

Engaging with families of children with disability

to support early learning and development in
early childhood education and care (ECEC)



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 early learning practice guides](#) (which target early childhood services for 3- to 5-year-olds). In this resource, the term 'disability' also encompasses any children with developmental delay who may require additional support within an education and care setting.

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 services, educators and teachers. This supports the requirements to build partnerships with families set out in the Early Years Learning Framework and National Quality Standard.

Many ECEC services already build strong partnerships with families that honour their unique expertise in relation to their child. In all the strategies outlined here, it is also 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. These two models help educators and teachers to work with children and families in respectful, effective and ethical ways (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 care, changes to program, 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 educator and teacher understanding and informs their practice. For example, an educator or 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 educators and teachers to move forward with a strengths-based approach and provide a positive learning environment for their children.

Promising approaches

The promising approaches outlined in AERO's [family engagement for early learning practice guide](#) 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 and development
- promoting a literacy-rich environment at home.

✓ Promising approaches



Collaboratively planning and problem-solving with families

Collaborative planning and problem-solving between families, educators, teachers and service leaders can improve children's early learning and development. This approach also helps share the responsibility for decision-making and learning and helps ensure that everyone is using a consistent approach for addressing a child's unique learning and development needs.

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

Considerations and strategies for educators and 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.
- Work not just with families, but also with relevant child support professionals; for example, occupational therapists or speech pathologists. Discuss practices used at the service that support the child's strengths, preferences, interests and needs, as these may be used more broadly to support the child.

- For some services, seeking support from inclusion agencies and accessing an inclusion support program (ISP) may be an effective strategy. An ISP will help to identify, address and overcome inclusion barriers, set strategies and actions, and build service capacity and capability to promote inclusive practices.

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



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Considerations and strategies for service leaders

- Service 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 service.
- Many families present key information about their child to a new educator or teacher every year. This can be an exhausting and traumatic process and can be avoided if information is shared between the staff currently working with the child and their new educators and teachers. Service leaders can support the handover of key information (with the required permission) to enable smooth transitions between rooms and services, and support a child's transition to school. This may include notes from all meetings, and, in some jurisdictions, a transition statement describing the strengths, interests and needs of each child.
- 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 will be attending
 - any information or documentation that the family will need to provide.

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 do you collaboratively share successful strategies and communicate goals in the support of children's transitions?

✓ 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, educators and teachers need to be seen as equal, trusted partners who can influence children'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 educators and 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 you can support the child in your service.
- Bridging home and early learning service environments is important for ensuring a child's success through continuity of care and learning.
- Some targeted guidance to families around their involvement in their child's learning may be beneficial. For example, you could provide families with regular updates about what is happening in the service so they can communicate with their child about what they are learning or exploring.
- Many disabilities become visible in the early years for the first time. For families still learning about their child's disability, compassion and understanding can help them build confidence and see the child's strengths.

Reflection questions

- How do you invite and encourage families to talk about their child's strengths, preferences, interests and needs?
- How do you show families that you recognise and value their role in children's learning and development?

Considerations and strategies for service leaders

- 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 educators and teachers, so they can share this information with families.
- 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.

Reflection question

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

✓ Promising approaches



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

Two-way communication has been shown to improve children's early learning and development. The most effective two-way communication draws on the knowledge and expertise of both families and educators and teachers about children's learning needs and development.

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

Considerations and strategies for educators and 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 your service 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.

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?

Considerations and strategies for service leaders

- Provide space and time for educators, teachers, support professionals and families to share updates about a child's learning.
- 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 service level (within privacy considerations), ensuring consistency and reducing individual educator/teacher workload.
- Service leaders have a role in defining processes, particularly creating clear pathways for light-touch, consistent communications, potentially involving multiple staff.

Reflection questions

- How often do you provide time and space for educators, teachers, and support professionals to meet with families and share updates about child's learning?
- What strategies do you have in place to ensure that messages about a child's learning are clear, consistent and communicated to the people that are supporting the child?

✓ Promising approaches



Promoting a literacy-rich environment at home

Emergent literacy is a foundational skill for all children, including those with disability who may communicate in alternative ways. 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.

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 educators and 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 in your service and how you could help support this at home.
- Talk to the family about the importance of oral literacy (verbal and non-verbal) to emergent literacy, and help them recognise the many ways in which their child may be learning to communicate. This may include reframing challenging behaviours as expressions of feelings or desires.
- 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.

Reflection question

- How do you support families to create a literacy-rich environment at home for each child?
- How can families respond to children in a way that nurtures their language and communication skills, however they choose to express themselves?

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Considerations and strategies for service leaders

- Work in collaboration with educators, teachers and families to create literacy-rich environments at home and in the service that promote the child's interests and support their needs and development. For example, some children respond better to a combination of both visual and verbal cues, so you might embed this strategy into your practice.
- Service leaders with a wealth of knowledge about children's learning and development are well-positioned to support literacy-rich environments at home and in the service.

Reflection questions

- What additional resources or strategies to promote a literacy-rich environment have you explored together with families?
- How might 'literacy-rich environments' change as you learn about child's needs, and as you watch children grow and develop?

References

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Further reading

- 'New ACECQA resources to support inclusion in children's education and care services' (ACECQA)– <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/latest-news/new-acecqa-resources-support-inclusion-childrens-education-and-care-services>
- Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA) resources (ACECQA) – <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/resources/disability-discrimination-act-1992-dda-resources>
- Disability Standards for Education 2005 <https://www.dese.gov.au/disability-standards-education-2005>
- Inclusion Support Program (ACECQA) – <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/help/inclusion-support-program>
- Inclusion Support Program (Department of Education) – <https://www.education.gov.au/child-care-package/inclusion-support-program>
- Inclusion Support Program Guidelines (Department of Education) <https://www.education.gov.au/child-care-package/resources/inclusion-support-program-guidelines>
- 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>