

Transitions to school for children with disability or developmental delay

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Transitioning to school and between educational settings is a significant milestone for children and families. Successful transitions lead to better outcomes for children and enhance continuity of learning and development. A successful transition occurs when a child and their family feel a sense of belonging in their new environment.

Educators, teachers and school and service leaders are uniquely placed to support children and families in establishing and maintaining a sense of belonging at critical transition points.

You can use the evidence-based practices presented in this guide to **support children with disability or developmental delay** as they transition to their first year of school. It is designed to help services and schools work together to achieve more successful transitions.

The guide is organised into two distinct categories:

- [Collaborative partnerships](#)
- [Child-centred approaches](#)

Many ECEC services and schools already plan for transitions with a child-centred approach and draw on collaborative partnerships to enhance the process. However, many educators and teachers would like to gain a better understanding of how these practices look in action.

Some of the examples offered here may not apply in all contexts or be appropriate for all children. Reasonable adjustments should be made where necessary to ensure appropriate support is provided for children with disability or developmental delay and to accommodate families across different contexts and cultures.

To find out more about the research and evidence behind this practice guide, see our [evidence summary](#).



Collaborative partnerships

[Links to national standards and frameworks](#)

Early Years Learning Framework

- Principle: Partnerships
- Practice: Continuity of learning and transitions

National Quality Standard

- 6.1 Supportive relationships with families (all elements)
- 6.2 Collaborative partnerships (all elements)

Australian Professional Standards for Teachers

- 1.6 Strategies to support full participation of learners with disability
- 3.7 Engage parents/carers in the educative process
- 7.4 Engage with professional teaching networks and broader communities
- 4.1 Support student participation
- 7.3 Engage with parents/carers

Australian Professional Standard for Principals

- Professional Practice: Engaging and working with the community

Disability Standards for Education

- 5.2 Participation standards
- 7.2 Standards for support services

Why collaborative partnerships are important

Children are more likely to experience successful transitions when families, educators, teachers, school and service leaders and other professionals such as allied health work together. These partnerships are essential for children with disability or developmental delay, who benefit from personalised educational supports as they transition from ECEC services to their first year of school. Research has found that collaboration between educators and teachers in ECEC and schools, allied health professionals, and families can enable successful transitions to school for children with disability or developmental delay.

These practices:

- help children to feel safe, secure, and supported throughout the transition
- assist children to adapt what they have learned in ECEC to the school context
- support educators and teachers to look at ways to adapt the learning environment, curricula, teaching approaches, and school and ECEC policies to better facilitate the inclusion and participation of children with disability or developmental delay
- promote a greater sense of belonging and higher-quality educational and social outcomes for children with disability or developmental delay at school.

What collaborative partnerships look like in practice

The following practices contribute to collaborative partnerships in transitions to school for children with disability or developmental delay.

Build a team around the child

‘Team around the child’ is a framework for providing holistic and individualised support to children with disability or developmental delay during and after their transition to school. The team might include educators, teachers and leaders from ECEC services and schools, family members, allied health professionals, and outside school support agency staff. The family is a critical member of this team, as the child’s first teachers and advocates.

Educators and teachers in ECEC services and schools can:

- maximise the participation of the child’s family in the collaboration, and commit to recognising the expertise of families, respecting their choices, and working with families as equal partners and shared decision-makers in transition planning
- seek permission from the child’s family to speak to the child’s support workers, outside school support agency staff and allied health providers, or invite the family to share information about the transition with other professionals who support the child
- work with the family to map key professionals who know the child and can support their transition to school, and identify strategies for engaging them
- consider additional professionals who are not yet involved with the child, but whose support may become important later in the transition process, such as school support staff or outside school hours care educators
- learn what each team member can contribute to the transition, including their role in relation to the child, their expertise, and any legal or administrative arrangements
- use Reimagine Australia’s [‘working together agreement’](#) to guide and track collaboration.

