

Transitioning to high school:

What families need to know



Children and Young People
with Disability Australia





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Introduction

The move from primary school to high school is a big change. It can bring excitement, new opportunities, and sometimes uncertainty or worry. If your child has disability, you might be thinking about how to help them through this time and make sure they feel included, safe, and confident.

It's important to remember that every child's milestones and transitions look different, and there is no 'typical' path for them to take. What matters is providing support in a way that works for them.

This booklet is here to help parents and caregivers of children with disability aged eight to 12 years. It was co-designed with families who shared their experiences, ideas, and hopes for their children.

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.

What does this booklet cover?

This booklet offers practical information about supporting your child as they transition to high school. It includes information about finding support, communicating with teachers and health professionals, and ideas about supporting your child's confidence and pride.

Along the way, you'll find tips for looking after your own wellbeing, because supporting your child starts with supporting yourself, and a useful glossary of common words and phrases.

You can read this booklet from start to finish or just use the parts that feel most helpful right now. It can be used on its own or alongside our poster in this series.

We hope it gives you the knowledge and confidence to take charge of this next chapter of change together.



Getting ready for high school

Starting high school is a big milestone for every student. It's a time of change, with new routines, teachers, and expectations. It's normal to feel unsure about what's coming next, but there's also a lot you can do to prepare.

With the right planning, this transition can be a positive experience that helps your child grow in confidence and independence.

Start with relationships

A strong connection with your child's school can make a big difference. The more the school understands your child – and listens to you as a parent or caregiver – the better they can support them to settle in and succeed.

There are several ways you can build a relationship with the school, even before your child's first high school term begins. Start by setting up meetings with key staff, including year coordinators, teachers, and education assistants. These early discussions will be an opportunity for you to share what you know about your child's strengths, needs, and things that have worked to support their learning in the past. It's also a chance for you to begin creating a **transition plan** for your child.



For information about how to speak with teachers and school staff, see the Talking About Disability section of this booklet.



Create a transition plan

A transition plan is a document that helps you and school staff prepare for your child's move into high school. Its purpose is to get everyone on the same page.

A plan may include:

- a profile of your child (and their disability, strengths, and challenges they may face)
- an overview of school-based supports and necessary adjustments
- strategies to help your child cope with the transition
- timelines containing key dates, like orientation days or Individual Education Plan meetings
- processes for information-sharing between you and school staff.

You may wish to ask your current school to help you prepare a transition plan based on what has worked so far or start the conversation with the new school. In any case, working together on this document will make sure everyone understands what is needed to support your child to thrive during this time of change right from the beginning.



Other practical considerations

Graduating to high school brings a lot of practical changes too. By considering them early, you can help your child feel more confident and independent during their first term. Some things to think about, and to raise with the school during transition planning, include:

- How your child will get to, from, and around school?
- What new rules and routines they may face (such as bell times or uniform expectations)?
- How they will organise and complete homework tasks?
- How they will navigate new friendships and peer pressure?

What supports are available?

All schools are legally required to make reasonable adjustments to support students with disability, according to the Disability Standards for Education (2005).

Your school may provide the following for your child:

- an Individual Education Plan (IEP)
- support staff, like education assistants
- flexible timetables
- sensory and self-regulation supports, like quiet zones
- social skills or peer support programs.

If your child has an NDIS or other financial assistance plan, you can explore how that funding can be used to help them succeed at school. For example, their plan may pay for assistive technology or equipment, training for your child's teacher, sessions with a specialist, in-class support like note-taking or interpreting, or other supports.



What is an IEP? An Individual Education Plan, or IEP, is a personalised plan for a child that sets out their educational goals and what supports they need to reach those goals.





Understanding Disability

Disability is a normal part of life. People with disability may think, move, communicate, see, hear, or understand things differently. Some disabilities are visible, and some are not. Every child is different, and every child has strengths, interests and things that make them unique.

Having a disability doesn't mean something is wrong with your child. It's just part of who they are. With the right support and environment, children with disability can thrive, feel confident, and take part in school and life alongside their peers.

As your child moves from primary to high school, understanding what disability is – and is not – can help you:

- Talk about your child's needs with teachers, doctors and other professionals.
- Support your child to feel proud and confident.
- Find the right supports to help them feel safe, included and ready for school.

