

# What school should do to help your child

Your child has the right to get the help they need, to be included at school, and to learn and achieve their best.

This section talks about what you have a right to expect, in how your child's school works with your child, and with you as their parent or carer. It gives examples of how the school should meet your child's learning needs, as well as their emotional and cultural needs. And it explains the funding that the school might be able to get to help support your child, depending on their special needs.

## 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.

## Schools must talk to parents and carers

Schools should work closely with the families of every child with **special needs**.

Your child's school should be talking with you regularly about how your child is going, and how you and the school can support your child.

## Communicating with you

Good communication is really important. Schools communicate with families in different ways. Staff can chat with you at drop-off or pick-up time. There are school reports and parent-teacher meetings twice a year. There are also school newsletters and notices that come home in your child's bag.

Some children have a communication book, which the school and the family can use to keep in touch on a daily basis. If the school doesn't write much, you can ask them to give you more details about your child's day.

## Meeting to talk about your child's needs

The school should also have regular meetings with every parent or carer of a child with special needs. These should happen at least once a term, and are usually called **Student Support Group** meetings. If you are not having these, you can ask for them, even if your child does not have a diagnosed disability.

The meetings should include you, the teacher, the Principal or Assistant Principal, and sometimes other staff, like a **Koorie Education Worker** or the **Wellbeing Coordinator**. You can take your own support person from outside school with you. If you wish, your child can also attend.

Uncle Henry meets with the staff at his girls' primary school regularly. He knows that the Assistant Principal or the **Koorie Educator** will give him a heads up, if there's a problem at school.

*"I know all the teachers up there of the girls now. And they help them a lot ... We have meetings up there to discuss what we want to do. Or [the Assistant Principal], she gives me a call, or she comes down and sees me. She's very good." - Uncle Henry*



You can ask for an extra meeting any time, for example if you're worried about your child's learning, if there's a problem at school, or changes at home that might affect your child's attendance.

### How the meetings work

In any meetings with the school, it's important to speak up about what you want for your child. You should also speak up about any concerns that you have.

Sometimes parents or carers find it hard going. Many people find it helpful to write down problems to bring up, before they go into the meeting. You can also take your own **support person** with you.

The meetings should discuss:

- How your child's learning is going
- What your child will be working on this term (their **learning plan**)
- What help your child needs with their schoolwork
- What help your child needs to mix in and feel comfortable at school
- How school can support your child in culturally appropriate ways
- How you can support your child's learning at home
- Any concerns that you or the school might have

If your child's school is getting extra funding to help support your child, the meetings should discuss how this will be spent.

One of the staff should write down every decision made at the meeting. They should send you these notes and go through them next time, to check what has been done.

### The right help and learning for your child

By talking with you regularly, the school will better understand your child's needs. They should make changes to how they teach your child, to help meet those needs.

### When school has a grasp of your child's needs, they must make changes to meet those needs

These changes are called **reasonable adjustments** – changes to how the school works, or to the environment, which help your child learn and be included at school. They are seen as 'reasonable' if they don't affect the school or other students in a negative way.

The school should plan your child's adjustments and write them up in their learning plan. Every child has the right to the reasonable adjustments they need at school. That right is protected by law and government policy, no matter what kind of school your child attends.

### Different children need different help

There are adjustments that make it easier for your child to hear, see, focus on their learning, or know what's coming up. The school can also adjust the **curriculum** – what your child learns, their lesson activities and their homework. Some children need adjustments to help them feel more comfortable at school.





Here are some examples of adjustments:

- Exercise breaks, to help a child focus on their work
- Getting into the classroom a bit early, to help a child settle in and feel less anxious
- A map of time, so a child knows what's coming up, in the day or in the week
- Breaking up information into smaller parts, to help a child learn and remember
- Different class activities, like questions to answer instead of writing a long story

If the school gets extra funding to help your child, this can pay for adjustments like help from an **aide** in class, personal care, or therapy sessions at school.

The school can get information or training from the **education department**, to help them make the right adjustments for your child. The department has specialist staff who can visit the school and give advice.

