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Understanding the mental health needs of children with disabilities

In Australia most school-aged children with a disability (89%) attend an ordinary school. However, 63% of these students have been found to experience difficulties at school, while only some receive additional support¹. Meeting the needs of children with disabilities can be challenging for schools and families. However, effective support for children’s mental health and wellbeing involves efforts to meet the social, emotional and learning needs of all children.

Children with disabilities

are often seen as ‘different’ by other students. When they are excluded from play with other children they may experience social isolation. Such experiences of isolation and exclusion are common contributors to children’s mental health difficulties. All children benefit from having positive friendships and feeling a sense of belonging at school. These positive experiences are especially important for children with additional needs.

In this overview we look at how disability and illness affects children and their families, why children with additional needs are at a greater risk of mental health problems and how schools can promote mental health in children who have additional needs. With careful attention and planning, and well coordinated efforts between parents, carers and schools, children with disabilities can be supported to participate and be included at school and have their needs met.

How disability affects children

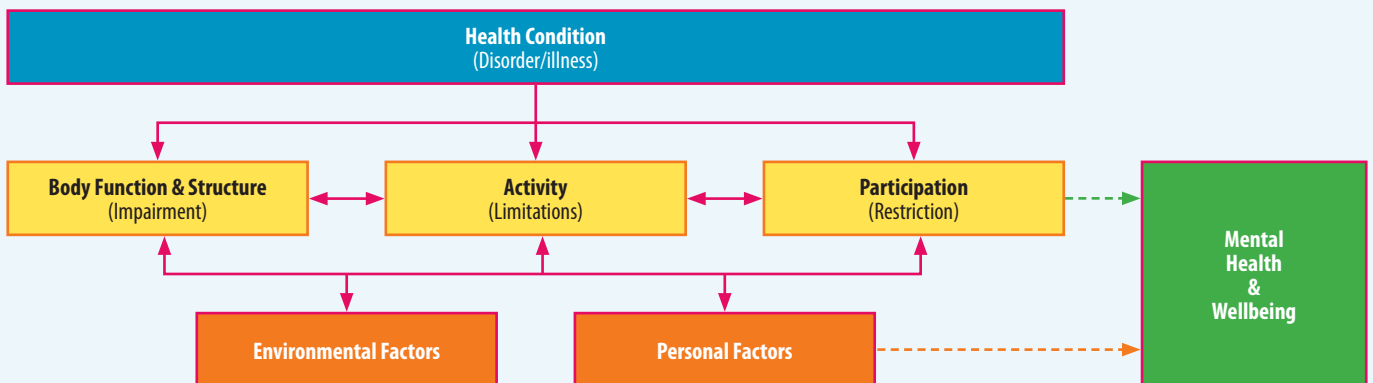
The term ‘disability’ refers to a wide range of conditions that in some way limit people’s ability to manage everyday living. Different disabilities are often grouped in categories such as intellectual and learning disabilities, psychiatric disabilities, sensory and speech disabilities, chronic illness, acquired brain injury or physical disabilities. People may also be affected by more than one kind of disability.

i For information about specific disabilities and their effects on children see Raising Children Network’s Disability Reference, available at http://raisingchildren.net.au/children_with_disabilities/raising_children_with_disabilities.html

Having a disability places limits on the things that children can do. It may restrict them from participating in some activities that their classmates do. It is vital to see the whole child, not just the disability or illness, and to offer support for what children with disabilities *can do* so as to reduce restrictions on their participation. This approach helps to build self-confidence and motivation for trying new things. It promotes ways of valuing and including all children.

International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF)

The World Health Organisation (WHO) uses the following model to show the impact of illness and disability on children and young people.



The model describes three key factors that can impact the mental health and wellbeing of children with disabilities or chronic illness. The part shown in blue on the diagram looks at how children's illness or condition impacts on their functioning, that is, their ability to carry out everyday learning and activities. Impairments in the ways a child's body works (due to problems with body function and/or structure) can lead to difficulties in performing particular activities (*activity limitations*) and/or in restrictions to participation in different life situations and events (*participation restrictions*).

The part shown in orange looks at all the factors other than the illness. These are divided into two different types – those factors to do with the individual child and those that are to do with the environment in which they live. Environmental factors include the level of support and attitudes of people and groups around the child and accommodations made for the child's needs in school and the wider community. These factors can also lead to difficulties with performing activities or restrictions in participating in different life situations.

Families and children with disabilities

A family who cares for a child with a disability or chronic illness is faced with many challenges. These challenges can affect the whole family or particular individuals within it. For example, social isolation often affects families who have a child with a disability. Friends and extended family may find it difficult to understand and support the family's new situation. Time for catching up with friends or going on outings may be severely reduced as family members strive to meet the child's additional needs.

For parents, the challenges often include working out how to access the right services for their child, and dealing with the roller

coaster ride of emotions that can accompany parenting a child with a disability. There may be a range of challenges associated with caring for your child's additional needs on a day-to-day basis. These challenges may include the difficult behaviours of some children with disabilities, the need to administer daily treatments, helping children with self-care, (e.g. such as bathing, dressing and eating), dealing with discrimination, and making sure there are facilities that can accommodate your child's needs when you visit places outside the home.

Having a brother or a sister with a disability or serious illness can affect siblings in different

ways. They may feel a range of emotions – jealousy for parents spending more time with child with the disability, guilt for complaining about the strains that the child with the disability puts on the family, or joy when their brother or sister accomplishes something new for the first time. Siblings may sometimes get teased about their brother or sister with a disability. Having a break from the responsibility by spending time with friends can be really helpful for siblings. Being able to talk about their feelings and getting support from parents is also really important.

