

Disability and children's mental health

In Australia, most school-aged children with a disability (89%) attend a mainstream school. Yet, 63% of these students have been found to experience difficulties at school, while only some receive additional support¹. Meeting the needs of children with disabilities can be challenging for schools and families. However, effective support for children's mental health and wellbeing involves efforts to meet the social, emotional and learning needs of all children.

Children with disabilities

Children with disabilities can sometimes be seen as 'different' by other children. In some settings, this may lead to being excluded from play or peer relationships and experiences of social isolation. Such experiences of isolation and exclusion are common contributors to children's mental health difficulties.

However, children with additional needs can experience good mental health and wellbeing in respectful and supportive environments that promote their strengths. All children benefit from having positive relationships and feeling a sense of belonging at school. These positive experiences are especially important for children with additional needs.

In this overview, we look at how disability affects children and their families, why children with additional needs are at a greater risk of mental health difficulties, and how schools can promote mental health and wellbeing in children who have additional needs. With careful attention and planning, and well coordinated efforts between parents, carers and schools, children with disabilities can be supported to participate and be included at school and have their needs met.

How disability affects children

The term 'disability' refers to a wide range of conditions that in some way limit people's ability to manage everyday living. Different disabilities are often grouped in categories such as intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, sensory and speech disabilities, acquired brain injury or physical disabilities.

Having a disability places limits on the things that children can do. It may restrict them from participating in some activities that their classmates do. It is vital to see the whole child, not just the disability or illness. It is also important to offer support for what children with additional needs can do, so as to reduce restrictions on their participation and maximise their opportunities for success. This approach helps to build self-confidence and motivation for trying new things. It promotes ways of valuing and including all children.

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Families and children with disabilities

A family who cares for a child with a disability is faced with many challenges. These challenges can affect the whole family or particular individuals within it. For example, social isolation often affects families who have a child with a disability. Friends and extended family may find it difficult to understand and support the family's situation. Time for catching up with friends or going on outings may be severely reduced as family members strive to meet the child's additional needs.

For parents and carers, the challenges often include working out how to access the right services for their child, and dealing with the roller coaster ride of emotions that can accompany parenting a child with a disability. There may be a range of challenges associated with caring for your child's additional needs on a day-to-day basis. These may include managing the challenging behaviours of some children with disabilities, the need to administer daily treatments, helping children with self-care (eg bathing, dressing and eating), advocating for your child's needs, and making sure there are facilities that can accommodate your child's needs when you visit places outside the home (eg wheel chair access).

Having a brother or a sister with a disability can affect siblings in different ways. They may feel a range of emotions – jealousy for parents spending more time with the child with the disability, guilt for complaining about the strains that the child with the disability puts on the family, or joy when their brother or sister accomplishes something new for the first time. Siblings may sometimes get teased about their brother or sister with a disability. Having a break and spending time with friends can be really helpful for siblings. Being able to talk about their feelings and getting support from parents, school and/ or support services is also really important.

Disability and children's mental health

Research tells us that children with disabilities have a greater chance of developing mental health problems than children without disabilities². High rates of mental health difficulties have also been found in young people who are hearing impaired, have cerebral palsy, epilepsy or chronic illness.

The level of the child's impairment and support and attitudes from others are key factors that influence the mental health and wellbeing of children with disabilities. When those around them take effective steps to include children with disabilities and ensure their needs are met, they can help foster positive mental health and wellbeing. However, when this does not occur, mental health difficulties are more likely to develop in some children.

Some children with disabilities may have difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships because the impairments caused by the disability limit or restrict them from participating in everyday activities with their peers. Children with disabilities are also more likely to experience situations that negatively affect their mental health, such as bullying,

Some children with disabilities have difficulty in picking up social cues that allow them to participate cooperatively with others (eg following the rules of a game, taking turns). Children with physical disabilities may find it hard to participate in games that other children play. Some children may find it difficult to approach their peers to engage in social activities. As a result, children with disabilities may lose confidence in their ability to make friends or to participate in activities that other children their age enjoy.