If your child sees a therapist, they might be able to visit the school and make suggestions about other adjustments to help your child at school. Many **disability organisations** also have staff who can work with schools.

### The right learning for your child

Your child's schoolwork shouldn't be too easy or too hard for them. Every child should be given work that's just a little bit ahead of where they are at. This challenges them to learn. If their schoolwork is too easy, they might get bored and not achieve their potential. If it's too hard, they might get frustrated or give up.

If your child is in a **mainstream school**, they might do everything their classmates do, but with extra help. Or they might be taught the same things, but get different schoolwork or assignments. Or they might be taught different things. The school can get help from the education department to adjust the curriculum for your child.

If your child is in a **specialist school**, the school should also adjust their curriculum for your child. You can help the school plan your child's learning, by telling their teachers what your child can do well at home, and what you would like them to work on while they're at school.

### Help for your child to feel comfortable at school

A big part of going to school is learning to mix with other children. Being at school helps children learn social skills: how to join in games, how to share their ideas, how to listen, and how to make friends. When your child joins in and feels included, they feel more comfortable at school. When children feel comfortable, they can learn better.

Sometimes children with special needs need extra help to learn to mix well. Speak to your child's teacher if you think your child is feeling left out, or needs help to join in. Teachers can work with your child and their classmates in many ways – to help everyone get along, play together, look out for each other and make friends.

### Speak up if your child feels left out or bullied

Learning how to get along with others is very important for all children. Every child needs to learn how to include other children, including children who are different from them.



If your child is feeling left out or bullied, speak up. Every school has rules against bullying, victimisation and harassment. No school should tolerate racism, or discrimination because of a child's special needs or any other reason.

## Planning your child's education journey

Every child has the right to get help, to do the best they can at school. Planning is a big part of this. By planning for the stepping stones ahead, you can help your child to achieve in their chosen path.

### Every child can learn

Your child's school should challenge them and help them to achieve. Planning is a big part of this. By planning your child's learning and the help they need, their school can help them reach their goals, and achieve their dreams.

Every child with special needs should have an **'Individual Education Plan'**. This is a document that the school writes up every year. It's a plan for what your child will learn, and how the school will help them. They might also have a **'Koorie Education Learning Plan'** – this is a document that every Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander student should have.

### Help set the goals for your child

The school should discuss your child's learning plan with you at the start of the year, and then again at every Student Support Group meeting. You can help school set your child's learning goals – what they will learn.

When Rodney and Suzanna's son started at mainstream primary school, they had many meetings with his teacher and aide. They talked about how school would help him learn in the next fortnight. Over time, their son learned to be much more independent at school.

*"Fortnightly we were having meetings. And choose a goal, whether it was for him to actually hang his bag and walk into the classroom by himself. Or to pick up the books himself, instead of the integration aide, and put them in his bag. Whether to get him to answer the teacher. They're little steps, but they're huge. Now he's got an integration aide, but just to make sure he doesn't run out of school. Things like that. But he does everything himself." – Suzanna*

### Learning through what your child loves

Children can learn a lot through doing what they love. Rodney and Suzanna's son loves playing music.

*"Music helped him learn how to talk. It helped him learn to deal with other people – social skills. It helped him learn to play with his brother. At his school they had piano lessons. That would have been good, but he would have had to be with the other children. We asked if some of his funding could be used for piano lessons at school, in order for him to learn to be in a room with other children – communicate with other children. And that was accepted. That worked amazingly well." – Suzanna*

*"Just seeing him through his music, and the ways kids were talking to him – treating him and talking to him like a friend, without any disability. It was like, 'Wow, man, it's working now'. The music is working! And our boy is not a weird kid. He's a legend, man! He's a guitarist!" – Rodney*





## Regular check-ins

The school should be talking with you often about how your child is going at school. Children might not always tell you if they're struggling. The teacher should let you know – through chats at drop-off or pick-up time, your child's communication book, school reports, parent-teacher meetings and Student Support Group meetings.

