

ACD

Snapshot: Reflections on disability inclusion in education from teachers who are parents of children with disability

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Background

ACD is the Victorian advocacy service for children with disability and their families.

We are a not-for-profit organisation led by and for families of children with disability.

Our vision is an inclusive community where children with disability and their families thrive.

In March 2025, ACD ran a Have Your Say Consultation with Victorian teachers who are parents of children with disability.

The snapshot highlights what's working and what could be improved to support children with disability in the education system from the perspective of families with both lived and professional expertise.

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Executive summary

In March 2025, ACD ran a *Have Your Say* consultation with teachers who are also parents of children with disability. The session aimed to understand what's working and what could be improved to support children with disability in the education system.

Families shared how their lived experiences as parents had reshaped their perspectives and approaches to teaching. They described a deeper understanding of the link between wellbeing and learning, and a greater understanding in recognising and supporting each student's individual learning needs.

Building on their insights, families have adapted their teaching approaches by pursuing further professional development, providing more flexibility in classroom dynamics and student behaviour expectations, modifying physical classroom environments, and making more proactive efforts to engage and build relationships with families.

Families shared their experiences and views on Student Support Groups (SSGs) and Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings, both as educators and parents. Families told us that while they did have some knowledge on rights and entitlements that other families may not have, they still faced challenges in having plans created and implemented consistently to meet their child's needs.

Several areas for improvement were identified. These included better access to training and awareness building for both parents and teachers around SSGs and IEPs, as well as dedicated time and resources to support these processes. Participants also called for greater school-wide accountability, noting that inclusive practices too often rely on the commitment of individual teachers rather than being embedded across the school.

The discussion also highlighted the need for ongoing professional development that focuses on disability-specific knowledge, family-centred practices, and strategies to tailor teaching to the varying needs of students and classrooms. Participants emphasised the importance of practical, well-resourced training, led by people with disability.

Families spoke about how education policies and procedures can either support or hinder inclusion. They pointed to the benefits of smaller class sizes and alternative learning methods, such as hands-on and outdoor learning, to better meet the needs of diverse students. In contrast, consistency and accuracy of attendance data, punitive behaviour managements and exclusionary practices, standardised testing, and rigidity in how the student must present (e.g., uniform) and participate in education were all identified as barriers to inclusion.

1. Lived experience and the impact on teaching

Families shared how their experiences as parents of children with disability have shaped their teaching style, views on education, and understanding of disability. Many became parents while already in the teaching profession, whereas one group member who became a teacher after becoming a parent said they felt “*very despondent*” with the education system as a parent of children with additional needs.

A consistent theme of the discussion was the importance of validating parents as experts of their own child’s strengths and needs. Participants highlighted the need for teachers and school staff to work in genuine partnership with families, focusing on shared goals and high expectations for the child’s learning.

“I think it’s really important that parents feel validated and heard that their child is exactly who they need to be.”

“In my experience as a parent, but also as a teacher, [it’s] trying to work out how to best support the parent in order to support the child.”

Other perspectives and learned insights include:

- A deeper understanding of reasonable adjustments and the range of approaches that can be used to support individual needs
- A greater appreciation for how relationships, wellbeing and sense of belonging affect a student’s ability to engage in learning
- An understanding of the importance of building teaching around a child’s strengths, rather than trying to fit their interests into a pre-existing curriculum
- Recognising outward behaviours as an indication of underlying, unmet needs

“I’ve been teaching for 21 years and since having children it’s only now that I’ve actually learned more about disability in education and reasonable adjustments just from my personal perspective of being a mum.”

Families spoke about how their lived experience as parents of children with disability had shaped the way they teach and manage their classrooms. This experience led them to adapt their teaching practices and learning environments in meaningful ways, including:

- Increasing communication and relationship-building with families
- Creating more flexible classroom routines to meet individual learning needs, such as allowing students to stand, listen to music, or take movement breaks
- Adjusting the physical classroom environment to reduce overstimulation
- Actively seeking out additional resources and professional development opportunities

Lived experiences also motivated participants to become advocates for inclusion in their education setting, in both raising awareness and supporting other staff to make changes to their practice.

“I’ve also done a whole lot more professional development in that space to actually understand some of the triggers, some of the strategies, some of the things that I could be implementing.”

"It actually doesn't make a difference to learning whatsoever if they're sitting or standing, because if they're happy, I'm happy as a teacher."

"I am always learning and adjusting my practice based on personal experience. I think lived experience brings such a dynamic lens to teaching. I have found over the years I have developed my confidence to speak out and advocate. Every child is so very different and it is important to tap into the knowledge that parents bring."

2. Student Support Groups and Individual Education Plans

Families discussed their experiences on Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and Student Support Groups (SSGs), both as educators and as parents. They shared how their professional experience gave them insights that other families might not have. These insights included an understanding of their child's rights and entitlements to SSGs, reasonable adjustments that could be made, and the flexibility to include social and wellbeing goals within IEPs.

"My son's had plenty of SSGs, but because I'm a teacher, I know my rights and I will go in and advocate for my son, whereas my friend's kids or my friends do not have SSGs."

