

## If there's a problem at school

You have the right to raise any concerns you have about your child at school, and you don't have to do it alone.

Children and young people are in school for many years. Most will have times when they find school hard going. If you are worried about your child, or you have a concern about something at school, don't be afraid to speak up.

In this section, families share their experiences of raising their concerns at school. By speaking up, some families stopped bullying or teasing of their child. Others describe how raising their concerns meant the school paid more attention to their child's **special needs**, and gave them better help at school.

It's always worth speaking up. It can make a real difference.

### Learn about the language used to talk about special needs

The terms used by schools and support services might be confusing to many parents and carers. Rock Solid uses some of these words too, in explaining how it all works. When we use one of those terms, it is in **bold**. These words are listed at the end of this section under 'Key terms explained' with a short explanation of what they mean.

### Speaking up about your concerns

You have the right to speak up at your child's school. You have the right to speak up, whether you're not happy with something at school, or worried about how your child is going in their learning, or getting along with other children. It can be hard to speak up, but you can get help.

#### If you're not happy with the school

Sometimes you might have a concern about how your child or family is being treated. You might be concerned that your child is missing out on activities, or not getting the right help.

When Janine expressed concern that her son's school had reduced his aide time, the school fixed the problem.

*"The aide would be with him every day. But once he got to Grade 4, the hours changed. Because there was other children in the school that didn't get funded, they used some of his funding to help other children.*

*I didn't mind so much that they were helping others, but they were just taking less away from my son. I went in and spoke my mind, and what I thought of it. So it changed again." – Janine*

#### If you're worried about your child

You might be worried that your child doesn't seem to be learning well. It might be really hard going, getting them to go to school. Or your child might be in trouble for mucking up, or getting frustrated or angry in class.

Usually when children refuse school or muck up, it's because they're upset or frustrated. It might be about bullying or some other problem with another child, or with a teacher. Or they might need more help, or different help in class.



Stacey's older boy was seen as 'naughty', when he actually had a learning disability that hadn't been diagnosed. He just needed different help to learn, and when he got it, he settled down.

*"I've always known that he was a bit more sensitive and a bit more emotional than the other kids too. But I would have had no idea. Like, the other kids just labelled my kids as the naughty Koorie kids in the class ... That's not what's going on. Our kids are screaming out for help." – Stacey*

Sometimes teachers try to find out what's wrong – but not always. Even when they do, children might not be able to say. Sometimes when children get in trouble, it might remind their parents and carers of their own experiences at school, like Aunty Faye says. Sometimes they might feel like there's no point in complaining.

*"Teachers can be a bit, 'Rah rah rah – you mucked up, you was this, you was that, something else.' There's a lot of ways that kids clam up, and they won't say a thing. And then when they go home to their parents, if they're with Mum and Dad, Nanna, Grandma, they'd be like, 'Oh yeah, them gabbas are all the same, they don't treat us blacks the same'." – Aunty Faye*

### **It's always worth speaking up**

After many years of raising children and working in schools, Aunty Faye always tries to sort out problems at school, by talking to the teacher and the child.

*"You talk with the teacher and find out what is the problem in there. And then you've got to listen to your child. Listen to your child – that's most important. Because him and the teacher might clash." – Aunty Faye*

Uncle Henry has always had a good relationship with his girls' primary school. So when his oldest girl was being bullied at her new secondary school, he went straight to the Principal.

*"I went to see the headmaster – young bloke. And he pulled 'em up. Next day when they came to school, he called 'em into a room and talked to 'em. And it hasn't happened again ever since." – Uncle Henry*

### **Get help to speak up**

Whatever your concern might be, you have the right to bring it up at school, and to have it sorted out. You don't have to do it alone. You have the right to get help from a **support person** – someone to yarn with, who can give you information and support, and help you prepare for a meeting with the school. Some support people might even be able to come with you to meetings.

### **How to go about bringing up a concern**

It may be hard to bring up a concern at school, but it can make a big difference. The best person to speak to first is usually the person involved, like the teacher. If you don't feel comfortable to do that, there are other options. You can also get help to bring up your concern.