Children have a hard time at school for many different reasons: because they don't understand the work, because they need more help, or because of problems like feeling left out, or bullying.

Your child might also need different help at school if their medical or care needs change, or if they are affected by changes at home. If you know your child is having a hard time at school, make a time to yarn with the teacher, to sort it out before it becomes a big drama.

## Respect for your child's culture at school

It's your child's right to have their special needs and their culture respected at school. When children's special needs and culture are respected, they can feel more comfortable at school, and can focus on learning.

### Respecting culture helps your child feel learn

For many children, part of going to school is making friends with children from different cultures. Every student needs to learn the school rules, and how to mix with other children. But your child also has the right to have their cultural ways understood and supported at school. This includes every side of their cultural identity, be that Aboriginal or another culture.

*"Be assertive. Be proud. Your cultural needs and your child's cultural needs are something that's very important in the outcome – in the long run. Don't give up." – Suzanna*

When your child feels respected at school, they can feel comfortable and calm in the classroom. Instead of worrying about doing the wrong thing, they can put their energy into thinking and learning. When this doesn't happen, it can affect how they feel about school, and stop them learning. Stacey saw this happen with her older boy.

*"It's a terrible thing, but he's eight years old, and he knows where he's gotta speak white, and where he's gotta speak black. I believe that's his main insecurity at school. He just wants to be himself, but he just doesn't know how to be." – Stacey*

## Educating non-Aboriginal school staff

Sometimes, schools intend to be culturally sensitive to Aboriginal children and families, but their non-Aboriginal staff might not have a good understanding of Aboriginal cultural ways. They may tell a child off for behaviour that the child doesn't intend as disrespectful, but is just their way of communicating, or sharing and caring for others.

You can ask for support from a Koorie Education Worker. They can help non-Aboriginal staff understand more about the culture, and how to work better with children and families. But often, the parent or carer might have to be the one who explains, as Stacey did to help her older son.



*"My boy is so culturally aware of who he is. In his eyes, he's a blackfella. He loves to be outside, he loves to be playing, be in the dirt. He's the type of blackfella, he's like, 'Me miss, me miss!'"*

*The teacher last year was putting that he's being disruptive. His new teacher is more culturally sensitive. She is putting it down to – Koorie kids, that's how they are. She's letting it go. Not taking it personally. They're understanding it a little bit more.*

*And that's because I went up there and explained to them, 'That's how he is. He's not being disrespectful. It's not directed at the teacher personally. Because he's got so much culture in his head, and so much knowledge. That's his whole demeanour – like, he's a blackfella first and a little kid second.'" – Stacey*

## **Ideas for how schools can support children's cultural needs**

There are many ways schools can support the cultural needs of Aboriginal students. Here are some ideas from families and from other resources. If any are relevant to your child, you could raise them in a meeting with the school.

- Community shared care is also practiced by children. Some families find it helpful if siblings or cousins are able to check in with each other at school. If a child is distressed, it might help them to be with a sibling or cousin.
- Sometimes, Aboriginal students might gather in the playground – this is about being with their mob, checking in and talking about business. It is helpful if teachers understand and support this as something children might do, which helps them feel good at being at school. It can help them feel calm, and that helps them to learn.
- Sometimes, children are away due to family cultural responsibilities, such as funerals. If the school knows about this, they can give the child support when they return; help to catch up on schoolwork, but also time and support to deal with grief and loss, including time with their mob in school.
- Cultural events and festivals are very important for all Aboriginal children, including those in out-of-home care. Schools can support children's attendance by being flexible in how they deliver personal care or aide support.
- Children have the right to feel respected and safe at school. Staff and students should always speak out against any form of racism from other students, staff or families.
- Aboriginal culture is a strongly visual culture. School can use visual tools to help explain concepts, such as pictures, maps and diagrams. This will benefit all children in the classroom.
- Aboriginal ways of learning are based on respectful relationships, group learning, storytelling, relating lessons to real-life situations, observation and practical trial and error. These are all good practices in any classroom.





