. Therefore, it can be helpful to take some time to reflect on how you feel after the first meeting. You can think about things like:

- Did the school seem warm, friendly, and welcoming?
- Did the school seem open and collaborative?
- Do you think your child will feel comfortable here?
- Do their values and beliefs align with your own?
- Did the school freely offer their support?
- Did the school seem to understand your child's challenges?

If you don't feel seen, heard, or comfortable in the meeting, trust your feelings. You don't need to feel rushed with your enrolment choice. The education journey is a long one, so it is best to take your time to make a final decision.





'School inclusion' – what does it mean?

An inclusive school fosters belonging, safety and acceptance.

A truly inclusive school not only demonstrates inclusion in their policies, procedures and promotions but they reflect it in everything they do – through a school-wide commitment involving students, caregivers, teachers and support staff.

What does a 'school-wide commitment' to inclusion look like?

Inclusion can be experienced differently by everyone. This can include:

For families:

- feeling listened to when raising concerns or sharing ideas
- actively included in meetings and decision making

For staff (including teachers, support staff and principals):

- staff being flexible in their approach
- staff collaborating with families to identify resources and accommodations that allow a child to participate
- staff modelling positive language and celebrating diversity

For non-disabled students:

- students being supported to learn about disability and difference
- students encouraged to celebrate diversity and challenge negative attitudes

For students with disability:

- students with disability being supported to meaningfully engage in all aspects of school life
- students with disability being involved in all parts of learning, extracurricular activities, social events and community engagement
- students with disability feeling confident to be themselves and feeling like a valued part of the school community

What does 'real' inclusion mean?

Inclusion should not just be something the school talks about in vague terms. Instead, real inclusion should be actions that the school takes to ensure our children can fully and meaningfully participate in school life, just like all the other kids.

What is a 'reasonable' and 'justifiable' adjustment?

When something changes so our children can join in it is called an 'adjustment' or 'accommodation'.

Schools must make these 'reasonable adjustments' to their policies, practices and learning environments to ensure students with disabilities access education on the same basis as their peers. These adjustments must be reasonable and justifiable. It may be something that the school does routinely for students with disability, or it may be something that we initiate.

What do we mean by 'reasonable'?

An adjustment is generally considered reasonable if:

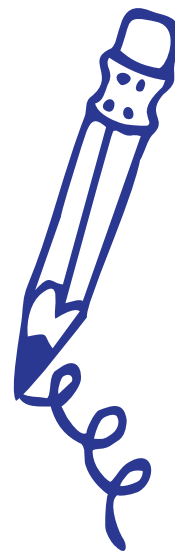
- it removes a barrier so that our children can participate
- it is practical to implement
- does not cause unjustifiable hardship (eg it is not excessively expensive or disruptive).

What do we mean by 'unjustifiable hardship'?

Under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, schools must provide reasonable adjustments unless doing so would cause unjustifiable hardship. This is a legal test that considers factors like cost, available resources, and the impact on the school.

An adjustment may not be reasonable if:

- it has a very high cost that the school cannot reasonably cover.
- it would cause serious and ongoing disruption to the school.



What kinds of adjustments could we expect from our schools?

There are all sorts of things a school can do to ensure that our children can be their best and have equality in their school life.

Practical examples of adjustments may include the following:

- Additional support (eg extra learning support in the classroom, onsite school therapists or allowing therapists to visit).
- Modifying classroom and school routines, adjusting start and finish times, accommodating sensory needs like movement breaks, providing sensory toys or headphones, allowing a student to sit on a chair at mat time instead of the mat.
- Modifying the physical environment (eg making a classroom accessible with a ramp, rearranging furniture, creating quiet break-out spaces, selecting events venues or excursion activities with consideration to physical access or sensory experience).
- Adapting of teaching (eg an individualised learning plan with adjusted curriculum and goals, use of visual aids and alternative formats for learning materials, adapting testing methods, creating mixed-ability groups).
- Providing assistive devices (eg supplying devices that help students communicate, learn or access information).
- Facilitating social and learning inclusion (eg creating supported and structured opportunities for students seeking social connection like lunch-time clubs, passive and sensory-friendly spaces, coordinating study or play buddies).

