

# Supporting the development of children and young people with disability

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## The language we use

We use the term 'children with disability' in this fact sheet and in all our fact sheets. The professionals who work with your child may use different language.

Disability does not have an exact definition. An individual's experience of disability depends on many things, including:

- the barriers they face to participation
- the access they have to the typical experiences of their peers
- the inclusive nature of their school, home and community.

Children and young people with disability experience better outcomes when they are supported by the people around them to have the same experiences that all children and young people have and need.

When thinking about your child with disability, you may have questions and wonder how you can best support their development. Common questions include:

- Do children and young people with disability have different needs to other children and young people?
- Do they learn and develop differently?
- What additional supports do they need?

When thinking about how best to support the development of children with disability, here are some points to think about.

## The needs of children and young people with disability

Children and young people with disability are children and young people first. They have the same core needs as other children and young people, including good health care and nutrition, security and safety, responsive caregiving, opportunities for early learning, inclusive schooling, experiences of a range of environments, and opportunities for meaningful participation in home and community activities. It is important to remember this along with any other goals your child might have (e.g. therapies or other early intervention services).



For some children with developmental disabilities, it may also be harder to meet these needs. This may be because of the nature of the child's condition and health, or because of family circumstances. Everyone who is caring for your child and supporting your family needs to remember that children with disability need what all children need, plus whatever extra support is needed to enable them to have these needs met.

### **All children need supportive care and strong relationships**

Young children develop through their relationships with the important people in their lives. The bonds and attachments that children form with families create the foundation from which their mind develops.

This is just as true for children with disability. Having a child who responds differently to your expectations can be worrying. You might wonder if your child is rejecting you, or worry about the strength of your bond. All children with disability will develop positive attachments in their own time.

Sometimes children with disability develop attachments to their families and caregivers but don't show this in obvious ways. They may respond differently or seem more detached than other children. Families need to observe their children closely and learn to read the signs that show the strength of your bond.

It is not only the relationships with families that matter. Young children learn through their relationships with all the people in their lives, such as extended family, child minders, childcare workers and early childhood educators. It is important that these other adults in children's lives are also able to provide them with supportive caregiving.

### **Feeling safe in physical and social spaces**

Children and young people with disability need to feel safe and secure, both physically and in their relationships. Feeling safe in their core relationships gives children a secure base from which to explore the world. Families and other caregivers provide that base: a place where children and young people can turn to whenever they feel unsafe or hurt, physically or emotionally.

Feeling safe means children can focus on what interests them and what they enjoy. When young children feel unsafe for whatever reason, they focus on the source of the potential danger rather than on play and exploration. As children grow into young adults, safety and connection comes from having strong relationships and trusted adults in their lives outside the family home.

Children and young people with disability can experience greater risk of abuse or neglect. For more information, see the CYDA fact sheets on abuse and keeping kids safe.

### **Learning starts from birth**

Learning does not start when children start to talk or go to preschool or school. It starts from birth, so starting early is important. In the very youngest children, learning happens through the interactions that they have with their families and caregivers.

Learning is cumulative. Everything that a child learns builds upon what they have learned previously. The more they learn, the more knowledge they have to build on and the more progress they make. This is just as true for children with disability. It is important to start early in providing them with the experiences and support they need to learn.

Young children learn in every environment in which they spend time, including their homes, community settings, and early childhood programs. Children with disability often need environments modified to be inclusive and enable them to learn and participate more. This could mean assistive technology to support communication, adapting a physical environment to be accessible, or the creation of quiet spaces to support sensory needs. Each child will have their own needs. The more we adapt environments to enable children with disabilities to engage and participate, the more they will learn.

Young children need home and community environments that give them lots of opportunities to explore and play. Children learn from having lots of opportunities to practise skills. They do this by themselves if given the chance, and as a result they master many of the basic skills they need without having to be taught or with minimal support. The core skills that children need are those that enable them to function in their everyday environments. These include the ability to move around, to play, to communicate, to interact with others, and to dress and feed themselves. Mastering these skills enables children to begin to participate meaningfully in family life.

Children with disability also need to practise these basic skills, especially as they may need more time to master them. Practising skills does not mean doing exercises. Instead, it means having lots of everyday opportunities to practise the skills they need to develop. This means building opportunities to practise family routines instead of adding exercises to your busy day.

## Meaningful participation in the family and community

Participation is one of the major things that drives development. Participation is especially important for children and young people with disability since they may experience barriers to participation at home and in the community. Participation does not just mean being present while an activity is happening. It means taking part, having a say and being actively involved. For many children and young people with disability, extra supports or changes are needed to allow them to participate meaningfully. Think about what your child might need to enable them to participate in the same way as everyone else and provide the support so they can.

## Children and young people with disability need to experience a range of settings and people

As children grow, they experience an increasing range of environments other than their home. This includes other caregivers, other families, and other settings. These experiences are important for development as they help build children's social and emotional understanding and skills.

Children and young people with disability may not be exposed to as many different environments or meet as many people as their non-disabled peers. This can be because of inaccessible settings, health challenges or family circumstances. It is important to make sure that they have access to the same range of social and other experiences as other children and young people. These experiences are as important for promoting the development of children and young people with disability as they are for all children.

Children and young people with disability should experience the same range of social and other environments with other children and young people, not separately. Among other things, this means attending regular early childhood services – childcare, preschool programs and schools. Being included does not just mean attending. They should be participating meaningfully in activities with their non-disabled peers.

Programs children access have a responsibility to change their settings or use assistive technology as specified in the national Disability Standards for Education. For more information, see CYDA's fact sheet on inclusive education.

The more we change settings to make sure they are inclusive and offer genuine opportunities for children to participate, the less impact their disability will have on their development.

## Key points for families and caregivers

- Focus on building a strong bond with your child so that you become the support they can come to when stressed.
- Learn to read and understand your child's needs and requests for attention. These may not be easy to recognise at first.
- Pay attention to what your child is interested in, what they look at and what they enjoy. The more you understand about your child's wants, the better you will be at meeting their needs.
- Look for ways in which your child can participate meaningfully at home and in other activities and try to create more opportunities as your child grows.
- Establish routines that provide your child with lots of opportunities to practise the core skills they need to function in their everyday settings.
- Give your child plenty of opportunities to explore and play, making changes to their setting when needed to let this happen.
- Give your child opportunities to meet other children and families, and to attend the same activities and programs as other children.



### Key points for NDIS participants and families

- Make sure your plan includes support for your child's inclusion in community activities, and mainstream early childhood and school programs.
- Relationships with peers become increasingly important as children grow older, so think about how support for these can also be built into your NDIS plan.
- Choose services that will build the capability of your child in all the settings that they spend their time.

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Disclaimer: CYDA's In Control Our Way resources have been created to support families of children and young people with disability to self-manage their NDIS plans. Information provided is intended as a general guide and may not contain the most recent information and updates. CYDA is not responsible for decisions made by the NDIA or its partners in the community. For the most current information on the NDIS, refer to the NDIS website. These fact sheets are current as of September 2020.

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Funded by the National Disability Insurance Agency