The combination of these sorts of factors can lead children with a disability to be at risk of developing mental health difficulties, such as low self-esteem, and mental health disorders, such as depression. However, when families, schools and communities take steps to understand the child's individual needs, build on their strengths, and provide supportive and respectful environments, children with additional needs can experience good mental health and their potential for learning can be maximised.





Key principles for supporting children with disabilities

Build strengths step-by-step

Breaking tasks into small steps helps to ensure success and supports children's learning. Support children's confidence by emphasising what they can do.

Be an advocate for children with disabilities

Making sure that others understand the need to include and value all children benefits the individual child and promotes a caring community.

Focus on the child and their individual needs

Children's needs should be assessed individually and regularly. It's best not to assume that all children with a particular disability have the same problems and needs. An individual child's needs may also change over time.

Develop partnerships

Parents and carers cannot meet the complex needs of children with disabilities or chronic illness alone. Collaborative involvement between families, schools and health professionals helps to ensure the best outcomes for children's development and mental health.

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Using the KidsMatter Primary framework to help children with disabilities

KidsMatter Primary was found to have a positive effect on students with a disability by strengthening their wellbeing and reducing mental health difficulties³. Below are some ways of using the KidsMatter Primary framework to help children with disabilities.

1 Creating a positive school community for children with disabilities

Developing a culture of belonging and inclusion at school is especially important for children with disabilities and their families. This involves finding out about the particular needs of children with disabilities, tailoring teaching practices accordingly and collaborating effectively with parents and carers. Schools can also support belonging and inclusion by promoting values of friendship, cooperation and respect, and by ensuring that the school's policies and practices address instances of bullying or harassment quickly and effectively when they occur.

2 Social and emotional learning (SEL) for children with disabilities

When planning a SEL curriculum, teachers of children with disabilities should be sure to take into account their particular learning needs. By assessing each child's social and emotional skills individually, a learning plan can be developed to build skills step-by-step. Breaking down complex skills into smaller concrete steps is important for ensuring success. Opportunities for students to practise should be provided for each step. Providing structured peer-to-peer learning activities, in which students learn social skills through direct interaction with one another, is often particularly helpful. Praise or rewards given for effort and achievement of each step help to consolidate new skills. Any materials used to teach social and emotional skills need to be considered in terms of their appropriateness for use with children with disabilities.

3 Supporting families of children with disabilities

Having good support is especially important for families of children with disabilities. Schools can provide support by listening to parents and carers, finding out about the particular needs of their children, and collaborate to meet those needs. Schools can also provide relevant information and links to services that can assist families. By facilitating access to support networks, disability advocacy groups, and professional services, schools can help families of children with disabilities get the range of support they require.

4 Helping children with mental health difficulties

Getting help early in the lifespan can make a significant difference to ensure that children's disabilities are appropriately identified, and that professional help and learning support are provided as soon as possible. This helps to minimise the effects of the disability and provides developmental support. Some disabilities, particularly those involving learning and social difficulties, may only become apparent after children begin school. In these circumstances, schools can provide crucial assistance through facilitating children's referral for specialist assessment and services.

Schools can increase the protective factors that support children's mental health by providing an inclusive and accepting environment for all children, including those with additional needs and mental health difficulties. It also helps to have effective working relationships and clear referral pathways with services, and work in partnership with parents, carers and health professionals in order to meet the needs of children with disabilities. By paying attention to the mental health needs of children with disabilities and identifying mental health concerns, school staff can facilitate appropriate support for children's mental health difficulties.

For more, see the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on children with autism, children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and recognising and getting help for children with a mental health difficulty.

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2006, Disability updates: Children with disabilities, Bulletin, 42, Australian Government.

² Dix, K.L., et al (2010). KidsMatter for Students with a Disability: Evaluation Report Ministerial Advisory Committee: Students with Disabilities South Australian Government. Australian Government.

³ Dix, K.L., et al (2010). KidsMatter for Students with a Disability: Evaluation Report Ministerial Advisory Committee: Students with Disabilities. South Australian Government.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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