Consider what will make your child's school experience successful and discuss this with the school, so that you can work together to find what is reasonable.





Things to do before school begins

Before starting school, it can be a big help to prepare our children and in turn our school about what to expect when school starts.

When everyone knows what to expect and the right supports are in place then things are more likely to get off to a positive start and stay on track.

The '6 'P's' checklist can help with a smooth start to school

- 1 Prepare** – Ask if your child can meet their teacher and see the school before school starts. It may help to ask for teacher profiles, or social stories.
- 2 Profile** – Summarise (in one page) your child's interests, strengths, challenges, triggers, accommodations, preferred learning methods and rewards.
- 3 Plan** – Ask for an individual learning plan for your child. This plan can ensure that everyone understands how your child learns and how the teaching staff can best support your child.
- 4 Process** – Ensure the school is aware of any requests for adjustments for your child. For example, do you need ramps or assistive technology?
- 5 Professionals** – Provide a list of key therapists for your child or share updated reports to help the teacher to get to know them.
- 6 People** – Learn what social supports at school are available. Are there lunchtime clubs or a buddy system that could support your child to feel comfortable?



What if my child experiences bullying?

When our children start school, we can worry about so many different things. We worry that they will be safe, accepted, and included. We might also be concerned about bullying from other students or from the school community more broadly.

What is 'ableism'?

"Sometimes with these things you can't see it, you can just feel it."

– Parent of a child with disability.

Ableism is negative behaviours and attitudes towards someone with a physical, mental, or cognitive disability, which stems from the person with disability being seen as less able compared to their non-disabled peers.

These attitudes and behaviours disempower and disadvantage people with a disability and can leave both physical and emotional scars.

What are the common forms of 'bullying' at school?

At school, bullying may take the form of repeated aggressive behaviours with an aim to cause harm to another student.

Examples may include the following negative behaviours::

- Physical (hitting, punching, spitting, pushing, tripping and shoving)
- Verbal (name calling)
- Social (mocking a person's movements or communication style)



What are the more subtle forms of 'bullying'?

Ableism can be a subtle type of bullying and can include discrimination, denial, exclusion, and isolation.

It is important for us to recognise that these 'ableist' attitudes and behaviours can happen not just by other students but by principals, teachers and support staff.

For example:

Discrimination – (eg a deficit-based approach school culture where staff focus on a child's deficits and limitations like a teacher telling a student with ADHD "you are naughty for getting out of your chair all the time" or a student with an intellectual disability they are being lazy for not finishing work).

Exclusion – (eg a child with emotional outbursts not being allowed to attend camp or excursions, or a child in a wheelchair being excluded from a class ball game "because it's too hard to involve them").

Denial – (eg a child being denied movement breaks, headphones, fidget toys, or other classroom adjustments because "it's not fair that other kids don't have them").

Isolation – (eg a child not being invited to a class birthday party when every other child is invited, or a child being left out of playground games).

All children's experience of ableism is different.

Depending on our children, it can be helpful to talk about the different attitudes and behaviours that are unacceptable.

No form of 'ableism' should be tolerated.



What can we do if our child is bullied?

Bullying can have severe and lasting effects on the mental health, self-esteem, education, and social inclusion of our children.

Therefore, if our children tell us they are being bullied or harmed it is important to make them feel safe immediately – we should let them know we are there for them, acknowledge their feelings and build their disability pride.

It is important to discuss your concerns and your child's experience with the school. You can work together to understand what is happening, and help your child to feel safe in the classroom.

If your child has difficulty communicating with you, you may see changes in their behaviour or willingness to attend school. This can be a sign that they are not feeling comfortable.

If children need immediate help, Kids Help Line (1800 55 1800) is available 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. This is a free service.

It can help to make a time to discuss the issue with your child's allied health providers or paediatrician if they access them..

What should we do when our children are being bullied?

When we know, or suspect, there is bullying then it is important for us report it to our school to investigate and ensure the bullying is stopped.

Bullying – Report bullying to the school as soon as possible and include helpful details like dates, times, locations and names and evidence like social media posts, photos of injuries, recordings, or witness statements.

