

Seeking your child's input and supporting their voice

Most children and young people, as they mature, can have meaningful input into raising and resolving issues at school. There are many ways to seek your child's input and to support their voice.

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Your child's growing independence

As children and young people grow older, their parents and carers generally work to support their growing independence – their ability to have a say in decisions that affect them, and to speak for themselves. What this looks like for different families often depends on the family's culture and values, on the experiences of parents and carers, and on the child or young person themselves.

What kind of decisions a child or young person can make, and how they communicate their preferences, will of course depend on their abilities. The growing range of communication aids and other supports has helped many children and young people with disabilities to have more of a say on large and small issues that affect them.

At school, supporting independence includes supporting a student to let the adults around them know – school staff and their parents or carers – if they are having a problem at school. It also means seeking the student's input into decisions about resolving issues, and into planning their learning and supports.

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Different school approaches

Schools vary in how much of a say their students are given in planning their educational goals, and in raising and resolving issues. Some schools create many ways for students can have input, such as junior school councils, student surveys and parent-teacher interviews that include students. Some schools place less emphasis on student input.

As your child grows older – especially if they are in a mainstream secondary school – they are likely to be given opportunities to choose subjects, sports activities or optional assignments, and to participate in career planning. Some schools invite students to set their own educational goals and plans. What were once parent-teacher interviews in primary school usually become student-parent-teacher interviews in secondary school. There are a variety of approaches, depending on the school setting and its educational philosophy.

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Inviting your child's participation

There are many ways that you can seek your child's input into raising and resolving problems at school, even when the school culture does not emphasise student input.

As your child grows, they might well be able to explain some concerns for themselves, for example in a meeting with their teacher. Supporting them to do so can be very powerful, both to achieve the best outcome for them, and to build their confidence in speaking for themselves. When you and your child are in a meeting with the school, you can model supporting their voice to the staff. If a teacher or the principal asks about your concerns or your opinion about an issue, for example, you can turn to your child and ask them what they think.

Your child has a right to attend their Student Support Group meetings, when appropriate. You can raise this with the other members of the SSG, and discuss whether your child could attend all or some meetings, or part of each meeting. Also consider when it might be appropriate for your child to attend other meetings with staff. This might more often be the case into the middle and later secondary years.

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Supporting your child to advocate for

themselves

As your child grows into their teenage years and to adulthood, they need to develop: a knowledge that they have the right to speak up (whatever that might look like for them); the confidence and skills to advocate for themselves; and the willingness to seek help to do so, for example from an advocate. Supporting your child to gradually have greater and greater input into decision-making, including at school, is a very valuable support to this process.

Advocacy services are available to support young people with disabilities to speak up for themselves, including at school. They can be very helpful if your older child wants to resolve a problem independently of you, or if you and your child are in conflict about an issue.

- Find contacts for YDAS and other youth advocacy organisations in our [Through the Maze](#) resource.

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Seeking your child's input to understand an issue

Whether or not your child is able and willing to talk directly with the teacher or other staff about an issue, they are likely to be an important source of information about the problem. If you can, ask your child about their experiences, and what they would like to happen. Ask them to tell you in detail about a problem, if they can, and ask them for any ideas they have about what might help.

When they are struggling with a problem, children and young people often express themselves in broad emotional ways ("I hate school") but if you can support them to explore and express what is hard for them ("I can't hear the teacher properly because it's too noisy", or "No one plays with me at lunchtime", or "I just can't write essays, even if I try really hard") you will have a better idea of what the problem is and how to tackle it.

You can also report back to your child on the discussion after it happens, and ask for their response to the decision made in the meeting. And your child can often let you know, if agreed actions are not being followed up at school.

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