

Guide

Disability Standards
for Education



Getting started: Disability and education

This resource is for parents and caregivers new to disability and the Australian education system.



This resource was co-designed by students and young people with disability and their parents and caregivers.

About this resource

This resource was funded by the Australian Government. It was designed by parents and caregivers of students with disability, 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.

We use 'educational institution' and 'school or centre' to mean the same thing in this resource. They both mean a place where your child may be educated.

This resource is for parents and caregivers. We say 'your child' to mean any child you are responsible for.

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: *This guide mentions prejudice and discrimination. It has examples of negative ideas and language. For support you can call Lifeline on **13 11 14** or text **0477 13 11 14**.*

Who this guide is for

This guide is for you if you're responsible for a child with disability. You may be their parent, guardian or caregiver.

What this guide is for

This guide is to help you start:

- learning about your child's education rights
- thinking about your child's education options.

What this guide covers

This guide talks about:

- [What disability means](#) (p. 1)
- [Attitudes to disability](#) (p. 4)
- [Your child's education options](#) (p. 6)
- [Once your child is enrolled](#) (p. 9)
- [Goals for your child's education](#) (p. 14)
- [Where to get support and information](#) (p. 16)

What disability means

Like people, disability is very diverse. People have different ideas about what it is. You might not be sure if your child's experiences count as disability.

Their teachers or doctors might use words like:

- Medical condition or illness
- Access needs
- Additional support needs
- Special needs
- Different ability
- Needing adjustments
- Impairment
- Needing accommodations

These terms can all refer to disability.

Note: The language we use to describe ourselves is personal and up to us. But some of the words in this list have a difficult history. We don't use them again in this resource.

The word '**disability**' is used when we discuss rights, laws, services and supports.

Definition: Disability

Disability is a very broad term and covers:

- Partial or total loss of bodily or mental functions
- Partial or total loss of a body part
- Presence of organisms that cause or can cause disease or illness (e.g., HIV)
- Disorders of learning
- Disorders of behaviour, emotions, judgement, or thought processes.

There are different categories of disability:



Cognitive

(e.g., Down syndrome, acquired brain injury)



Neurological

(e.g., epilepsy, autism)



Physical

(e.g., arthritis, cerebral palsy)



Sensory

(e.g., blind, hard of hearing)



Social/emotional

(e.g., depression, obsessive compulsive disorder)

Your child's experiences may fit more than one category of disability. They may also have more than one condition or disability.

Australian disability discrimination law

All students with disability in Australia are protected by the **Disability Discrimination Act 1992** (DDA) and the **Disability Standards for Education 2005** (DSE). All education providers must follow the DDA and the DSE.

Definition: Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA)

The DDA is a law that applies to everyone in Australia. It protects people from being discriminated against because of their disability.

Definition: Disability Standards for Education 2005 (DSE)

The DSE are a set of laws that come under the DDA. They clarify the obligations of education providers. The DSE tell education providers what they have to do to support students with disability.

Students with disability are covered by the DSE as well as the DDA, when they go to:

- preschool
- kindergarten
- school
- higher education
- vocational education and training.

The DSE do not currently cover child care but the Australian Government is examining how to change this.

To learn more, see our [Explaining the Disability Standards for Education](#) resource.



Attitudes to disability

Your child should be:



- accepted
- included
- part of the community.

You should also be treated this way.

If disability is new to your family, you might not know how to feel about it yet. You may be feeling worried or overwhelmed. It's okay to let yourself feel whatever you need to feel.

But it's also a good idea to try to understand:

- What are you feeling?
- Why are you feeling this way?
- Where does it come from?
- What's your own attitude toward disability?

You and your child are not alone: 1 in 5 people in Australia have disability.

Disability isn't a bad word. It doesn't mean your child is lacking something. Every child learns and develops at their own pace.

People with disability face barriers in society. Barriers are things that make it harder to join in.

Note: A barrier isn't something your child causes by being themselves. It's something in the world around them that we need to change or remove.

For example:

A barrier IS: ‘My child isn’t being supported to communicate in a way that works for them.’

A barrier is NOT: ‘My child can’t speak.’

Sometimes the people around us can have a negative idea of disability. Their negative attitudes are not okay. You should not be made to feel shame or stigma.

The goal

Everyone has different attitudes and ideas about disability. But we’re always working towards a better society. This is one that respects, includes and values people with disability.

You should expect people to accept and include your child. If they don’t, they are doing the wrong thing. They may even be acting unlawfully.