### **Who to talk to first**

If your child is in primary school, the best person to talk to first is usually your child's classroom teacher. If your child has an aide, you might be able to talk to them, but the teacher is responsible for what happens in class.



If you don't feel comfortable talking to the teacher, you can go to the Assistant Principal or Principal. You can ask for an extra **Student Support Group** meeting if you want. If school has a **Koorie Education Worker** or **Wellbeing Coordinator**, you could also talk to them.

If your child is in secondary school, you can contact their year level coordinator, or a Koorie Education Worker or Wellbeing Coordinator. The Wellbeing Coordinator is the staff member responsible for all students with special needs.

### Speak up early

If you are worried about something at school, it's a good idea to speak up early. Often, the school will appreciate this. It means they can do something before a small problem turns into a big drama.

*"My little grandson, he's very hard to understand. I know with his problem, he's going to go through a lot of problems, and be teased. Cross fingers, not yet ... But if we do hear that, we'll address that situation straight away.*

*If there's a problem, you've got to try and talk with the teacher. And we've got a gem of a teacher – two grades now. Just fantastic, and understanding where we're coming from." – Aunty Faye*

If it's something small, you can chat about it with the teacher at drop-off or pick-up time. But often, it's better to make time for a longer yarn, when there aren't too many people around.

If it's hard for you to get to school outside class time, ask for a time to talk on the phone. If your child has a communication book, you can write concerns in there. You can also write the school a letter or an email.

### Get help and advice

If there are problems at school, it can be very upsetting. If you're feeling very angry or upset, or if just unsure what to do, get some help and advice.

You can get help from a support person. They can listen to your concerns, give you information, help you write a letter or prepare for a meeting. They might even be able come with you sometimes.

### Don't give up

If you bring up a concern at school and it isn't dealt with to your satisfaction, don't give up. You can get help to take it further – as Aunty Faye says.

*"You don't have to accept what's said as gospel. You keep going until you get the best outcome for your child. And that's what it's all about, you know? You can't be there all the time. But don't give up.*

*I felt like doing it myself, but I thought, 'Youse don't know. You don't know my boy. And I'm going to try this.' You get help to do this. There's always help out there. And don't stop at one. Not at one, no. It's your child, and you want the best for your child." – Aunty Faye*

So if talking with your child's teacher didn't address your concern, talk to the Principal or ask for a Student Support Group meeting. If talking with the Principal doesn't achieve the results you are seeking, contact the Department of Education and Training regional office. You can get help from a **Koorie Education Support Officer** or an outside support person, if you are writing to or meeting with the department.



## Making a complaint

You can just talk to the department about your concerns, or you can make a formal complaint.

If talking to the department doesn't sort the problem out, you might be able to take a complaint to the **Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission**. You can always ring their advice line for a yarn. You don't have to give your name or make a formal complaint unless you want to.

Sometimes in the end, you might decide that your child needs a different school – one that you feel can support their needs better. You can still make a complaint if you want.

## Help from a support person or advocate

You can get help to work with your child's school. You have the right to bring along your own support person to any meeting with your child's school. There are different kinds of support people.

A support person could be a friend or family member who is there to support you. Some support people can act as an advocate for your child and family. An advocate is someone who can help you understand the language that school uses, and help you get your point across to the school, as Suzanna and Rodney say.

*"If you can't talk, you can always ask an Indigenous person that you know – a family member, or take an Auntie or a daughter, a niece. Someone that can speak the language that they want to hear, but saying what you want. So you can speak through them. So there is ways to get around." – Suzanna*

*"Yeah, there is ways. There's other people who can speak the way you do, and understand you." – Rodney*

## Choosing a support person or advocate

It's up to you who you want to support and maybe **advocate** for you. Whoever you choose, they should be supportive and non-judgemental. A Koorie Education Worker can help you, but they might not always know a lot about special needs. You can choose to bring in a support person from outside school as well.

You could choose an appropriate Elder, with experience of working in schools, or in advocacy for the community. You could choose a family member who understands the system – who works in schools, or understands special needs. You could choose a friend, like another parent whose child has similar needs. Or you could choose a community or disability advocate, or a supportive worker.