Leaders in ECEC services and schools can:

- prioritise creating sufficient time and space for educators and teachers to work with families and other professionals to support children with disability or developmental delay
- promote family engagement as a core practice that benefits all children
- establish and maintain relationships between the ECEC service or school and other organisations during and beyond transition times to facilitate collaboration between individual practitioners and teams
- work with the wider service or school community to promote a culture that supports the inclusion of children with disability, and values partnerships, shared decision-making and common goals.
- hold a family-centred planning meeting with all team members to learn more about the child's strengths and interests, and discuss the child's and family's support needs
- ensure all meetings are scheduled at a time and place convenient and welcoming to the family, with sufficient notice to allow support for the child to be arranged, and clear information in advance about who will be there and what will be achieved
- develop a plan for supporting the child during and after the transition, with input from the family and other professionals who know the child and family well
- develop goals for a successful transition focused on supporting the child and family to establish a sense of belonging at school and a plan for how and when to check in on the progress of each goal.

Sustain collaboration throughout the transition

Transitions to school are a process, not an event. Collaborative partnerships begin well before the transition and continue until the child has achieved a sense of belonging at school.

Before the transition, all parties involved can:

- establish the team around the child (see above), and clarify roles and responsibilities
 - identify a lead professional to coordinate the transition and provide a clear point of contact for the family throughout the transition process
 - establish the family's preferred method of communication, and use it to provide information to families about the transition and available supports
 - encourage families to ask questions, clarify information, and make informed choices about the types of support provided to their child at school
 - obtain initial information from the family about the child's strengths, needs, support strategies at home and in the community, and their feelings about the transition
- During the transition, all parties involved (coordinated by the lead professional) can:
- implement agreed steps in the transition plan for the child, including participation in transition experiences for all children (such as school visits), and additional strategies or experiences to support their unique needs (such as individualised supports)
 - provide information about planned transition experiences to families as early as possible, so they can help to coordinate support for their child
 - monitor the plan and the child's progress through follow-up observations, team meetings and regular discussions with families, teachers and other professionals
 - check in with families regularly, but informally, about how the transition is going, for example during school drop-off and pick-up times
 - celebrate the child's successes, and encourage families to notice and share these

- modify support strategies as the child's needs change, incorporating suggestions from families based on their own observations of the child's progress
- coordinate contact with outside-school support agencies to ensure information is shared and modifications to support strategies can be made collaboratively
- sustain formal or informal collaboration until the child has achieved a sense of belonging at school, recognising that this will take a different amount of time for each child.

Share clear, consistent, accessible information

A clear, consistent and accessible approach to communication with families of children with disability or developmental delay is key to successful collaboration.

Educators and teachers in ECEC services and schools can:

- familiarise themselves with the types of information that families of children with disability or developmental delay might need to supply or obtain during the transition to school, including administrative, funding and diagnostic processes for their child
- be proactive in two-way communication with families and other professionals to ensure that information is provided to the right people at the right time
- work across organisations, including ECEC services, schools and other services, to ensure information provided to families is coherent and consistent
- understand the terminology used by different organisations about disability, as well as different perspectives on disability that may affect how communication is framed
- recognise the information burden that families may be facing, and be sensitive when following up requests for information or responding to families' questions

- recognise how diversity might affect families' communication preferences, such as:
 - beliefs and understandings about disability and inclusion
 - past experiences of interactions with professionals
 - individual needs and preferences of the family
 - cultural or linguistic backgrounds
 - socio-economic factors
 - distance from support services or facilities.

Leaders in ECEC services and schools can work together to:

- provide a single point of contact for each family to support their child's transition (lead professional), and ensure that person has access to relevant information
- streamline communications to families about transitions to avoid 'information overload'
- offer accessible information specific to children with disability or developmental delay, or help families to locate this information from other authoritative sources
- establish regular information-sharing protocols with relevant partner organisations.



