

**INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH  
DISABILITY IN NEW SOUTH WALES EDUCATIONAL  
SETTINGS**

**Organisation:** Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD) Australia  
Incorporated

**Date Received:** 16 February 2024

---



February 5, 2023

The Director  
Portfolio Committee No. 3 – Education  
Parliament House  
6 Macquarie Street  
Sydney, NSW 2000

Dear Director,

Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD) Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the **'Inquiry into Children and Young People with Disability in New South Wales Educational Settings'** on behalf of the DCD community. In this submission we will provide information about this disorder and our organisation. We will present the findings of a national inquiry into the unmet needs of children with DCD in this country, outlining the factors leading to neglect and violation of children's rights within the educator sector. We also provide recommendations to improve support within schools for children with DCD and the educational outcomes.

### **What is DCD?**

DCD (sometimes described as 'dyspraxia') is the most prevalent child onset movement disorder - affecting one child in almost every Australian classroom. DCD is included in the same diagnostic manual as autism and ADHD (DSM-5 APA, 2013) and is characterised by marked impairments in learning and performing movement skills. Symptoms are most noticeable on entry to school when a child's movement is observed next to their peers. Children with DCD often have difficulty manipulating a pencil to draw/write, cutting with scissors, opening their bag and lunchbox items, and engaging in activities in the playground. Movement appears uncoordinated and physically awkward. The inefficiency and additional mental effort that goes into processing, planning and executing their movements often results in tiredness and fatigue. These difficulties create significant challenges throughout schooling, especially keeping up with written work in the classroom, sport and play. Social relationships are often impacted, as children are excluded due to their inability to 'keep up' with their peers (i.e., in the playground) and avoidance of challenging activities is observed.

DCD is a lifelong condition. The movement difficulties experienced in early childhood continue to exert an impact throughout adolescence and adulthood. Poor fine motor skills associated with the disorder causes difficulty with handwriting, self-care, cooking, housework, and shopping. Poor gross motor skills affect balance, posture and ability to engage in leisure and

physical activities. Difficulties organising themselves in their surroundings can make activities such as navigating road crossings and learning to drive a car particularly challenging. Without appropriate provisions in place, academic performance and future opportunities are impacted.

### **DCD Australia**

DCD Australia was established in 2014 as the national peak organisation for children and adults with DCD in Australia. We take a human rights-based approach and work to:

- advocate on behalf of people with DCD to ensure they have access to the services and supports they need;
- provide community support to people and families affected by DCD;
- raise awareness in the community of the complex nature of DCD;
- develop strategies and teaching programs for educators and health professionals; and
- support research that will advance understanding of DCD.

### **National Inquiry – Impact for DCD Report**

Currently in Australia there is limited awareness of DCD in the Australian Education System and the impact that the disability associated with DCD has on a child's ability to learn and participate at school.

In 2020, DCD Australia partnered with researchers to deliver the first national study investigating the impact of DCD on children and their families. The results of this large-scale survey (completed by over 400 families of children aged 4-18 years – 36% from NSW) demonstrated substantial neglect across the education sector.

Findings revealed:

- 82% of parents felt that their child's movement difficulties were negatively impacting their education.
- One in four parents reported that their child did not enjoy going to school.
- Less than half had individualised learning plans despite the school and teachers being made aware the child had DCD.
- 2 out of 3 children did not have modifications made to tasks and assessment items impacted by their movement difficulties (e.g., extra working time, rest breaks, modified tasks).
- 62% of children had difficulties making friends at school, with children often excluded and bullied by their peers, and
- 5.3% of parents homeschooled their child (compared to 0.3% of the general population) because their learning needs were not being met at school.
- 86% of parents were concerned about how their child's DCD may impact on their ability to successfully complete their education.

**Parents reported that their biggest challenge with schooling was lack of teacher awareness of DCD.** This is further highlighted by a recent investigation of teacher familiarity with neurodevelopmental disorders (Hunt et al., 2021) who reported that only 35% of Australian

teachers have familiarity with DCD. This lack of familiarity is even more striking when compared to other neurodevelopmental conditions, with familiarity rates of 98% for autism, 94% for ADHD and 94% for dyslexia.