Different ways of thinking about disability

There are many ways people think about disability. Some of these can be helpful, and others less so. It's important to understand the difference.

The medical model

The medical model sees disability as a problem that needs to be 'fixed' or 'cured'. It focuses on what a person cannot do and often places the responsibility on the person to change or 'fit in'.

The social model

The social model, on the other hand, says disability is not the problem – barriers in society are. These barriers might be physical (like stairs instead of ramps), attitudinal (like low expectations), or systemic (like policies that exclude people). According to this model, it is all of our responsibility, as a community, to remove these barriers so everyone can take part equally.

Disability is a natural part of human diversity, and the focus should be on inclusion, access, and respect.

What is Disability Pride?

Disability pride means feeling good about who you are, including your disability, and is an important part of getting ready for the move to high school. That's because when your child has pride in who they are, it helps them:

- build confidence
- ask for what they need
- form friendships
- stand up to discrimination

You can help your child build disability pride by talking positively about disability, helping them learn about their strengths, and connecting with other disabled people and role models. You might join disability groups and communities like CYDA or a state-based organisation, attend events with other disabled people, or watch movies and TV shows featuring disabled characters played by disabled actors.

Language matters

The words we use to talk about disability shape how we feel and think. It impacts how your child views their own disability and themselves. We should always try to use language that reflects respect, inclusion, and acceptance. For example, instead of saying something like:

“She is confined to a wheelchair”

You might instead say:

“She uses a wheelchair”

This simple shift in language removes the idea that disability is something limiting or negative, and instead just describes how someone moves through the world. It also opens the door to strengths-based language, which is language that focuses on what someone can do or what they enjoy.

Your child might have their own preferences for how they talk about disability, and those may change over time. For example, they might like identity-first language (e.g. “I’m a disabled person”) instead of person-first language (“I’m a person with autism”) – or they might like both!

You do not need to get it perfect. What matters is being open, respectful, and willing to listen and learn together.

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ



Talking about disability

You might be wondering how, or whether, to talk about your child's disability with other people. These conversations can feel personal, emotional, or even intimidating, but you do not have to have all the answers.

Talking openly about your child's disability can help others better understand your child's needs, and help your child feel proud and supported.

Talking with teachers and school staff

Your child's school plays a big role in their day-to-day life, so building a strong relationship with teachers and staff is important. The more they understand your child, the better they can support them to thrive in and outside of the classroom.

Here are some things you can do:

- **Share reports and assessments**
Provide staff with any reports or documents that explain your child's disability. This can help the school better understand their strengths and support needs.
- **Be specific about what's worked before**
Share examples from home or previous schools or services. This might include talking about your child's communication preferences, any sensory needs they have, or what to look out for to suggest your child is feeling overwhelmed or uncomfortable.
- **Ask questions**
Don't be afraid to explicitly ask how the school will support your child, especially through their first few months in a new setting. You might ask about learning adjustments and specialist support options, or what specific disability training teachers have received.
- **Keep records**
Write down what's discussed in meetings and keep copies of emails or plans. This can be helpful if you need to follow up certain things later.



Did you know every school has a legal responsibility to make reasonable adjustments for your child? The [Disability Standards for Education 2005](#) outline you and your child's rights to education in Australia.

Talking with doctors and health professionals

Health professionals play a part in assessing and diagnosing, as well as supporting children and families to learn about their disability as they grow. When talking to them, it's okay to speak up if something doesn't feel right or you need things explained more clearly.

You can help the conversation go smoothly by:

- **Preparing questions ahead of time**
Before meeting with a doctor or health professional, prepare a list of the things you want to ask or concerns you would like addressed. Be honest and remember that you know your child best.
- **Take notes**
Bring a pen and paper, or a device you can write on, so you can record what you talk about. Don't be afraid to ask your doctor to repeat themselves or slow down.
- **Bring a support person with you**
Meetings with doctors can feel overwhelming, especially when you're navigating a new diagnosis that you're unfamiliar with. It can help to bring a family member or friend with you to provide emotional support. They can also keep their own notes so nothing is missed.

Sometimes doctors may not have the experience to diagnose particular disability, like autism, in which case you may seek out another professional, like a speech therapist or psychologist.