Reflection questions

1. How do you create a team around children with disability or developmental delay? How can you maximise families' involvement in this partnership? Whose voices are privileged and whose are missing?
 - a. What expertise would everyone bring to this team?
 - b. Which values, beliefs and goals might they share?
2. At what points in the transition do you collaborate best with families and other professionals?
 - a. How do you collaborate before the transition?
 - b. How do you sustain the collaboration throughout the transition?
3. Imagine you are the parent of a child with disability or developmental delay. What information would you need and when? What could help you to navigate this?

More information

Read AERO's 'engaging with families of children with disability' resources for further tips on supporting children with disability and developmental delay.

Child-centred approaches

Links to national standards and frameworks

Early Years Learning Framework

- Practice: Responsiveness to children
- Practice: Continuity of learning and transitions

National Quality Standard

- 1.1.2 Child-centred
- 1.1.3 Program learning opportunities
- 5.1 Relationships between educators and children (all elements)
- 6.2.1 Transitions

Australian Professional Standards for Teachers

- 1.6 Strategies to support full participation of learners with disability
- 4.1 Support student participation
- 6.3 Engage with colleagues and improve professional practice

Australian Professional Standard for Principals

- Professional Practice: Leading teaching and learning

Disability Standards for Education

- 3.4 Reasonable adjustments
- 3.5 Consulting the student

Why child-centred approaches are important

A child-centred approach can help children with disability or developmental delay establish and maintain a strong connection to their school. A child-centred approach to transitions prioritises warm, trusting relationships and a genuine effort to know and connect with each child, enabling educators and teachers to adapt learning environments and experiences to suit all children in their care. During transitions, educators and teachers can come together to make decisions about which practices will work best for each child, based on their needs, and with consideration of their interests and perspectives.

These practices:

- express a warm and welcoming attitude toward children with disability or developmental delay and their families
- hold high expectations for all children
- provide the right level of support at the right time
- involve open communication and shared decision making with all members of the child's support team.

Using a child-centred approach

The following practices contribute to a child-centred approach in transitions to school for children with disability or developmental delay.

Cultivate positive relationships with children

A child-centred approach begins with developing positive relationships with children with disability or developmental delay and creating safe and trusting ECEC and school environments. When children have positive relationships with the adults in their lives through the transition to school, they are more likely to feel a sense of belonging.

Educators and teachers in ECEC services and schools can:

- prioritise responsive relationships with all children as the foundation of their practice
- model inclusive attitudes to disability in what they say, what they do and the messages they communicate through the setup of the learning environment
- notice and celebrate the child's progress in building relationships with adults or peers
- utilise friendships or sibling relationships to help the child feel supported
- adopt positive behaviour management strategies, encouraging positive behaviour and minimising potential triggers for challenging behaviour for each child
- monitor their own wellbeing and mindset and seek support if they need to.

Leaders in ECEC services and schools can:

- ensure that their statement of philosophy (ECEC services) or vision and values (schools) is inclusive of children with disability or developmental delay, and is used by educators and teachers as a guiding document for children's transitions
- promote policies and public communications that reflect a commitment to ensuring all children feel they belong, and can contribute and succeed
- model and support positive relationships in their own interactions with children, families and colleagues during transitions for children with disability or developmental delay
- provide and promote appropriate professional learning for educators and teachers
- support staff to develop and maintain positive relationships with children and families, including offering confidential, timely assistance when challenges arise.

Build on children's strengths

A child-centred approach focuses on children's abilities and strengths, and how to support them to achieve their potential. It recognises that all children have agency in their own transition and provides opportunities for children to contribute to the transition process.

Educators and teachers in ECEC services and schools can:

- encourage children to think about what they can do to make their own transitions more successful and enjoyable, and – when appropriate – support them by implementing their ideas
- use transition curriculum (see below) or other tools to document children's strengths and needs, and share these appropriately with others involved in the child's transition
- develop goals for the child's transition in partnership with the family, and based on the evidence regarding successful transitions, to create a vision of what success looks like for each child, and how success can be achieved
- create a learning environment that enables children of all abilities to experience success as early as possible in the transition process, recognising that families of children with disability or developmental delay may define success in distinctive ways
- ask about children's strengths, interests, and what they enjoy doing, when obtaining information from children, families and other professionals
- reflect on their own expectations about children's abilities at the point of transition to school, and challenge any assumptions informed by a 'deficit' view of disability.