#### **Families from New South Wales told us:**

*“There needs to be increased awareness and support for teachers including assistance in the school environment to promote inclusion.” – parent of 14-year-old.*

*“DCD needs to be officially recognised as a disability and therefore funding available to assist our kids and educate the educators.” – parent of 7-year-old.*

*“Increased awareness and support by teachers is absolutely vital. There needs to be recognition by Learning Support teams and Board of Studies in NSW.” – parent of 8-year-old.*

*“Increased awareness and support by teachers is needed. This was a major reason for us choosing to homeschool, as despite things being agreed to at meetings, his teachers failed to follow up, and continued to have unrealistic expectations of him.” – parent of 12-year-old.*

**Increased knowledge, awareness and support at school was identified as the largest priority area by families** in our national inquiry, with 63% of families recommending it as the area they would like to see resources allocated.

#### **Recommendations**

DCD Australia and the DCD community would like to see teachers receive **more training and resources**, so that teachers:

1. Know what DCD is.
2. Can support the learning needs of children with movement difficulties.
3. Can make appropriate adjustments where required (e.g., additional working time, rest breaks, modified tasks/assessments, use of adaptive devices).

Currently in Australia, DCD is not included in the training or professional development opportunities received by our teachers to prepare them to work with children with disabilities. As a result, most teachers do not know what DCD is or know what adjustments to make to support their learning and participation in the classroom and playground.

With education a focal point of the NDIS Review and the Disability Royal Commission’s recent report (which we contributed to); we kindly ask the New South Wales Review Committee to ensure that disabilities like DCD are not forgotten. **Children with DCD require adjustments to participate in learning experiences on the same basis as other children.**

Principals and schoolteachers need more education about DCD and inclusive education.

**We ask for DCD to be:**

- **Included Educational and Professional Development modules** so that teachers can learn about DCD and adjustments they can make to improve these children's outcomes at school.
- **Included in Education Department disability support services** so that teachers have access to professionals who can provide evidence-based intervention to improve movement abilities and know what accommodations and adjustments may best support a child's needs.
- **Recognised**. For too long it has been perceived to be a 'specific learning disorder' (SLD). DCD is a neurodevelopmental disorder, it impacts on functioning and participation in the classroom and playground, and there needs to be appropriate systems in place to support those with significant disability.

DCD Australia has developed a free resource package which is available on our website <https://dcdaustralia.org.au/>, as a first step in providing educators with the knowledge and skills needed to support children with DCD at school. This resource was developed in partnership with teachers.

While these efforts have helped raise awareness of DCD, **systemic change to address the issues raised above will only be fully achieved through direct changes to procedures and policies directly within the education system**. This is an urgent call for changes that will support the rights of children with DCD and their families in Australia.

In September last year, we wrote to the Federal Education Minister and the Education Minister in every state around Australia to raise awareness of DCD and the challenges experienced by families in Australian schools.

**The Hon Prue Carr MP (Minister for Education and Learning) in New South Wales responded to our request (19 November 2023) stating that:**

*"All students in NSW public schools with disability, including those with DCD, receive support to access and participate in the curriculum on the same basis as their peers without disability. Support provided for each student reflects their personalised teaching needs and is identified in consultation with teachers and school staff, the student and their parents and carers. Core budget resources are available to all schools to support the education of students with disability. Students do not need a formal diagnosis to access specialist support. Every mainstream school in NSW public school has access to a specialist Learning and Support Teacher who works directly with the school to provide support for student and their teachers. Also, each school has success to an Assistant Principal, Learning and Support to build teacher capacity to support students with disability."*

While the response was positive, it does not match the experience reported by families. This again likely reflects the lack of knowledge of DCD by the NSW education system preventing appropriate supports from being implemented.

To help increase this knowledge and the support available to families, we are asking for your help.

Yours sincerely,

**Dr Jacqueline Williams**  
Director - DCD Australia Inc.

**Dr Melissa Licari**  
Committee Member - DCD Australia Inc.  
Australian Representative – International  
Society for Research and Advocacy in DCD

**Professor Elspeth Froude**  
Committee Member - DCD Australia Inc.