## Community advocates

A **community advocate** can be anyone in community that the family trusts and respects as acting in the child's best interests. They might be appointed by other community members to visit families, and offer support. They can help a first time parent understand that their child has special needs, recommend how to get help, and help families deal with paperwork. They share care and also information, so families can learn skills to advocate for themselves.



For Stacey, having a community advocate made a big difference.

*"If I didn't have her in my corner to bat for me and my son, I would have more or less laid down and accepted anything they had to say about him. He was even mishandled by a teacher at school. Normally I would have just copped that, went up to the school, went off me head ... but because I spoke to her, we put it into a different play. She's a godsend!" – Stacey*

## **Advocacy organisations and workers**

Some organisations can help you sort out a problem for no cost. ACD has an over the phone Support Line. There are also regional disability **advocacy organisations**, and advocacy organisations for children with different special needs. Sometimes, a child and family worker or therapist might support you to advocate for your child at school.

### **How they can help**

Your support person or advocate can tell you about your child's rights and the help they should get at school. They can yarn with you about how to bring up issues with the school, and help you write to the school or the department.

Some support people might be able to come with you to a meeting. Make sure you have a good yarn beforehand. Many people find it helpful to write down things to bring up, before the meeting. Your support person needs to know what you want, and what's important to you.

A support person should not make any decisions for you. Instead, they should help you understand what choices you have. And they should help you get your point across to the school. If you feel upset in the meeting, it can be good if your support person can suggest a break, to give you a breather.

### **Tell the school how it works in community**

Schools usually hold meetings only when the main parent or carer is available. But in community – because of extended family care for children – an Aboriginal community advocate might sometimes be able to attend meetings instead of the parent or carer, if they have other obligations. Let the school know that regardless of who attends a meeting on the family's behalf, the information discussed will be passed on to the family.

## **Ideas for dealing with common concerns**

Here are suggestions for dealing with common issues that families told us about. These suggestions are just a start. If the first person you approach isn't able to help, don't give up. Your child has the right to the help they need, to learn and be included at school.

### **Your child's learning**

If your child comes home with low marks or saying school is too hard, talk to the teacher. When children don't get the help they need to achieve their best at school, it can make them feel bad, or like there's no point trying.

If your child is already getting help for their special needs, they might need a different kind of help. They might have a new teacher with less knowledge, their needs might have changed, their work might have got harder, or school might have changed their supports. You can talk with the teacher or ask for a Student Support Group meeting.



If your child has not had an **assessment** for special needs, have a think about it. Some families feel uncomfortable about **diagnosis** and mainstream ideas about disability. But the experience of families we talked to is that the information helped them and their child, and other people in community too.

### Activities outside class

You might be concerned that your child is missing out on excursions or camps, or not getting the right help with activities like sport, art or music. Talk to the school about how to organise things so your child doesn't miss out. It's a good idea to plan ahead for camps, and to ensure your child gets support to attend cultural events that the school participates in. You can also talk with the art, sports and music teachers about what help your child might need in their classes.

### Behaviour issues and why they come up

Children sometimes muck up because they need more help, and are frustrated or embarrassed. Some children find it hard to sit still and focus in a noisy classroom. For some children, unexpected changes can trigger challenging behaviour. If Suzanna's son is in trouble at school, she wants to be told straight away.

*"And I want to be present. I don't want my child to be reprimanded without getting to the bottom of why he done what he did." – Suzanna*

Sometimes children muck up if they're tired or not eating well, or because of things happening at home. There are many pressures that can affect families. If you're having a hard time, get help for yourself and your child. Some of this might come from community. Some might come from **disability services**. The school can also help – talk to the Koorie Education Worker or Coordinator.

### Discipline and safety

School can discipline students in different ways. The education department's '**Student Engagement Policy**' explains everyone's rights and responsibilities, and what should happen if your child mucks up. School must talk to you, and work out what will help your child settle. Suspension or expulsion should only happen in extreme circumstances.

If you're concerned, talk to the Principal. In some cases, you might be very concerned. Schools are not allowed to use corporal punishment. And they can't restrain children, except if the child's behaviour is a threat to their own or other people's safety. If you are not satisfied after talking with the Principal, get help to take it further. If there is violence or abuse, call the police. Children have the right to be safe at school.