Talking with friends, family, and the wider community

You might also choose to talk about your child's disability with friends, extended family, or other people in your life. Some people may not know much about disability, or may say things that aren't helpful, even if they mean well.

You do not have to explain everything, but sharing what your child needs, what supports them, and what you expect from others can help build understanding and inclusion.

You might say:

- "He finds it easier when we keep things calm and give him time to settle"
- "She uses a communication device – it really helps her join in!"
- "Using her fidget toy helps her concentrate better."
- "They wear headphones to help them feel more calm when things get noisy."
- "Taking breaks throughout the day helps him stay regulated."



Talking with your child

Every child is different, and the way you talk about disability will depend on your child's age, personality, and communication preferences. What's most important is being honest, supportive, and positive.

When talking about disability, let your child know:

- Disability is not a 'bad word' or something to be ashamed of
- Everyone has things they find easy and things they need help with
- It's okay to ask for support from others
- You are proud of them

These conversations can help build your child's self-esteem, pride, and trust in you. They also set the stage for something really important – self advocacy.

Setting the stage for self-advocacy

Self-advocacy means speaking up for ourselves about what we need. For your child, this might look like them asking for help in class, saying when something is too loud or overwhelming, or telling a teacher what makes them feel included.

By talking openly with your child about their disability, their needs, and their rights early on, you can help them build the confidence to speak for themselves as they grow in school, in friendships, and in life generally.





Living in community

Building connections within the community can play a key role in supporting your child as they move from primary into high school and their teenage years. Some of the most meaningful growth happens through play, friendships, hobbies and connections outside of the classroom, and feeling like they belong can boost your child's confidence and pride.

Strong connections can also help you, as a parent or caregiver, feel supported during this time of change.

Making friends

Children learn and grow through the relationships they form with others. You can help your child make friends by:

- Talking with your child about what they enjoy or are passionate about
- Finding recreational programs or community events that align with their interests
- Hosting events and inviting their peers from school
- Asking your child what helps them feel comfortable in group settings

If your child needs extra support with communication or social skills, you can ask a therapist or educator to help build these in everyday settings.



Finding accessible spaces and activities

Joining in social activities is not always easy, especially when events or attitudes aren't set up to include children with disability. That's why it's beneficial to do a bit of research into what accessible programs and spaces exist in your local area.

Here are some tools to get your search started.

Sports programs

You can find accessible sporting programs by visiting the website of sports associations near you. Inclusive National sporting associations include:

- Disability Sports Australia
- Reclink Australia
- Disabled Surfers Association

Some inclusive state-based sporting associations include:

- WA Disabled Sports Association Inc (WA)
- Physical DisABILITY Sports Tasmania (TAS)
- Access for All Abilities (VIC)
- Disability Sports Northern Territory (NT)
- Sporting Wheelies (QLD)

Art and creative programs

You can find accessible arts programs by researching art associations near you. Inclusive National arts associations include:

- Arts Access Australia
- Sensorium Theatre

Some inclusive state-based art associations include:

- Arts Access Victoria (VIC)
- Access Arts (QLD)
- Accessible Arts (NSW)
- Disability in the Arts, Disadvantage in the Arts (WA)

Libraries and local councils

Many libraries and local councils run school holiday programs or clubs that are welcoming of children with disability. It is worth reaching out to see what they offer in your local community.

Building your own support network

Parents or caregivers of children with disability sometimes say they feel isolated, especially if they have friends or family who don't fully understand what they're going through. Making your own connections can benefit your well-being in the long run.

Some ways to build your own network include:

- joining a support group to share stories, tips, and encouragement
- attending inclusive community events with your child
- connecting with other parents online through supportive Facebook groups, forums, and disability networks
- reaching out to other parents at school, activities, or in your neighbourhood.

“It helps to hear from people who’ve been through something similar ... It’s a good reminder that you are not alone.”

– Parent of a child with disability.





Looking after yourself

When your child is going through a big change, it's natural to focus all your energy on helping them prepare. However, in doing so, it can be easy to forget about your own needs as a parent or caregiver.

Taking time for self-care can not only help you stay grounded, protect your mental health, and be there for your child in ways that are calm and sustainable, but it can also teach your child that looking after yourself is part of a healthy life.