Despite this knowledge, consultation participants still faced challenges when advocating for their child's learning needs. Some spoke about encountering "token" or impersonal goals in IEPs, a lack of understanding among staff about disability and inclusive planning, and inconsistency in how IEPs were implemented across different teachers and support staff.

"[There were] various teachers who contributed to the IEP who were not at the meeting at all and there were really abstract goals. ... [W]hen it came to academic things, it was just you know these really token things. One of her goals was I could see it was just [copied and] pasted from the curriculum and I wasn't listened to."

"I feel really strongly someone from the school whose role is in disability, not necessarily just wellbeing, needs to be involved in SSGs and IEPs."

While families highlighted positive experiences they had with their schools and praised "fantastic teachers", they expressed concern that the success of IEPs often depended too heavily on the commitment of individual educators. They noted a lack of consistent, school-wide processes to ensure accountability and follow-through.

To make SSG and IEP meetings more effective and meaningful, families suggested:

- Providing more in-depth training for educators and school staff on disability inclusion, extending beyond just funding-related knowledge
- Offering education and resources for families to better understand their child's rights and available supports
- Building inclusive school cultures that enable teachers to have the time and resources needed for this work

- Addressing power imbalances by creating meeting environments that feel less “intimidating” and “stressful” for families. For example, encouraging families to chair meetings.

“I would like to see a more holistic IEP that factors in all elements of learning and not just focusing on numeracy and literacy.”

“Time for staff to understand how to write IEP and conduct SSGs support staff adequately without making hard for the teacher to do.”

“[If] you have a fantastic teacher and education support staff member or team that [is] implementing [IEPs], that's great. But you've got to rely on that.”

3. Enabling inclusive practices in the education system

Training and professional development

Families spoke positively about examples of whole-school training and approaches that promoted inclusive practice. These included models such as trauma-informed practice and positive primer thinking. They particularly valued:

- Training that supports recognition of unmet needs
- Practical, proactive strategies that teachers can use in their classrooms
- Ongoing access to a lead expert who can provide implementation support and guidance

“I find the Berry Street Education model is very good. It's trauma informed and it has a lot of basis around recognising unmet needs, recognising that behaviour is an expression of unmet needs. Trying to meet those needs, focusing on proactive strategies in addressing children's difficulties rather than the reactive strategies and the focus on the connection and collaboration with students.”

Families also raised broader sector-wide training and professional development needs. These included:

- Training on family-centred practice
- Disability-specific knowledge, including neuro-affirming language and recognition of behaviours such as masking
- More frequent and responsive training to reflect the changing needs of student cohorts each school year, allowing timely implementation of adjustments
- Training delivered by people with lived experience of disability

Families emphasised that dedicated time for teachers to prioritise professional development is essential for improving disability inclusion across the education system.

“Reasonable adjustments are understood, implemented confidently and competently.”

“I feel it's so important that there needs to be more awareness and training around family-centred practice. Especially around factoring neurodiversity and people and children with disabilities struggling with limited access or no access to the NDIS.”

"More opportunities around understanding how children mask."

"Any disability training to be run by those with lived experience. E.g., Autistic PD to be run by autistic individuals."

Policies and processes

Families spoke about the importance of policies and procedures that can or could promote diverse learning, individuality, and students as *"agents and citizens in their learning."* These include:

- Smaller class sizes
- Opportunities for play-based, hands-on and outdoor learning
- Home-like learning spaces
- Curriculum design that recognises and responds to neurodiverse needs

"More hands-on learning through life experiences."

"Pedagogy and curriculum stemming from knowledge that we are a neurodiverse society."

However, families also raised examples of existing education policies and procedures that hinder inclusion. These included:

- Onerous inclusion funding application processes and lack of transparency on how funds are spent
- Rigid rules related to uniforms, timetables, restricted items, and school zoning
- Standardised testing, such as NAPLAN
- Punitive behaviour management policies and exclusionary practices, including suspensions and expulsions

A key challenge raised was the inconsistency of attendance monitoring and reporting, which often results in inaccurate portrayals of school participation and inclusion for students with disability.

"Would like to know as a parent that the funds/support is used to support my child. Clear and transparent discussion about how many hours approximately [are] used for an aide for the child. I understand the funding is used for a collective however are funds fairly allocated [?]."

"Focus on behaviourist-based student management (rewards, punishments, consequences)."

"Too structured in the classroom with no flexibility. Follow school rules only as stated."

"I work as an outreach worker, so I work with highly disengaged students. At a school I have one hour of engagement with those students per week. However, the enrolment shows that they're 100% enrolled and attending because they're in a re-engagement program. Any of those students are ASD, or ADHD or have some sort of underlying neurodivergence. And that is growing. The department is going to have no knowledge of that because the data that's represented is that they're all attending 100% of the time and that is not the case."

Families who participated

Nine families participated in the session. Their children ranged in age from one to 15 years, with an average age of 10. Autism was the most represented primary diagnosis.

Participants' teaching experience ranged across kindergarten, primary school, secondary school and leadership in mainstream, specialist and independent school settings.

One participant identified as culturally and linguistically diverse. 67% of participants lived in regional Victoria, with 33% living in urban areas.