## How funding for special needs works in schools

Extra funding may be available to help school support your child, depending on their special needs.

### How the funding works

All schools get some general funding to support every student with special needs. The school can use this to pay for things like teacher training, or changes in the classroom to help children with special needs.

Schools must help every child with special needs, whether the school can get extra funding to help them or not. The education department says that the type or amount of support your child gets at school should not depend on funding.

All schools – government, Catholic and independent schools – can get extra funding for students with a 'moderate to severe' disability. In government schools, this is called Program for Students with Disabilities funding, or PSD funding.

### What the extra funding can pay for

The extra funding is used to support your child's learning. If your child is in a specialist school, it helps pay for all the costs of their schooling. If your child is in a mainstream school, the funding can be used in lots of different ways, depending on your child's needs.

For example, the school might use the funding to pay for:

- Equipment to help your child in class
- Training for the teacher or aide to learn more about your child's **disability** or special needs
- Sessions with a specialist, like a **speech therapist, occupational therapist** or **visiting teacher**
- Support in class from an aide, or tutoring outside class
- Note-taking or interpreting (such as Auslan sign language interpreting) in class
- Help with **personal care** for feeding or toileting, so your child can be at school
- Aide support or personal care on excursions or school camp
- Helping with the costs of running the school's integration program

Your child should get the support they need in school, whether or not they are eligible for extra funding. The education department says that the support they get should not depend on their level of funding. Uncle Henry's girls' school provides them with extra support including visiting teachers, speech therapy and aide support.

*"They have speech, they have visitors. They got some girl to help us from up there. She come to school. They come and help my oldest girl a lot ... They've got a girl who works with my oldest girl one day a week. Another girl works with my younger girl. We get them once a week ... Everything's going good so far." – Uncle Henry*



## What it can't pay for

The funding can't be used for the practical aspects of your child being at school, like school fees, uniforms, school camp or transport. You might be able to get other kinds of help to cover these costs – ask the Koorie education staff, Wellbeing Coordinator, Principal or Assistant Principal to help you negotiate this assistance.

The extra funding might not be available for equipment like an iPad or communication device. And the school can't use it to pay for big changes in the school environment, like building a ramp. There might be other funding available for all of these things if your child needs them – ask the Wellbeing Coordinator, Principal or Assistant Principal.

## Different ways of helping students

Different schools use the extra funding in different ways.

Schools get this extra funding so they can support all of their students with moderate to severe special needs.

Often schools will use the funding in ways that can help more than one child. For example, they might train all the teachers to work better with children with special needs which might help your child more than a bit of extra time with an aide in class.

The school should talk to you about the extra help your child needs, including supports that need extra funding (like aide time) and supports that don't (like different school work or ways of teaching).

The school makes the final decisions about how funding is spent, but they must talk to you about what you think would help your child. And you have the right to speak up if you are concerned that your child is not getting the right support, or to ask questions about the funding that the school gets to help them support your child.

## Find out if school can get extra funding to help your child

Your child will need to have tests, to see if their school can get extra funding to help them.

## Speak up to get help for your child

If your child is in a mainstream school, and you think they might need extra help, speak up. Ask the school to find out if it can get extra support. The school would apply for this money through the Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD) if they are in a government school.

As Aunty Faye says, some children could get the extra help, but never do because the school never brings it up, and because their parents or carers don't know it exists. It's important to pass on that information to others in community.

*"I didn't know about the funding. It took me a long, long time to get it. And I'd get it sooner because I could talk up, and talk with the teachers. But there's other families that just can't do it. Like, Nanna's home with about four kids, you know? Little ones as well. And she can't do it. Or foster care. But she's got a bit too much on, and she can't do it. Tell them that there is funds ... out there." – Aunty Faye*





## Testing and diagnosis

Your child will have to have tests, to find out more about their special needs, and to see if their school can get this extra funding. This is called **assessment**.

Your child's kindergarten might suggest that they be assessed, to find out the best way to support them at kindergarten. Some tests result in a **diagnosis**, and might tell you whether your child might have the choice of going to a specialist school.

