

Disability: Suggestions for families

Parenting a child with a disability is often challenging, especially when your child's additional needs are complex and time-consuming. Working together as a family and getting support from relatives, friends and professional services is really important. The following suggestions may be helpful to assist with these challenges and promote family wellbeing.

Be an advocate for your child

Being an advocate for your child involves letting others know about your child's needs and working with them to find ways to have them met. You can be active in this by finding out what kinds of additional support is available for your child and making sure this is provided. This can be hard work at times, so gather allies to help you. Supportive allies may include family, friends, school staff or health professionals who understand your child's abilities and difficulties and are committed to meeting the child's needs. There are also a number of disability advocacy groups who can provide valuable support.

Work collaboratively with the school

Discuss your child's needs with school staff and work with them to develop strategies for supporting your child's learning and their social and emotional development. Talk with school staff about ways you can collaborate to actively support your child's involvement in school life so that it is a positive and enjoyable experience. For example, you might write a letter to introduce your child to the class. Make sure to communicate regularly with your child's teacher so you can share information, provide updates and continue to work together effectively. One strategy is to use a booklet for daily or weekly communication between home and school. Another approach is to set up regular telephone or meeting times to talk about how your child is managing socially as well as academically.

Teach social and emotional skills

Social relationships can sometimes be difficult for all children. Parents can help by supporting the development of social and emotional skills. Extra help may be needed by children with disabilities if they have been absent from school due to ill health and have to re-engage with others, or if they face intolerance or bullying behaviour. For some children, the nature of the disability may mean that learning social skills is difficult and therefore requires lots of guidance and practice. For more, see the KidsMatter Primary information sheets on social and emotional learning.

Provide opportunities for developing friendships

Inviting classmates over to play can be a good way to strengthen a budding friendship. Help your child to choose activities or games that they can do confidently with friends. With younger children, or if your child's social skills are limited, ensure you are available to provide support if needed.

Support siblings

Be open with siblings about the challenges that affect their brother or sister with a disability. Provide important acknowledgement by showing you appreciate their help, but also ensure that they have time and space for themselves. Listening to their feelings and experiences lets them know you are there for them too. Setting aside some regular time to spend with your other children, even if it is brief, helps to maintain positive family relationships.

Get support for you

Parents have needs too. There is no such thing as a 'perfect' or 'super' parent. It's important to set realistic expectations of what you can and can't do. Take some time out. Spend time with friends, your partner, or alone doing something that you enjoy. Asking friends, family or respite services for help when you need it is a really important coping strategy for families. Talking with other parents or carers of children with disabilities can be very helpful.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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