Australian Education Research Organisation
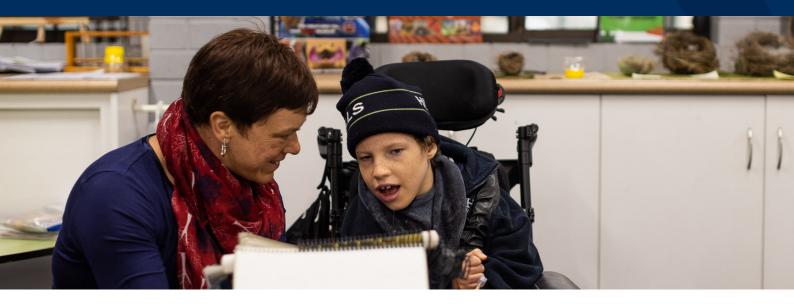
Engaging with families of children with disability

to support learning in primary and secondary schools

There is a great deal of evidence that families play a critical role in their child's learning and development. This resource details engagement strategies for families of children with disability by elaborating on the 'promising approaches' outlined in the Australian Education Research Organisation's (AERO) family engagement for learning practice guides.

The *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* protects Australians from discrimination based on disability. A child with a disability is entitled by law to be provided with an education program that is appropriate for their development and academic needs. Under the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* ('the standards'), education providers are obligated to make reasonable adjustments, consult with children and their families, and eliminate harassment and victimisation. The standards place responsibility for family engagement on schools, teachers and leaders. Families are important partners in supporting the learning of their children, so it is vital to understand how to work with them effectively as part of this engagement responsibility.

Many schools already build strong partnerships with families that honour their unique expertise in relation to their child. In all the strategies outlined here, it is important to recognise and celebrate the strengths, interests and talents of children with disability, doing so with warmth, empathy and inclusivity.

Context

The approaches detailed in this resource should be approached through the lens of both a social model of disability and a human rights model of disability. When these two models are adopted, evidence suggests children with disability's achievement in higher education is likely to increase (Boyle and Anderson 2020; Little et al. 2020).

Social model of disability

A social model of disability offers a distinction between the concepts of 'impairment' and 'disability'. Although an individual may experience impairments that affect them, such as the inability to walk or see, the level of disability they experience will depend on the society and environment they live in. Making adjustments for a child based on the social model of disability considers how physical and social environments, attitudes, and communication channels can be adjusted to enable that child living with impairments to participate in society on an equal basis with others (People With Disability Australia 2022).

Human rights model of disability

A human rights model of disability asserts that children with disability have the same human rights as everyone else. The model also argues that disability should not be a barrier to, nor an excuse to deny, these rights (Lawson and Beckett, 2021). This approach is supported by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disability (CRPD) (2006). Within an education setting, Article 24 of the CRPD asserts that all children should have access to an inclusive education that is provided equally and free from discrimination.

Disability affects each person differently. Strategies need to be adapted to suit the strengths, goals, values and needs of the child and family. The level of adjustment provided to each child will also vary. For some children, reasonable adjustments mean they require highly modified classes, changes to curriculum, routine or to the physical environment. For others, the adjustments may not be as extensive. The aim of reasonable adjustments is to enable participation with other children and access to learning opportunities.

Acknowledging and respecting families as the experts in their children's lives and inviting them to be active participants in the child's learning enhances the child's experience. It also improves teacher understanding and informs their practice. For example, a teacher could communicate with a child's family to determine:

- a child's preferences for people, places and experiences
- how the child communicates their wants and needs
- what type and level of support their child needs.

Collecting relevant information from families and collaborating with them regularly allows teachers to move forward with a strengths-based approach and provide a positive learning environment for students.

Promising approaches

The promising approaches outlined in AERO's family engagement for learning practice guides include:

- collaboratively planning and problem-solving with families
- recognising and supporting family engagement in learning at home
- supporting two-way, positive communication and providing light touch updates about learning
- promoting a literacy-rich environment at home (primary guide only).

✓ Promising approaches

Collaboratively planning and problem-solving with families

Collaborative planning and problem-solving between families, students and school staff has been shown to improve students' academic outcomes and social-behavioural competency. Collaborative planning could involve working together with families and students to identify students' individual goals (for example, around developing reading skills or transitioning smoothly from primary to secondary school), as well as strategies for achieving these goals.

The following are some considerations and strategies for collaboratively planning and problem-solving with families of children with disability.

Considerations and strategies for teachers

- Collaboration in disability support may include:

  – asking questions about the interests, talents and strengths of the child

  – establishing what goals the family has for the child (or the child has for themselves)

  – speaking with the child's family to understand the types of assistance needed

  – identifying any barriers the child may encounter and ways to overcome them, including possible adjustments

  – sharing relevant medical and therapist reports so all parties understand the disability and any needs or supports that can help.

- As part of any collaboration, written records of agreed adjustments should be captured, along with the start dates of any adjustments made.