Your child's education options

In Australia, your child has different options available to them at each stage of their education. It can be hard to figure out what education options your child has. It's important to remember:

Your child should have the full range of education options.

Education providers should give your child the same opportunities to enrol in education as all other children. This is the law in Australia. Education providers should not push your child towards a particular education pathway, such as government, independent, specialised, faith-based, etc.

Before you enrol your child

At different points in your child's education journey, you will need to decide where to enrol them. When making your decision, you might think about:

- Location
- Family or support
- Values
- Faith or beliefs
- Finances
- Access

Other important questions are:

- Will my child be safe and happy there?
- Will they get the support they need to learn?
- Will they make connections in their local community?

You can learn more about choosing different paths in education in our [Milestones and transitions](#) resource.



Australia's education and training system

Australia's education system has 4 levels:

- early childhood education
- primary school
- secondary school
- tertiary education.

Levels of education

Type of education provider	Age of child	Compulsory or optional
1 Early childhood education e.g., kindergarten and preschool	Generally 3–5	Optional but encouraged from age 4 onwards
2 Primary school	Generally 5–12	Compulsory – every child must go to school from age 6
3 Secondary school	Generally 12–18	Compulsory until 16, 17 or 18 depending on which state or territory you live in
4 Tertiary education e.g., vocational education and training (includes TAFE), workplace training, higher education (includes university)	Generally 15 and above (can combine with secondary school)	Optional

Types of schools

Australia has 2 types of schools. These are government and non-government schools.

Government schools are run by state and territory governments and generally do not charge fees.

Non-government schools are run by other organisations. For example, there are faith-based schools and independent schools. These schools generally charge fees.

Funding is available for every school to provide **reasonable adjustments** to support students with disability to join in.

Every student with disability has the right to go to their local school or centre. Some places are only open to students with disability. You can find out about these on the education department website for your state or territory.



Once your child is enrolled

Your child should be supported to access the full range of options after they enrol in education. These options can include different classes, activities, courses, and certifications.

Just like their peers, your child should be able to:



Apply for, be accepted at and enrol in an educational institution



Join in with every part of their education course or program



Take part in learning experiences



Learn in a safe environment, free from discrimination, harassment and victimisation



Use support services e.g., school counsellor

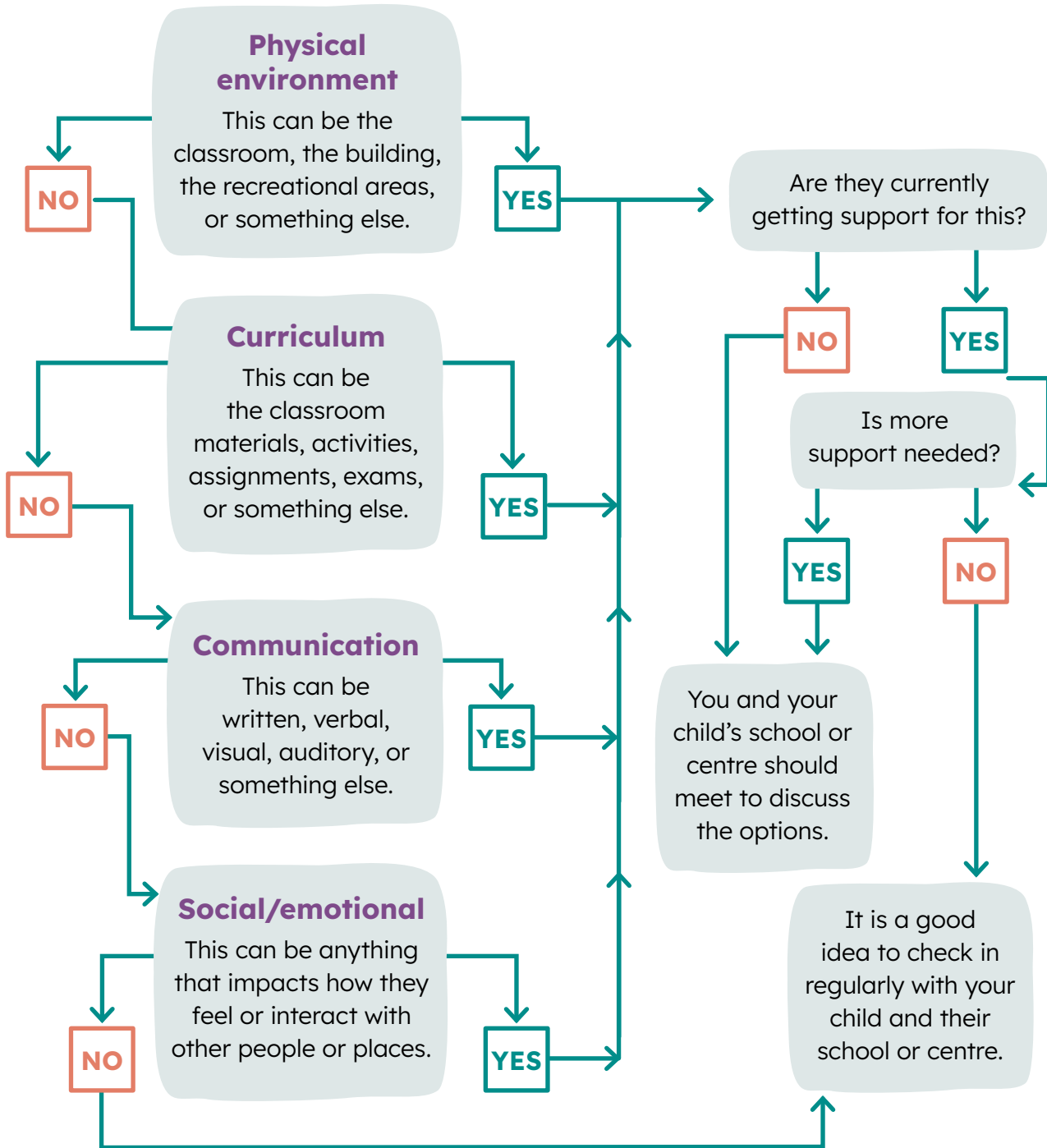
Note: You can learn more about harassment and victimisation in our [Explaining the Disability Standards for Education](#) resource.