Understanding – If possible, include our children in a meeting with the school so they explain in their own words what has been happening, and the impact.

Log – Try to record your complaint on the school's bullying register so you have evidence if it continues or escalates.

Legal – If the bullying is severe, authorities like child protection services or law enforcement may need to be alerted.

Yell – Shout out for help. Our children should never feel alone. We can ask the school if there is a wellbeing officer that can help support your child and do regular check ins at school.

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Know your rights

We can be a more confident advocate for our children when we know our rights.

The best outcomes usually result from building mutual understanding and respect with our school. However, if a school is not cooperating there are safeguards.

Whether your child is enrolled in a government, independent or private school, there are federal laws that apply. These include the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth)*, the Education Standards under this Act, and the *Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986 (Cth)*.

All schools are obligated to:

- prevent bullying and discrimination
- make learning accessible
- involve families in planning support



What help is available?

If your school principal fails to address any concerns that you raise you can take further action.

Depending on your school you can contact:

- The Education Department (if your child attends a public school)
- The Board (if your child attends a private school)
- The Catholic Education Office (each diocese has an office for their region)

If you need to escalate the matter, there are also several organisations in Australia that can help with bullying and equal opportunity concerns.

A good starting point is to contact:

The Australian Human Rights Commission – which provides resources and referral services for bullying, violence, and harassment and can also direct you to the Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission in your specific state or territory.

Visit www.humanrights.gov.au, or call 1300 369 711, or (02) 9284 9600.

Advocacy support

Several Australia-wide organisations also offer disability advocacy. This may include general advice about how to manage issues that arise at school, or an advocate who can attend meetings with you, depending on the severity and complexity of your case.

For disability advocacy available in your specific state or territory is the **Disability Gateway**:

Call 1800 643 787 or visit www.disabilitygateway.gov.au.

You can also ask to access their Disability Support Advocacy helpline available.

The following Australia-wide advocacy organisations can also help:

- **PWDA** (People with Disability Australia):
call 1800 422 015 or www.pwd.org.au
- **DANA** (Disability Advocacy Network Australia):
call 1800 643 787 or visit www.dana.org.au
- **Ask Izzy** (Disability Advocacy Finder):
visit www.askizzy.org.au/disability-advocacy-finder
- **Equality Australia** (for students at Catholic schools):
call 03 9412 0412 or visit www.equalityaustralia.org.au



Legal support

For Australia-wide legal advice, the best starting point is the Legal Aid Commission or community legal centres in your state or territory.

They offer free legal assistance to people who meet their eligibility criteria and can provide information, advice, and referrals.

You can also contact the Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC): call +61 436 940 119 or visit info@alrc.gov.au.

Personal care and support

It is distressing to know your child is being bullied, excluded or discriminated against.

If you urgently need someone to talk to there are free and confidential services like:

- **Lifeline** (24/7 crisis support)
www.lifeline.org.au | 13 11 14
- **Beyond Blue** (Mental health support and resources)
www.beyondblue.org.au | 1300 22 4636
- **Carer Gateway** (Support for caregivers, including counselling)
www.carergateway.gov.au | 1800 422 737
- Bullyingnoway.gov.au (parent support hotlines for your state and territory).

Your child can also access urgent help with Kids Helpline:

- **Kids Helpline:** call 1800 55 1800 or visit www.kidshelpline.com.au.

For general parenting and family information

- **Raising Children Network**
(Parenting resources, including disability-specific advice)
www.raisingchildren.net.au
- **Association for Children with Disability**
(Victoria-based parent support and information)
www.acd.org.au | 03 9880 7000 or 1800 654 013 for regional callers
- **Kiind**
(Supports families raising children with disability with resources and guide)
www.kiind.com.au | 08 6164 9806

For further information about this booklet you can contact CYDA on 9417 1025.

Disclaimer: CYDA's Take Charge of Change resources have been funded by the Australian Government created to support families of children and young people with disability to help manage key transitions throughout their lives. Information provided is intended as a general guide and may not contain the most recent information and updates. These fact sheets are current as of October 2025. View the full set of resources at cyda.org.au