Leaders in ECEC services and schools can:

- promote the use of tools to monitor children's strengths, such as transition statements
- foster a strengths-based approach to learning and development for all children, emphasising the unique strengths of children with disability or developmental delay
- establish processes for documentation about children's strengths and needs to be shared between educators, teachers and families, within confidentiality constraints.



Transition statements

ECEC educators and teachers in some states and territories complete a formal **transition statement** (or transition learning and development statement) to summarise each child's learning and development. For children with disability or developmental delay, this provides an important collaboration opportunity. Collaboration can occur between ECEC services, schools, families and early childhood intervention or allied health services that support the child and family. These documents are especially valuable for children with disability or developmental delay, as they help to ensure that knowledge about the child is shared at the point of transition.

Transition statements (or similar documents) provide individualised information about:

- the child's strengths
- the child's interests, ideas, perspectives and preferences
- how the child communicates
- activities or routines the child may need assistance with (in particular, self-care routines such as dressing, toileting, and meals)
- specific strategies that help the child meaningfully participate.

Processes for completing and sharing transition statements vary across states and territories, but it is typically completed by an ECEC service (with input from families and other professionals who work with the child) and then shared with the child's primary school.

Provide responsive teaching and support

During the transition to school, children with disability or developmental delay may benefit from support that responds to their particular needs to enable participation in certain aspects of ECEC and school life. This may include appropriate support to participate in experiences, events and excursions before, during and after the transition.

Responsive, personalised support is best determined through collaboration between ECEC services, schools, families and allied health professionals who know the child (see Collaborative Partnerships). The list below is a general guide to strategies that may be considered.

Educators and teachers in ECEC services and schools can:

- identify ways for the school to include or adapt strategies that have been effectively used in the child's ECEC service, home or early childhood intervention service
- set up the learning environment in ways that maximise the child's independence (for example, placing materials where the child can easily find and retrieve them), and ensure the child's specific health and safety needs are accommodated
- provide opportunities for reciprocal visits for both the child and family and educators and teachers, to observe personalised support and strategies in action
- While setting and articulating high expectations for each child:
 - design or adapt curriculum around the child's needs and interests
 - break down larger skills and tasks into smaller, achievable components
 - tailor the complexity of instructions to the capacity of each child
 - allow the child sufficient time to complete tasks, or permit frequent breaks.

Leaders in ECEC services and schools can:

- support professional learning on evidence-based strategies for supporting children with disability or developmental delay
- promote high-impact teaching strategies that benefit all children
- ensure all experiences, events and excursions are accessible to children with disability or developmental delay, including physical and social environments.

Reflection questions

1. What does it look like to create a warm and welcoming ECEC or school environment for children with disability or developmental delay and their families?
 - a. How is this done at your ECEC service or school, in policies and practices?
 - b. How do you know if children and their families feel welcome?
2. How do you identify and celebrate a child's strengths, talents and successes with their family and other professionals during their transition to school? How else might you do this?
3. What personalised supports or teaching strategies do you provide for children with disability or developmental delay, and how do these enhance their transition to school?
 - a. How do you gather information about what will work best for each child?
 - b. How can you learn more about evidence-based strategies?

More information

For further resources and tips on supporting children with disability or developmental delay, see AERO's:

- [Transitions to school for children with disability or developmental delay evidence summary](#)
- [Engaging with families of children with disability – early childhood education and care guide](#)
- [Engaging with families of children with disability – schools guide](#)

The Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority's (ACECQA) has also produced a suite of [Disability Discrimination Act 1992 \(DDA\) resources](#).



Acknowledgment

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