

Disability Standards for Education



**Our stories: Personal experiences
of young people with disability
in the education system**



These are personal stories which share the experiences of students with disability during their time in education.

About this resource

This resource was funded by the Australian Government. It was designed by students with disability and their parents and caregivers, with help from Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) and the National Ethnic Disability Alliance (NEDA).

The Australian Government acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians of Country throughout Australia. We acknowledge their continuing connection to land, water, and community. We pay our respects to them and their Elders past and present. We pay our respects to the continuing cultural, spiritual, and educational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Note on language

This resource uses person-first language (e.g., ‘student with disability’). But this approach does not suit everyone, and many people prefer identity-first language (e.g., ‘disabled student’).

It is up to each person how they choose to identify. We encourage you to ask people what they prefer. We also acknowledge the deep history behind all these terms.

People use ‘**reasonable adjustments**’, ‘adjustments’, or ‘accommodations’ to mean the same thing. We use these phrases interchangeably in this resource. ‘**Reasonable adjustments**’ is used in the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*.

Additional resources

This is one part of a group of resources. You can find them on the [Australian Government Department of Education website](#) or by scanning the QR code.



Scan the QR code

This resource is also available in Easy Read, Auslan, and several other languages. You can access those versions on the [Australian Government Department of Education website](#) or by scanning the QR code.

Content note: *These stories include examples of ableism, exclusion, and discrimination. For support you can call Lifeline on **13 11 14** or text **0477 13 11 14**.*



What this resource is for

This resource shares real stories of young people with disability. In it, they talk about:

1. their experiences in education
2. what they learned from these experiences
3. what they want you to know.

Their experiences are all different, and all are important. Together, they tell a story about how education providers follow the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* (DSE) and how they could potentially support students better.

Before you get started

You can [learn more about your rights under the DSE](#).

Then check out:

- [Lily's story](#)
- [Daniel's story](#)

 **Disclaimer:** These stories are the words, opinions, and experiences of the young people who participated in this project.

Lily's story

Content note: Mentions of ableism and exclusion.

At primary school I already felt awkward, apart from the crowd. Coming from an immigrant family who didn't have a cultural understanding or framework for disability or mental health, I didn't have the words or the space to figure out why I couldn't fit in, or what I needed to belong.

Once I moved overseas for university, I was exposed to a new culture and people that were interested in talking to me about who I really was and why I felt like I hadn't reached my potential. They were genuinely invested in supporting and mentoring me. This was my first time being aware that I was part of a community that had similar lived experiences, and that together, we had agency and power over how future generations would be brought up.

Although I wasn't in Australia, it was also the first time that I became aware that, globally, access to education is a recognised right for all people, and that schools must provide accessible adjustments and supports for people with disability like me.

Since then, I've had mixed experiences of working with academics and institutions to advocate for myself. Some people may have a better understanding of disability, due to their own backgrounds and experiences, and are more open to having a conversation about my needs. But from an institutional perspective I've consistently been frustrated by slow processes, poor communication and unaccommodating requirements – especially when it comes to providing medical paperwork and documents to prove something that I feel I should not have to prove.



Once adjustments have been provided, they have been relatively impactful though. I've been grateful that, once I jump through the various hoops and hurdles, institutions often offer significant flexibility regarding a wide range of adjustments and modifications to support me and my peers. However, they really need to develop and cultivate tools and information to support students through the process of applying, and to increase awareness and visibility so that future young people know that these supports exist.

For other young people in a similar position to mine, I really want to emphasise that you are not weird, you are not abnormal, and you are not alone.

Writing this story has been such a validating and rewarding experience for me. The opportunity to share openly, without judgment and with true peers, has been something that I will never take for granted. Remember that if you need a hand or feel like you are lost, do your best to reach out and you'll find that we are here for you and here to help. I know it can be hard to make yourself vulnerable, but know that it's those moments that will lead to more learning, growth and strength.



Daniel's story

Content note: Mentions of ableism, exclusion, chemical restraint, and bullying from teachers.

Primary school

My experiences with education have covered the full spectrum, from negative to positive and everything in between. I am an autistic person and have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and anxiety. I remember having extreme 'behavioural difficulties' in primary school – or that's what my teachers told my mother. My primary school experience can be described by what my teachers would always say in my reports, 'Daniel is a bright student with a lot of potential but struggles to regulate himself in the classroom or give tasks his full attention.' I'm sure that this line is still thrown around for many students across many education settings.

I had difficulties sitting still. I was speaking out of turn, saying inappropriate phrases (or really anything to live up to my self-proclaimed title of class clown). I lacked emotional intelligence and resilience when meeting barriers. I was diagnosed with ADHD and medicated throughout primary school.