### Bullying, victimisation and racism

No school should tolerate bullying, victimisation, racism or any form of discrimination. If you are worried your child is experiencing any of these problems, speak up. The school must take these issues seriously. If the teacher doesn't deal with the problem, go to the Principal. If they do not deal with it, get help to take your concerns further.



## Uniforms and school costs

Sometimes families find it hard to pay for uniforms, books, school fees, camps or excursions. You might be able to get help – don't be shame. Ask the Koorie Education Worker, Wellbeing Coordinator or Assistant Principal. Or you might have the uniform and shoes, but your child won't wear them. Some schools might be more flexible about this than others. Ask the Koorie Education Worker or Wellbeing Coordinator to talk to the school for you.

## Dealing with concerns about school attendance

Keep in touch with your child's teachers, and talk to them if your child misses school. Make sure you know your child's rights, and get help, if they are suspended or face being expelled.

## Attendance makes a difference

Regular school attendance is important. By making sure your child gets to school, you are giving them more choices in life, and a chance to achieve their dreams. Regular attendance helps your child to feel like a part of their class and their school community. It helps them make friends, play and just enjoy being a kid. If they can get help to achieve their best, it builds their self-esteem, and helps them learn to speak up for themselves.

## If your child has to be away

Children sometimes have to be away from school. The family might have to travel for Sorry Business, or your child might have hospital stays, or medical or therapy appointments. Let the school know when and for how long your child will be away, so they can plan how to support them and help them catch up when they're back. Sometimes a school can help your child keep up with their schoolwork, if they're in hospital or at home recovering for a long time.

## If your child is unhappy at school

Your child might refuse or skip school if they're having a hard time. They might be feeling bullied or left out, uncomfortable if their culture is not understood, or frustrated if they aren't getting the right help to learn. Some children muck up when this happens, and some just give up.

If a child is unhappy at school, parents or carers might want to keep them home sometimes. If children get in trouble, or if they feel ignored, it might remind parents or carers of their own experiences, as Aunty Faye says.

*"When they go home to their parents, if they're with Mum and Dad, Nanna, Grandma, they'd be like, 'Oh yeah, them gabbas are all the same, they don't treat us blacks the same'. Because white people, right, they know of somebody, or where to go, or what to do. But if Nanna had such a bad experience with school – I might have only been to Grade 2 or 3, you know? And then might have had to go out and work." – Aunty Faye*

Children do sometimes have a hard time at school, but they also have more rights than in times gone by. And you can get more help to make sure that their rights are respected, and that they get the help they need at school.



## If you find it hard to get them to school

Sometimes children miss school because of things happening at home. Children – especially those with special needs – benefit from an organised routine at home and at school. They benefit from being at school every day.

Sometimes, pressures on families might make it hard to get organised to get children to school. The family might have very low funds, making it hard to cover uniforms, lunch or transport. They might be experiencing issues with grief and loss, housing, health or mental health problems, drugs or alcohol, family violence or child protection.

We acknowledge the role of government and welfare policies, such as those that led to the Stolen Generations, in creating intergenerational trauma and loss that impacts on these experiences for many in community.

If you're having a hard time, it's important to get help for yourself and for your child, so they can have their special needs supported and be at school.

## Early pick-ups and part-time attendance

Sometimes, a school might ring the parent or carer and ask them to pick their child up early. Your child might need to come home early sometimes, if they are unwell or very upset. But this should not happen often, and never because of behavioural issues.

Sometimes families might feel pressure to bring their child to school part-time. This is not allowed. Unless there are special medical reasons, the **education department** says that all children must be in school full-time.

## Suspension and expulsion

The education department tells school how to respond positively to behavioural issues. As much as possible, schools should encourage children to behave well, rather than punish them. All children muck up for a reason. For example, if a child with special needs isn't getting the right help, they might get frustrated or embarrassed and muck up, or walk out. The school has to work with you, to figure out how to help your child.