It's also essential to prevent burnout, which can show up as frustration, exhaustion, or feeling disconnected from the things and people that matter to you.

What does self-care look like?

Self-care doesn't have to be big or expensive – it's not about bubble baths or perfect routines (unless that works for you!). It's about doing small things that help you feel more balanced, even on hard days.

Some examples include:

- sitting down with a quiet cup of tea
- going for a walk or run, or doing other forms of exercise
- talking to someone who understands, like another parent, friend, or counsellor
- doing things you enjoy, like watching a show or listening to music
- taking a break from social media when it feels draining.

Ultimately, looking after yourself looks different for everyone and what works for one person might not work for another. The key is finding what helps you feel more settled, rested, and recharged.

Setting boundaries

Knowing your limits and giving yourself permission to say “no” when something doesn't feel manageable is another form of self-care.

When you're feeling overwhelmed or your schedule is already full, you might decide not to take on extra commitments or take a step back from people or conversations that leave you feeling depleted.

Boundaries are how we protect our energy so we can stay connected to what matters most.

Asking for help

When things get tricky, asking for help – whether emotional, practical, or professional – is a sign of strength, not weakness. Support might look like talking to a friend, family member, GP (doctor) or counsellor, joining a parent group, or connecting with a local caregiver organisation.

You may also want to reach out to the services below.

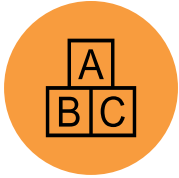
For emotional support and mental health

- **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

For 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
- **Youth Disability Advocacy Service**
(Victoria-based organisation with youth friendly resources)
www.yacvic.org.au/ydas | 0455 621 849





Glossary

Here are some simple explanations of words and ideas used in this booklet.

Advocacy

Speaking up for what someone needs, wants or is entitled to. Parents often advocate for their child at school, with doctors, or in services.

- **Self-advocacy** means speaking up for ourselves. Children with disability can learn to self-advocate over time with support from adults.

Co-design

When people with lived experience are involved in designing programs or resources from the beginning, it is called co-design. This booklet was co-designed with parents and carergivers.

Disability Justice

A movement led by disabled people that says all people deserve care, access, dignity and respect. It looks at how disability, racism, poverty, and other systems of inequality overlap.

Disability Pride

Disability pride is feeling good about being disabled and not seeing disability as something to be ashamed of. It means recognising the strengths, culture, and community within the disability experience.

Discrimination

When someone is treated unfairly because of a part of who they are, like their disability, race, gender, or background. When people with disability are discriminated against, it is called **ableism**.

- **Direct discrimination** happens when someone is clearly treated worse because of their disability.
- **Indirect discrimination** is when a rule or policy seems fair, but it makes things harder for a group of people, like disabled people.

Holistic Support

This refers to support that looks at the whole person, not just their diagnosis. This includes emotional wellbeing, family life, friendships, and other parts of life, not just therapy or school.

Individual Education Plan (IEP)

A document made by the school with input from the family and student. It outlines learning goals, support needs, and adjustments for a student with disability.

Lived Experience

Someone with lived experience has first-hand experience of living with disability or supporting someone who does. This knowledge is valuable and helps shape better services and supports.

NDIS

The National Disability Insurance Scheme is a government program that provides funding for supports and services for people with disability.

Reasonable Adjustment

A change made at school that helps a student with disability take part in learning. Schools are required by law to make adjustments, which may include giving a student extra time, or providing support staff, quiet spaces, or different ways of learning.

Self-care

This means doing things to look after our own well-being. It can include small everyday actions, like doing exercise or talking to a friend, that help us feel rested and recharged.

Stigma

Unfair beliefs or attitudes about people because of a trait they have, like disability. Stigma can make people feel excluded or ashamed, even when they've done nothing wrong.

Strengths-based language

Words and phrases that focus on a person's strengths and interests, not only 'limitations' or support needs. Strengths-based languages is about highlighting a whole person with skills, preferences, and value.

Transition Plan

A document that helps you and your school prepare for a big change in your child's life, like moving from primary to high school. It could include information about your child, their strengths, and what support they may need to succeed.

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