I often felt ostracised because of having to go down to reception every lunch to get another dose of ADHD medication.

I had many disagreements with teachers, refusing to do tasks and having verbal arguments with teachers who did not allow me to do things in my own style. I also had this kind of struggle with my peers. Upon reflection, I have realised that this was tied into my undiagnosed autism. I have a very specific memory of another student grabbing my slime that I was stimming with. I asked for it back politely, which they resisted. Suddenly, I remember fast-forwarding to being in the principal's office with this other student with my slime through her hair! Not my finest moment. I skated through primary school with a list of behavioural incidents and not much confidence in myself as a student, except my consistent domination in times tables competitions.

As an adult, I learned about the *Disability Standards for Education 2005*. When I look back, I think my school should have done more to support me. It would have been better if they had asked themselves 'Why is this happening?' – or asked me! Then we could have worked together to make adjustments that supported me to learn and be included.

Secondary school

I remember the first activity we had. It was being assigned to a class group while in a giant sports facility, which had a loud echo booming through the space. I remember not hearing or processing which class I was allocated to. That led to me walking around the school for 30 minutes trying to find my classroom. Apart from this, secondary school was an extremely positive experience for me. I was diagnosed as autistic and was given some opportunities to modify my classes and structures to support my personal goals.

As I did my Year 12 mathematics class in Year 11, I was given the opportunity to remove a subject from my Year 12 course load. Combined with my extra study breaks, this meant that my Year 12 schedule was 8:30am – 1:30pm, Monday to Friday.

At the time, I was working part-time, and was offered a Certificate IV in retail as part of management professional development at my job. It was also added to my Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). This allowed me to study during the day, and then make my way to work and earn a great living for a 17-year-old.

I was extremely grateful for my school's ability to listen to my goals and needs and be inclusive of that when planning the structure of my education. I also had the 'stock-standard' accommodations during exams, such as longer breaks, food in the exam, and the ability to walk around the exam room. However, to do so I was placed in an isolated space, which I found to be a very exclusionary feeling when my peers would get the opportunity to joke around and chat outside the exam halls before their exam.

It is really interesting, though, that I was never exposed to any materials or content that told me about my rights under the DSE. I knew that schools could make reasonable adjustments, but they were presented to me as 'I could have THESE options', not 'I should be consulted about WHAT reasonable adjustments I need to participate in education'. I am happy with what my school did for me, but on reflecting it seems a bit paternalistic in nature, even though they absolutely got it right in many ways.

Tertiary education

My next education experience was a Bachelor of Music at university. The university I attended had quite poor disability support. They really did not provide resources or give me the opportunity to apply for supports. I now know that this is something they should have done according to the DSE. I was targeted by a lecturer who did not like my personality (or my restlessness that can occur with ADHD).

Overall, the university got it wrong, and this led to me not attending classes, missing tutorials and, overall, not being engaged at uni.

I had multiple moments when I wanted to drop out of all my classes (and had to use informal support networks to keep me engaged). Overall, I was extremely glad to get my piece of paper and be done with the experience.

After I chose to stop pursuing the dream of being a professional musician, I decided to go back to university and ended up studying a Bachelor of Psychological Sciences. In my first year, I was apprehensive to sign up to the disability support services, after my experience at my previous university. I had this weird moment of pride when I wanted to prove that I could do the whole university experience without additional supports – but I realised that this wouldn't provide me value. I was working in the disability sector at the time and knew how useful supports could be in disabled people's lives. I knew that I had the right to these supports in my education under Australian law.

I decided to use my university's disability support services and got massive supports to have deadline extensions, rest breaks in exams, and quiet spaces whilst on campus to support me in my degree. I got massive value from this, as it allowed me to not hyperfocus on what went wrong and provided pathways to assist me if I was falling behind or stressed over deadlines.

This also supported me with working full-time whilst doing full-time university, which I valued for my career and financial goals. At the end of my degree, I was accepted into an Honours in psychology, but I chose to decline so I could follow exciting career opportunities.

If there is anything I hope people take from this snapshot of my 18-year experience with education, it's that supports really help. You may feel that you don't want to be treated differently, that you don't need adjustments, or that your disability shouldn't define your capacity. That's okay. But if you do need supports, don't feel alienated or that you aren't enough.

Everyone needs support, disability or not. The value you can get from supports can be the difference between hating your education experience or really enjoying it.

Your experience is what you make of it, so make it yours.



www.education.gov.au/disability-standards-education-2005/information-resources-students-disability-and-their-caregivers