Disability: Suggestions for families

Parenting a child with a disability is often challenging, especially when your child’s additional needs are complex and time-consuming. Working together as a family and getting support from relatives, friends and professional services is really important. The following suggestions may be helpful to assist with these challenges and promote family wellbeing.

Be an advocate for your child

Being an advocate for your child involves letting others know about your child’s needs and working with them to find ways to have them met. You can be active in this by finding out what kinds of additional support is available for your child and making sure this is provided. This can be hard work at times, so gather allies to help you. Supportive allies may include family, friends, school staff or health professionals who understand your child’s abilities and difficulties and are committed to meeting the child’s needs. There are also a number of disability advocacy groups who can provide valuable support.

Work collaboratively with the school

Discuss your child’s needs with school staff and work with them to develop strategies for supporting your child’s learning and their social and emotional development. Talk with school staff about ways you can collaborate to actively support your child’s involvement in school life so that it is a positive and enjoyable experience. For example, you might write a letter to introduce your child to the class. Make sure to communicate regularly with your child’s teacher so you can share information, provide updates and continue to work together effectively. One strategy is to use a booklet for daily or weekly communication between home and school. Another approach is to set up regular telephone or meeting times to talk about how your child is managing socially as well as academically.

Teach social and emotional skills

Social relationships can sometimes be difficult for all children. Parents can help by supporting the development of social and emotional skills. Extra help may be needed by children with disabilities if they have been absent from school due to ill health and have to re-engage with others, or if they face intolerance or bullying behaviour. For some children, the nature of the disability may mean that learning social skills is difficult and therefore requires lots of guidance and practice. For more, see the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on social and emotional learning.
Provide opportunities for developing friendships

Inviting classmates over to play can be a good way to strengthen a budding friendship. Help your child to choose activities or games that they can do confidently with friends. With younger children, or if your child’s social skills are limited, ensure you are available to provide support if needed.

Support siblings

Be open with siblings about the challenges that affect their brother or sister with a disability. Provide important acknowledgement by showing you appreciate their help, but also ensure that they have time and space for themselves. Listening to their feelings and experiences lets them know you are there for them too. Setting aside some regular time to spend with your other children, even if it is brief, helps to maintain positive family relationships.

Get support for you

Parents have needs too. There is no such thing as a ‘perfect’ or ‘super’ parent. It’s important to set realistic expectations of what you can and can’t do. Take some time out. Spend time with friends, your partner, or alone doing something that you enjoy. Asking friends, family or respite services for help when you need it is a really important coping strategy for families. Talking with other parents or carers of children with disabilities can be very helpful.

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Why connect at school?

Peter held his daughter Rachel’s hand tightly. It was a first for him to be taking Rachel to school. His heart was pounding as they made their way to the classroom. There was the teacher, Ms Lim. She smiled at them, “Welcome Rachel, hello Peter.” Another child waved at Rachel. She seemed happy to have a friend to play with. So why was Peter still nervous?

“We’re having a morning tea for parents next week. Will you come?” Ms Lim asked. “I’ll try,” Peter said. “It all seems different from when I went to school,” he thought as he headed out the door. “They seem to want parents to be involved. I wonder what else has changed?”

Schools can be scary places, and not just for children

Parents and carers also need to feel welcome and at ease to get the most out of being involved with their children’s school.

When parents and carers are involved and connected with school, children are better learners and have better mental health and wellbeing. This is an important emphasis in schools nowadays that may be very different from what parents or carers remember, or what they may have experienced in another country.

Connecting at school

Being connected at school is not about having mobile phones and computers. It’s about knowing you can get support, that you will be listened to, and that you can work together with school staff to help your child learn and develop. Working together to care for children is the best way for schools and parents and carers to support children’s mental health and wellbeing.

- When schools and parents and carers work together, children find it easier to understand what is expected from them and are better able to manage. They have fewer behaviour problems and do better at school.
- When parents and carers are connected to school it helps them get support when they need it. Support may come from talking with teachers or other school staff, or from making connections with other parents and carers. Schools help families to connect through having lots of different activities that parents and carers can get involved in.
- Being connected to the school helps keep parents and carers informed. Parents and carers who are informed about what their children are learning at school and about opportunities to get involved are able to support them better at home.
School is a place for adults to make new friends too!

Having opportunities to get to know other parents and carers, to find out how to support children's learning, or to get involved in class activities can help parents and carers feel connected to the school.

Working together is the best way to support children's mental health and wellbeing.

How parents and carers can get connected to the school

- Make contact with your child’s teacher and keep in touch. Ask for help if you don’t understand something.
- Check for notices that are sent home and keep informed about school activities through the school newsletter.
- Attend information sessions and social activities at the school whenever you can.
- Make contact with other parents and carers at your school: perhaps meet up informally with parents or carers of other children in your child's class, find out about parent social groups that meet at or near the school, or join a parent committee.
- Take an interest in the school council and consider joining it if you have the time and skills.