Suspensions and expulsions must only be used in extreme cases, and only if the school has tried every other way to deal with the behaviour. Schools must not expel a child with special needs unless they have made all **reasonable adjustments** that will encourage positive behaviour.

Your child's school must meet with you if a suspension or expulsion is likely, and ensure a Koorie Education Support Officer is available to help you, if you want. Your child has rights, and you can appeal against an expulsion. If you are in this situation, you can get help from a support person, such as a disability or community advocate.





## Key terms explained

### **Advocate or advocacy worker**

Someone who helps you to understand your child's rights, and to speak up about your choices for them. There are community and professional advocates. You can also advocate for yourself and your child.

### **Advocacy organisations or disability advocacy organisations**

The Association for Children with a Disability (ACD) is a disability advocacy organisation. ACD gives people individual advocacy by supporting families to understand their child's rights and speak up for them. ACD also does broader advocacy – speaking up for the rights of all children and family, and trying to make the system work better for people.

### **Assessment and re-assessment**

A test or group of tests your child does to get information about their special needs. Sometimes an assessment can lead to a diagnosis, for example of a disability or a chronic illness. Re-assessment is done regularly for children with special needs at school, to check if their needs have changed.

### **Community advocate**

This is an Aboriginal term. A community advocate can be anyone in community that the family trusts and respects as acting in the child's best interests. They might be appointed by other community members to visit families, and offer support.

### **Diagnosis**

A name for your child's special needs, which might be one or more types of disability or illness.

### **Disability services or organisations**

There are many different kinds of disability organisations. Some can help your child with their development by providing therapy or equipment. Others can help you find information, get support or speak up for your child and family.

### **Education department, Department of Education and Training (DET)**

Victorian government department that looks after schools, including services in schools that help children with special needs.

### **Koorie Education Support Officer (KESO)**

A specialist worker based in the regional education department office who works with schools, and with children and families. KESOs and regional coordinators have replaced other departmental Koorie education staff previously based in schools.

### **Koorie Education Worker, Koorie Educator, Koorie education staff**

A specialist worker, working in a school with children and their families. Schools might choose to employ a Koorie Educator, if they have a number of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students and families in their school community.

### **Reasonable adjustments, or adjustments**

Changes to how the school works, or the environment, that help your child learn and be included at school. They are seen as 'reasonable' if they don't affect the school or other students too much. The law and government policy state your child's right to 'reasonable adjustments'.

### **Special needs**

One or more differences between your child and most other children, which affects what they need so they can be well, move around, hear, see, learn, communicate or feel comfortable. Special needs can include disability, chronic illness and mental health issues.



### **Student Engagement Policy**

Government policy that says schools must help children who miss a lot of school, are suspended, or who might drop out. It says the school must talk with you to plan how to help your child at school.

### **Student Support Group**

Regular meetings that the school should have with you, to discuss how your child is going, what help they need at school, how you can help their learning at home, and any concerns that come up.

### **Support person**

A support person could be a trusted friend or family member who is there to support you. It's someone you can talk to, and who can give you information and support, such as helping you prepare for a meeting with the school.

### **Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC)**

The Commission helps people resolve complaints of discrimination, sexual harassment, racial and religious vilification, and victimisation.

### **Wellbeing Coordinator**

A school staff member responsible for all students with special needs.

## **Useful links**

Koorie Education Coordinator contact details

<https://www.vic.gov.au/koorie-education-coordinator-contact-details>

Koorie education resources for educators

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/multicultural/Pages/kooriesources.aspx>

Victorian Aboriginal Education Association

<https://www.vaeai.org.au/>

Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency

<https://www.vacca.org/>

Deadly Story

[www.deadlystory.com](http://www.deadlystory.com)

## **Related topics**

Welcome to Rock Solid

<https://www.acd.org.au/welcome-to-rock-solid>

Choosing a school for your child

<https://www.acd.org.au/choosing-a-school-for-your-child>

What school should do to help your child

<https://www.acd.org.au/what-school-should-do-to-help-your-child>

What you can do to support your child's journey

<https://www.acd.org.au/what-you-can-do-to-support-your-childs-journey>

More information for the journey

<https://www.acd.org.au/more-information-for-the-journey>