For some children, there is no diagnosis that properly describes their disability or special needs. Even so, the tests still give you information about the help they need in school.

Schools can't access extra funding for every child with special needs, even if they have a diagnosis. But the school must still work with you to meet your child's special needs. The education department says that the type and level of your child's support at school should not depend on funding.

## Re-assessment and getting more help if needed

Once your child's school is receiving extra funding through the PSD, your child will need to have regular **re-assessment**, to see how they're going. The extra funding can go up or down, depending on how their learning is going, or changes in their medical or care needs.

All children have an assessment at the end of primary school, to work out what support they will need at secondary school. It's important that your child attends all the appointments, or they might not get that help.

## Have a say about your child's funding

Your child's school must talk with you, to work out how they spend any extra funding they get to help your child. You can ask them for a breakdown of how it is spent.

You can also tell the school your ideas for how the funding should be spent. For example, if the school takes part in Aboriginal cultural events or festivals, you might suggest the school put aside some personal care or aide time, to make sure your child can attend.

Or you might want your child to get more therapy, rather than more aide time in class. This can be discussed at the Student Support Group meeting, and should be part of your child's learning plan.

## Key terms explained

### **Aide or Education Support Officer**

Someone who works in the classroom to help a child with special needs.

### **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.

### **Curriculum**

What children are taught at school, including the work they are asked they do in class and their homework.



### **Diagnosis**

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

### **Disability**

A way of understanding one or more things about how your child's body or mind works, which is different to most other people. Your child's disability might mean that they sometimes need extra help to be well, move around, hear, see, learn, communicate or feel comfortable. Having a disability does not mean there is anything wrong with your child. The problem is that we live in a world that often 'disables' people, by not being accessible to them.

### **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 Learning Plan (KELP)**

A plan that schools make for every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child, about how the school, child and family will work together to help the child achieve their best at school.

### **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.

### **Learning plan, Individual Education Plan**

A plan that school makes for a child with special needs about what they will learn, and the help they will get at school. The school should discuss your child's plan with you early in the year, and in every Student Support Group meeting.

### **Mainstream school**

A school where all children can go, including children with special needs, if their parents or carers choose. There are mainstream schools that are state schools, Catholic schools and independent schools.

### **Occupational therapist (OT)**

A therapist who works with children whose disability affects how they do things in everyday life: hold a pencil, feed themselves, bathe or dress, go to the toilet, play and learn. At school, an OT can help work out what changes in the environment can help your child feel comfortable and work. Your child might get funding from the NDIS to see an OT. Some specialist schools have an OT on staff.

### **Personal care**

Help from a disability organisation, usually provided by a disability support worker, with day-to-day things like eating, washing, dressing or going to the toilet.

### **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.

### **Specialist school**

There are specialist schools for children who are Deaf, for children with physical disabilities, for children with autism and for children with an intellectual disability. There are 'special schools', for children whose score on an IQ test is between 50 and 70, and 'special development schools' for children whose score is below 50. There are also some schools and alternative programs for children with behavioural issues, and for children who are having a lot of difficulties with learning.

### **Speech therapist or pathologist**

A therapist who works with children with special needs that affect talking and communication. They also help children who have trouble swallowing food or drink. They might be based at the regional education department office, or in health or disability services. If your child's school gets extra funding to support them, this can be used for them to see a speech therapist.

### **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, who can give you information and support, such as helping you prepare for a meeting with the school.

### **Visiting teacher**

A specialist teacher who works with children with particular special needs. Visiting teachers teach children themselves when they visit, and also advise the school on helping them learn. There are visiting teachers for children who are Deaf or hard of hearing, children who are Blind or vision impaired, and children with physical disabilities. If your child's school gets extra funding to help them, this can be used for them to see a visiting teacher.

### **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 you can do to support your child's journey

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

If there's a problem at school

<https://www.acd.org.au/if-theres-a-problem-at-school>

More information for the journey

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