- Collaborate not just with families, but also with relevant child support professionals – for example, occupational therapists or speech pathologists. Talk about practices used at school that support the child's strengths, preferences, interests and needs, as these may be used more broadly to support the child.

- For some children, developing an Individual Education Plan (IEP) may be an effective strategy to formally capture their strengths, preferences, interests and needs and to set appropriate and measurable goals. However, it is important that IEPs are not just a planning tool, and are used to influence classroom practice.

- When facilitating meetings, ensure that they are organised well in advance, held at a convenient place and have clearly communicated details, including:

  – the purpose of the meeting

  – who is attending

  – any information or documentation that the family will need to provide.

Reflection questions

- How do you communicate with families and decide on possible adjustments for their child?

- How do you collaborate with families to help ensure children can achieve their goals?

- How do you identify and overcome any barriers along the way?

✓ Promising approaches

Collaboratively planning and problem-solving with families

Collaborative planning and problem-solving between families, students and school staff has been shown to improve students' academic outcomes and social-behavioural competency. Collaborative planning could involve working together with families and students to identify students' individual goals (for example, around developing reading skills or transitioning smoothly from primary to secondary school), as well as strategies for achieving these goals.

The following are some considerations and strategies for collaboratively planning and problem-solving with families of children with disability.

Considerations and strategies for leaders

- School leaders are responsible for the systems and approaches in place at the service to facilitate collaboration and problem-solving. A team around the child (or, 'TAC') model is recommended to ensure that support is robust, yet inclusive. A TAC model encourages:

  – the child and family to be considered at the centre of all actions

  – an outcome-focused approach with an emphasis on positive engagement

  – a service framework that supports collaboration between all parties, including a well-coordinated approach from the school.

- Many families present key information about their child to a new teacher every single year. This can be an exhausting and traumatic process and can be avoided if information is shared between the staff currently working with the student and their new teaching team. Leaders have a role in facilitating the appropriate handover of key information that will enable smooth transitions between classrooms. This may include recording notes for all meetings and storing them centrally.

- School leadership must ensure and support effective development, completion and implementation of IEPs where they are appropriate to implement. This includes providing adequate time and resourcing for teachers to undertake these responsibilities.

Reflection questions

- Are there systems in place to allow for collaborative problem-solving with families and the broader support team on a consistent basis?

- How are student goals and successful strategies communicated between school staff as students transition from one year to the next?

✓ Promising approaches

Recognising and supporting family engagement in learning at home

This promising approach is about recognising and supporting learning that takes place in the home. For there to be genuine recognition and support of families' role in learning at home, families and school staff need to be seen as equal, trusted partners who can influence a student's learning.

The following are some considerations and strategies around recognising and supporting families of children with disability with learning at home.

Considerations and strategies for teachers

- Building a trusting partnership with families starts with understanding the needs of their child and how to adjust for them appropriately.

- Understanding how families already support their child's learning at home can provide valuable insights into how the child can be supported at school.

- Bridging home and school environments is important to ensure student success (Haines et al. 2015).

- Some targeted guidance may be beneficial to families around their involvement in their child's learning, such as providing families with regular updates about what is happening at school so they can communicate with their child about what they are learning.

Considerations and strategies for leaders

- Invite parents, carers and other supports for the child (for example, occupational therapists or speech pathologists) to discuss the child's learning needs and how to align learning at home.

- Consider any additional support channels or networks available in the area that can help children and families with learning at home. Communicate your knowledge of the local support services to teachers, so they can share this information with families.

- Leaders should set a culture where teachers proactively support families and support people to talk to their child about their daily experiences at school, including what they are learning.

- Leaders should also provide time and additional resources to teachers and other staff supporting students with disability to ensure that needs can be met.

Reflection questions

- How do families you work with already support their children's learning?

- How do you show families that you recognise and value their role in children's learning?

Reflection question

- There is no 'one-size-fits-all' way of recognising and supporting family engagement in learning at home. What does it look like in your school?

APST: Focus Areas 3.7 and 7.3
APSP: Professional Practice 5 – Engaging and working with the community

✓ Promising approaches

Supporting two-way, positive communication and providing light touch updates about learning

Effective two-way communication draws on the knowledge and expertise of both families and teachers about children's learning needs and achievements. Light touch updates from schools to families about student learning improve students' academic achievement, particularly for students at risk of falling behind.

The following are some considerations and strategies around supporting two-way positive communications and providing light touch updates about learning to families of children with disability.

Considerations and strategies for teachers

- Ensure your communication (through both verbal and nonverbal cues) is warm, empathetic and positive to support inclusivity. This includes using appropriate phrasing when talking about the child and their disability. Avoid terms like 'suffers from' or other negative, deficit-based phrases. Listen to how the family talks about the disability and follow their cues.

- Have regular, open and honest conversations with families about a child's needs and progress, and make sure to highlight their child's achievements.

- Discuss any adjustments made to support a child at school with their family. This exchange can help you determine whether their child is finding these adjustments beneficial and whether any further changes are required.

- Families know their child best and will be able to help tailor any broad knowledge you have about possible adjustments to suit their child's individual needs.