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Belonging at school makes a difference


Aunt Sue also talked to Tommy’s friend, Lulu, who had come over to play. “What about you, Lulu? How do you like school?” “It’s good. If I need the teacher then I have to put up my hand. But if I need help at playtime I can ask Jackie,” said Lulu. “Is Jackie your friend?” “Jackie’s my buddy. She’s a big girl.” “What does a buddy do?” “She helps me if I don’t know where to go or other stuff. She helps to look after me ‘cos she’s big and I’m new.”

Belonging improves mental health, wellbeing and learning

All children need to feel that school is a safe place where people will care about them, where their needs for support, respect and friendship will be met, and where they will be able to get help to work out problems. When these needs are met children develop a sense of belonging at school. Belonging is very important for children’s mental health and wellbeing.

Children who feel that they belong at school are happier, more relaxed and have fewer behavioural problems than other students. They are also more motivated to learn and be more successful with their school work.

Research into children’s mental health has found that a sense of belonging and connectedness at school helps to protect children against mental health difficulties and improves their learning.

Making friends and having positive relationships with teachers helps children develop a sense of belonging at school. Having older ‘buddies’ to turn to helps younger children feel that school is a place where they can get help if they need it. Looking after younger children encourages caring and helping in older children and helps to reduce conflicts and bullying. These are some of the ways that children’s sense of belonging at school can be supported.

Starting school is a big change for children

Not only do they have to cope with schoolwork and teachers, but they also have to get used to being part of a class and a whole school. A lot more is expected of children when they start school and there are lots more people to get on with. It helps children to know that there are people at school who will look after them and care about their needs.
More ways schools can help create a sense of belonging

As part of KidsMatter Primary, schools look closely at ways they can continue to build strong positive respectful relationships with all students and families. This includes things like:

- making the school environment welcoming for all students and families
- encouraging teachers to get to know all their students and their families
- identifying ways of improving communication with families
- focusing on child and family strengths
- making sure that school policies on safety, welfare and discipline are clearly communicated and support a sense of belonging for children and families.

All children need to feel that school is a safe place.

How parents and carers can help

Parents and carers can work with school staff to help create a bridge between home and school. When the adults responsible for children take a positive interest in what happens at school it helps children feel at home. It also makes it easier to pick up any problems early when they are easiest to resolve.

- Find out about the school and what your child is learning; participate in information sessions.
- Make time to listen to your child tell you about what he or she is doing at school.
- Let your child’s teacher know if he/she is having difficulties and discuss what kinds of things you can do at home and school to help.

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Cultural diversity: Suggestions for families

Parenting across cultures has particular challenges. Sometimes children and their parents or carers have different ideas about how to balance the values and expectations of two cultures. When children have a sense of belonging to both cultures it supports positive mental health and wellbeing. The following suggestions may assist you and your children to achieve a positive sense of belonging in both cultures.

Celebrate your own culture

Developing a positive sense of cultural identity supports children’s self-esteem and their sense of belonging. By telling stories and sharing customs you can help children to connect with their cultural heritage. It is important to talk to children in ways that are appropriate for their age and interest. Knowing and taking pride in their own heritage can help children feel comfortable and secure with their identity.

Build social networks

Friendships and social networks are important both for children and for families, helping them to feel part of the community. Making connections with local people is important for feeling welcomed and building a sense of belonging in Australian society. Your connections may be with your own cultural group or you may prefer to build your connections with another cultural group. Your child’s school can be a great meeting point for parents and carers where long-term friendships develop.

Get to know your child’s school

Becoming involved in your child’s school is a great way for families to feel connected to their community. There are often opportunities to participate in school events which may help you to get to know your child’s school and the school community. Forming relationships with school staff can also help you to feel like you belong. For instance, having a good relationship with your child’s teachers will allow you to ask questions about your child’s progress, and share your cultural background with them. When families and teaching staff develop relationships, they are more likely to understand each other’s perspectives, talk through concerns and support children together.
Learn about parenting in Australia

Some parenting practices may be quite different in different cultures. Finding out about parenting practices and expectations in Australia, including things like legal requirements of parents and supports available, can help you work out the best ways to manage problems that may arise. Many families from culturally diverse backgrounds find that blending the best parenting ideas and practices from both cultures is very helpful.

Be flexible

Children can feel confused when the values and behaviours expected at home seem to be different from what happens with their friends. It is helpful to be flexible when deciding on rules and expectations so you can take into account any difficulties your children may be facing. Listening to your children and talking openly about the concerns they may have regarding different expectations for school and home means that solutions can be found through understanding and compromise.

Be patient

Adjusting to a new life after migration has lots of challenges for both families and children. Establishing a secure and caring home environment helps to provide children with a sense of stability. Finding people who understand you and can support you as you settle in is really important. It is also often very important to access the help that is available through government agencies, community organisations and English language programs.

Seek support

Getting help in your own language can be especially important at times of stress or when dealing with complex issues. Many community organisations around Australia provide specific support and advice from a cultural perspective. Some organisations offer regular meetings or short courses to help with parenting or other family issues.

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