Disability and children's mental health

Research tells us that children with disabilities have a greater chance of developing mental health problems than children without disabilities. For example, 41% of young people with intellectual disability aged 4–18 years had also been diagnosed with emotional and behaviour disorders like depression and Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)². Young people with Autism were found to have even higher rates of emotional and behavioural difficulties than did those with intellectual disability. High rates of mental difficulties have also been found in young people who are hearing impaired, have cerebral palsy, epilepsy or chronic illness.

The level of the child's impairment and support and attitudes from others are key factors that influence the mental health and wellbeing of children with disabilities. When those around them take effective steps to include children with disabilities and ensure their needs are met, they can help foster positive mental health and wellbeing. However, when this does not occur, mental health difficulties are more likely to develop.

Some children with disabilities may have difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships because the impairments caused by the disability limit or restrict them from participating in everyday activities with their peers. Children with disabilities are also more likely to experience situations that negatively affect their mental health such as bullying, alienation and discrimination.

Some children with disabilities have difficulty in picking up social cues that allow them to participate cooperatively with others. Children with physical disabilities may find it hard to participate in games that other children play. Some children may find it difficult to approach other their peers to engage in social activities, particularly if they are aware of being 'different'. As a result, children with disabilities may lose confidence in their ability to make friends or to participate in activities that other children their age enjoy.

The combination of these sorts of factors can lead children with a disability or serious illness to develop mental health difficulties such as low self-esteem, and mental health disorders such as depression. While the disability and resulting impairment is rarely able to be changed, participation restrictions can be addressed, and environmental and personal factors can be improved to support children's wellbeing.

2. Brereton, Einfield & Tonge. (2006). Psychopathology in children and adolescents with Autism compared to young people with intellectual disability, *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 36, 863-870.



Key principles for supporting children with disabilities

Build strengths step-by-step

Breaking tasks into small steps helps to ensure success and supports children's learning. Support children's confidence by emphasising what they can do.

Be an advocate for children with disabilities

Children with disabilities often face discrimination. Making sure that others understand the need to include and value all children benefits the individual child and promotes a caring community.

Focus on the child not the disability

Children's needs should be assessed individually and regularly. Do not to assume that all children with a particular disability have the same problems and needs. An individual child's needs may also change over time.

Develop partnerships

Parents and carers cannot meet the complex needs of children with disabilities alone. Collaborative involvement between families, schools and health professionals helps to ensure the best outcomes for children's development and mental health.

Using the KidsMatter Framework to help children with disabilities

1. Creating a positive school community for children with disabilities

Developing a culture of belonging and inclusion at school is especially important for children with disabilities and their families. This involves finding out about the particular needs of children with disabilities, tailoring teaching practices accordingly and collaborating effectively with parents and carers. Schools can also support belonging and inclusion by promoting values of friendship, cooperation and respect, and by ensuring that the school's policies and practices address instances of bullying or harassment quickly and effectively when they occur.

2. Social and emotional learning for children with disabilities

When planning a SEL curriculum, teachers of children with disabilities should be sure to take into account their particular learning needs. By assessing each child's social and emotional skills individually, a learning plan can be developed to build skills step-by-step. Breaking down complex skills into smaller concrete steps is important for ensuring success. Opportunities for students to practise should be provided for each step. Providing structured peer-to-peer learning activities in which students learn social skills through direct interaction with one another is often particularly helpful. Praise or rewards given for effort and achievement of each step help to consolidate new skills. Any materials used to teach social and emotional skills need to be considered in terms of their appropriateness for use with children with disabilities.

More information on teaching social and emotional skills to children with additional needs can be found in the KidsMatter resource pack on *Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders*.

3. Supporting families of children with disabilities

Having good support is especially important for families of children with disabilities. Schools can provide support by listening to parents and carers, finding out about the particular needs of their children, and collaborating with parents and carers to work out ways to meet them. Schools can also provide relevant information and links to services that can assist families. By facilitating access to support networks, disability advocacy groups, and professional services, schools can help families of children with disabilities get the range of support they require.

4. Early intervention for mental health difficulties

Early intervention aims to ensure that children's disabilities are appropriately identified and that professional help and learning support are provided as soon as possible. Effective early intervention helps to minimise the effects of the disability and provides developmental support. Some disabilities, particularly those involving learning and social difficulties, may only become apparent after children begin school. In these circumstances schools can provide crucial assistance through facilitating children's referral for specialist assessment and services.

Schools can increase the protective factors that support children's mental health by working in partnership with parents, carers and health professionals in order to meet the needs of children with disabilities. By paying attention to the mental health needs of children with disabilities and identifying mental health concerns, school staff can help to facilitate appropriate early intervention for mental health problems.

For more information on children's mental health difficulties see the KidsMatter resource pack *Children's mental health difficulties and how to get help*.

For assisting children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or Autism Spectrum Disorders, see the relevant KidsMatter resource packs.

For further information about children with additional needs who may be at risk of developing mental health problems see the accompanying KidsMatter list *Children with additional needs – Other resources*

Further information on KidsMatter is available at www.kidsmatter.edu.au

This resource is part of the KidsMatter Primary initiative. The team at KidsMatter welcomes your feedback at www.kidsmatter.edu.au