Considerations and strategies for leaders

- Leaders are responsible for establishing and reiterating the partnership between teachers and support staff. Support staff should work collaboratively with teachers and keep them up to date with any observations about children that can inform classroom practice.

- Ask about and accommodate family members' preferences for how to connect about their child's learning (for example, video conferencing, phone, email or in-person). This information could be gathered centrally and recorded at a school level (within privacy considerations), ensuring consistency and reducing individual teacher workload.

- School leaders have a role in defining processes, particularly creating clear pathways for light-touch, consistent communication, potentially involving multiple school staff.

Reflection questions

- How could you personalise light touch updates, keeping them positive, accessible and to the point?

- How do you invite families to take part in conversations around learning?

Reflection questions

- Has your school consulted with families about their preferred frequency of time and day for communications?

- How do you put systems in place to streamline communications when a child has multiple people supporting them?

✓ Promising approaches

Promoting a literacy-rich environment at home (primary school)

A literacy-rich environment is where language in various forms (like talking, listening, reading, storytelling and visual arts) is part of daily life. This type of environment allows children to practice their literacy skills often, in functional ways. One specific way schools can support a literacy-rich environment at home is by promoting shared reading.

The following are some considerations and strategies for promoting a literacy-rich environment at home for families of children with disability.

Considerations and strategies for teachers

- Understand that families might have competing priorities and that providing a literacy-rich environment may not be seen as one. Share your knowledge of why you consider a literacy-rich environment to be important, what this looks like at school and how you could help support this at home.

- Determine what additional supports the child may be receiving in relation to literacy development (for example, speech pathology) and establish a professional relationship to collaborate with that provider.

- Connect with the child's family and support professionals to consider the providing:

  – additional resources that the child has shown an interest in

  – resources that are new to the child but may provide benefits

  – visual materials or any other items that can assist the child and family to engage with the resources.

Considerations and strategies for leaders

- Work in collaboration with both teachers and families to create literacy-rich environments at home and in the school that promote the child's interests and support their needs. For example, some children respond better to the combination of both visual and verbal cues, so you might embed this strategy into your practice.

- School leaders with a wealth of knowledge about children's learning and development are well-positioned to support literacy-rich environments at home and at school.

Reflection question

- How do you support families to create a 'literacy-rich environment' at home for each child?

Reflection questions

- What additional resources or strategies to promote 'literacy-rich environment' have you explored together with children and their families?

- How might aspects of 'literacy-rich environments' change for students across different learning and developmental milestones?

🔗 References

Anaby DR, Khan S, Tremblay S, Campbell WN, Missiuna C, Shaw SR, Bennett S, Kalubi-Lukusa J and Camden C (2019) 'Recommended practices to organize and deliver school-based services for children with disabilities: A scoping review.', *Child: Care, Health & Development*, 45(1):15–27.

Boyle C and Anderson J (2020) 'The justification for inclusive education in Australia', *PROSPECTS*, 49(3):203–217, doi:10.1007/s11125-020-09494-x.

'Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities' (CRPD) (2006), https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html.

Elder BC, Rood CE and Damiani ML (2018) 'Writing Strength-Based IEPs for Students with Disabilities in Inclusive Classrooms', *International Journal of Whole Schooling*, 14(1):116–155.

Garbacz SA (2019) 'Enhancing Family Engagement in Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports', *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 54(4):195–203.

Haines SJ, Gross JMS, Blue-Banning M, Francis GL and Turnbull AP (2015) 'Fostering Family--School and Community-School Partnerships in Inclusive Schools: Using Practice as a Guide', *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 40(3):227–239.

Lawson A and Beckett AE (2021) 'The social and human rights models of disability: towards a complementarity thesis', *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 25(2):348–379, doi:10.1080/13642987.2020.1783533.

Little C, deLeeuw RR, Andriana E, Zanuttini J and David E (2020) 'Social Inclusion through the Eyes of the Student: Perspectives from Students with Disabilities on Friendship and Acceptance', *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*1–20, doi:10.1080/1034912X.2020.1837352.

People with Disability Australia. (2022). Social Model of Disability. https://pwd.org.au/resources/models-of-disability/

Ryan C and Quinlan E (2018) 'Whoever Shouts the Loudest: Listening to Parents of Children with Disabilities', *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 31:203–214.

Smith TE, Sheridan SM, Kim EM, Park S and Beretvas SN (2020) 'The Effects of Family-School Partnership Interventions on Academic and Social-Emotional Functioning: a Meta-Analysis Exploring What Works for Whom.', *Educational Psychology Review*, 32(2):511–544.

📄 Further reading

- Disability Standards for Education 2005, https://www.dese.gov.au/disability-standards-education-2005

- NSW Department of Education – Universal Design for Learning, https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/learning-from-home/teaching-at-home/teaching-and-learning-resources/universal-design-for-learning

- Disability Discrimination (Australian Human Rights Commission), https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/employers/disability-discrimination

- Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations), https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html