Every student has choices and opportunities. These should be the same or very similar for students with disability. This doesn't just apply to classroom learning. It also covers things like school camps and playing at break time.

Getting the support your child needs to join in and learn

When you start thinking about disability and education, you can ask yourself:

Does your child need support in one or more of these areas?



If they do need support, are they getting it now? If not, contact the school or centre and ask for a meeting. You should be able to work together and discuss your child's options.

Are they getting support for this but need more? If so, contact the school or centre to discuss extra support.

If your child isn't getting the support they need, you have the right to ask for changes. These are called **reasonable adjustments**. Every child with disability has the right to these so they can learn and join in.

Definition: Reasonable adjustment

An **adjustment** is a change or accommodation. These are actions that help children to join in with their peers. They can be:

- people (e.g., support staff)
- materials (e.g., screen reader)
- changes in how things are done (e.g., rest breaks).

It's the role of the education provider to organise and fund adjustments unless it would impose an unjustifiable hardship on the provider.



What is **reasonable** will be different for every case. But education providers should consider things like:

- What do you and your child want?
- How does your child's disability affect them?
- How will the change affect your child and their ability to join in and learn?
- How will the change affect the staff and other students?
- What are the costs and benefits of making the change?
- Can the provider get financial or other forms of help to make the change (e.g., government funding)?

Generally, education providers must make reasonable adjustments. The only time they don't have to is if the change would cause an 'unjustifiable hardship'. This means a difficulty that would be too much for the provider to implement.

It's up to the provider to show that the change would cause an unjustifiable hardship. You don't have to prove anything.



Examples of reasonable adjustments are:

- rest/bathroom/snack break
- classroom aide
- Auslan interpreter
- teachers allowing certain behaviours in class
- flexible deadlines/extensions
- extra reading time
- ramps
- note taker
- communication support
- adjustable chair.

Or your child may need something else.



Advice for parents and caregivers

As a parent or caregiver of a child with disability, you should:

not be treated differently
due to your child's disability

be included in decisions
that affect your child

be able to make a complaint
if something is not right

have options on where
your child is educated

To learn more, see our [Explaining the Disability Standards for Education](#) resource.

Goals for your child's education

You can think of your child's education as a journey. There are many paths that they might take.

But before you choose a path it's a good idea to think about:

- what you want for your child's future
- what experiences you want them to have along the way.



Questions to ask yourself

- What do I want for my child's education? (What does my child want from their education?)



- What are the barriers (if any) to making this happen? (Are there any negative attitudes? Are things working now?)



- What do I want the education provider to do to remove these barriers? (Provide equipment? Academic support? Physical support? Something else?)



- What am I being told? (Does it match what I know about my child's rights? Is the provider pushing me towards a certain path or option?)



- Who decides what support my child needs? (How do they decide this? Have I been involved in this decision?)



You should **include your child** in all decisions about their education. How you do this will depend on their age and their own needs and interests.



Remember that:

Options should not be closed to your child

- Your child does not need a diagnosis for the DDA or the DSE to apply. If a child is thought to live with disability, then the DDA and DSE can be used.
- Your child should be able to enrol in education on the same basis as their non-disabled peers (if age, location, and other factors permit).
- Every education provider has a duty to support your child. They should make every reasonable effort to make it work.
- Your child's support needs might be new to staff. But they should listen, research, learn, and try things to find what works. This is part of their role.

You do not need to provide all the answers

- You understand your child and their needs. Educators are there to support your child to learn. You should be able to work together.
- Education providers need to assist a child with disability. It shouldn't depend on the 'level' or 'severity' of your child's disability.
- There are resources that educators can use to meet your child's needs. E.g., equipment, applications, support workers, training, etc.
- It is the responsibility of the education provider to fund and organise reasonable adjustments, not the parent or caregiver. This is true unless they can demonstrate unjustifiable hardship. (See the definition of 'Reasonable adjustments' on [p. 11](#)).
- You don't need to know everything about your child's disability all at once. You will learn as you go. Your child's needs may change. You can always ask for other supports later.

Where to get support and information

Communication support

Translating and Interpreting Service	National Relay Service	Free Translating Service
<p>They can help if you don't speak English.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Phone: 131 450• Website: https://www.tisnational.gov.au	<p>They can help if you need voice to text, text to voice, Auslan to English, or English to Auslan.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Phone: 1300 555 727 (Speak and Listen)• Website: https://www.accesshub.gov.au	<p>They can translate key personal documents. Visit the website to find out who can use this service.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Phone: 1800 962 100• Website: https://translating.homeaffairs.gov.au

Parenting, caregiving, and disability support

You should seek support as soon as you think you might need it. You don't need to be in crisis to ask for support.

- Raising Children Network (<https://www.raisingchildren.net.au>) – A hub of parenting information and resources
- Raising Children Network (<https://www.raisingchildren.net.au/grown-ups/services-support/about-services-support/helplines>) – A list of helplines for parents and caregivers
- Carer Gateway (<https://www.carergateway.gov.au>) – A support hub for caregivers
- Disability Advocacy Network Australia (<https://www.dana.org.au/find-an-advocate>) – A list of advocacy organisations
- Disability Australia Hub (<https://www.disabilityaustraliahub.com.au>) – A list of disability organisations
- Disability Gateway (<https://www.disabilitygateway.gov.au>) – Links to services and education and advocacy resources

Information about Australia's education system

- Settling in Australia (<https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/settling-in-australia/settle-in-australia/key-settlement-topics/education-and-training>)
- Australian Government Department of Education (<https://www.education.gov.au>)
- National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) (<https://ourguidelines.ndis.gov.au/how-ndis-supports-work-menu/mainstream-and-community-supports/who-responsible-supports-you-need/school-education>) – The NDIS funds disability supports and services

Other information resources in this series

- Explaining the Disability Standards for Education (<https://www.education.gov.au/disability-standards-education-2005/information-resources-students-disability-and-their-caregivers>) – A resource to help you learn more about your child's rights in education.
- Milestones and transitions (<https://www.education.gov.au/disability-standards-education-2005/students/english/milestones>) – A resource to help you support your child through times of change in education.
- Resources to support you and your child to make decisions and advocate for their needs:
 - Early childhood education and care – Advocating for your child: The early years (<https://www.education.gov.au/disability-standards-education-2005/resources/advocating-your-child>)
 - Primary school – Advocating with and for your child: Primary school (<https://www.education.gov.au/disability-standards-education-2005/students/english/advocating>)
 - Secondary school (and into further education and training) – Working together: Moving through secondary school (<https://www.education.gov.au/disability-standards-education-2005/resources/working-together>) and The Disability Standards for Education in practice: Action plan (<https://www.education.gov.au/disability-standards-education-2005/students/english/dse-in-practice>)
- Steps to raise concerns and resolve a complaint with your school – A resource to help you prevent, navigate, and resolve concerns with your child's school





[https://www.education.gov.au/disability-standards-education-2005/
information-resources-students-disability-and-their-caregivers](https://www.education.gov.au/disability-standards-education-2005/information-resources-students-disability-and-their-caregivers)