

Submission  
No 27

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

**Organisation:** The Australian Association of Psychologists Incorporated (AAPi)  
**Date Received:** 28 February 2024

---

## Submission on the Experiences of Children and Young People with Disability in Educational Settings

Dear Chair and Committee Members,

The Australian Association of Psychologists Incorporated (AAPi) is honoured to contribute to the inquiry on the experiences of children and young people with disability within educational settings. As the leading not-for-profit peak body representing psychologists Australia-wide, AAPi is committed to advocating for inclusive and supportive environments that prioritise the mental well-being of all individuals, particularly those with disabilities. Please see our submission comments below, which have been informed through consultation with subject matter experts within our membership.

- A. the experiences of children and young people within educational settings and measures to better support students with disability

Children and young people with disabilities require comprehensive support to address their developmental, social, psychological, and health needs within the school environment. Developmentally, these individuals may face unique challenges, necessitating tailored educational strategies to foster their cognitive, motor, and sensory skills. Socially, fostering inclusive environments is crucial to promote positive peer interactions, friendship development, and a sense of belonging. Psychologically, disabled children may experience additional stressors, requiring psychological support to navigate any emotional challenges they may encounter. Schools must prioritise mental health resources and create an atmosphere that promotes self-esteem and resilience. Additionally, addressing the health needs of disabled students involves accommodating physical and medical requirements, ensuring accessibility, and promoting a healthy lifestyle. A collaborative approach involving educators, healthcare professionals, and families is essential to create an inclusive educational environment that nurtures the holistic well-being of disabled children and young people.

Disabled children may experience bullying or discrimination based on their differences, leading to emotional distress and social isolation. Members state that ‘...the system looks for deficits, and discrimination is the norm’. The school system's default is not a ‘yes we can’ approach, with a marked shortage of teachers in New South Wales, and the hardest schools to staff are special education schools. Members consulted about their experience state that most teachers do not have special education training, and due to teachers being unsupported, they burn out and leave the profession. Children and young people who attend special education schools miss out on the community aspects, as these schools' geographical location can sometimes be 50km from their homes. This geographical distance significantly diminishes their ability to connect with peers.

Inaccessible facilities and classrooms can limit a disabled student's participation in various activities, hindering their overall development. Stereotypes and negative attitudes from peers or educators can impact the self-esteem and confidence of disabled children,

hindering their social and emotional well-being. Insufficient resources and support services may impede a disabled child's ability to thrive academically and socially. If not adequately included in classroom activities and social events, disabled children may feel isolated, leading to a lack of social integration and a sense of exclusion. Schools have a responsibility to ensure that all students and teachers are safe at school and that every student can participate in the variety of programs offered (Winn, Hay, Parmenter, & Riches, 2010).

B. the barriers to safe, quality and inclusive education for children with disability in schools, early childhood education services and other educational settings

Barriers to safe, quality, and inclusive education for children with disabilities in schools are multifaceted and hinder their holistic development. Physical barriers, including inaccessible buildings and classrooms, limit full participation in educational activities. Insufficient resources, such as funding, specialised materials, and trained staff, contribute to inadequate support. Negative attitudes, stigma, and discrimination from educators, peers, and the community create an unwelcoming environment, fostering social isolation. Inadequate teacher training further exacerbates these challenges, hindering the creation of an inclusive and accommodating learning environment. Bullying and harassment add to the vulnerability of children with disabilities, impeding their engagement in a safe and supportive educational setting.

Students experience barriers when the teaching staff are not trained in their university education to understand special needs. This lack of training is demonstrated frequently with AAPI members stating that 'when teachers meet with students who may be in wheelchairs or need to be tube fed- this shocks them...'. With principals hired on merit but without psychological and management training, this can often lead to poorly supported teachers, with students then impacted by this.

The absence of assistive technologies, limited access to tailored support services, and inflexible curricula pose additional obstacles to disabled children's academic and social development. Insufficient collaboration and communication between stakeholders, including educators, support staff, parents, and healthcare professionals, hinder the comprehensive support needed. Addressing these barriers requires a collective effort to create inclusive policies, provide adequate resources, foster positive attitudes, and promote collaboration to ensure that every child, regardless of ability, has access to a safe, quality, and inclusive education.

C. the specific needs of children and young people with disability in regional, rural and remote schools, early childhood education services and other educational settings

Children and young people with disabilities in regional, rural, and remote settings in New South Wales face unique challenges that stem from the geographic and resource disparities in these areas. Evidence shows that children and young people with disability experience violence, abuse, and neglect at rates considerably higher than their peers (Robinson, 2015).

The limited availability of psychologists to provide timely assessment and support results in delayed access to crucial specialist support for the children, their families, and school staff. The scarcity of psychologists in these regions exacerbates the difficulties in addressing the specific needs of children with disabilities, including tailored educational strategies and psychological support. There are significant issues around accessing support for these children and their families, as paediatricians or psychologists with specific areas of endorsement are often required to provide evidence in some schools.

The remoteness of these areas may also impact the accessibility of healthcare services, making it challenging for families to access timely interventions. To enhance the well-being and educational outcomes of children with disabilities in regional, rural, and remote settings, there is a pressing need for increased investment in mental health resources, training and retention opportunities for local psychologists, and the reinstatement of diverse pathways in psychology training such as the 4+2 program that can bridge the geographical gaps and provide comprehensive assistance for these individuals and their communities.

D. the impact on children and young people with disability and their families associated with inadequate levels of support

Inadequate levels of support for children and young people with disabilities in schools can have profound psychological and well-being impacts on both the students and their families. When children do not receive the necessary support tailored to their individual needs, it can lead to feelings of frustration, isolation, and diminished self-esteem. Academic challenges coupled with a lack of assistance may contribute to heightened stress and anxiety levels, plus other significant behavioural challenges. Moreover, the psychological strain on parents and families is significant as they grapple with the emotional toll of witnessing their child's struggles and the frustration of navigating a system that falls short of meeting their child's requirements. The overall well-being of both the children and their families can be compromised, with potential long-term effects on mental health. Adequate support in schools, encompassing tailored educational plans, accessibility measures, and psychological assistance, is essential to mitigate these adverse impacts and foster a positive and inclusive learning environment for children with disabilities and their families. Members state that the onus needs to be firmly placed on the school and school system as to why a child might be excluded from joining a school community- that it is 'too easy' to turn disabled children and their families away and that it should be very hard for a school to say no to a child.

E. the benefits for all children and young people if students with disability are provided with adequate levels of support

Providing adequate support in schools yields short- and long-term psychological and well-being benefits for all children and young people, fostering an inclusive and enriching educational environment. In the short term, individualised support ensures that students, including those with disabilities, can effectively navigate academic challenges, contributing to increased self-confidence and a positive self-image. Peer interactions are enhanced, promoting social integration and a sense of belonging. These positive experiences create a foundation for emotional well-being and resilience. In the long term, the psychological benefits extend to improved mental health outcomes, as children with adequate support are

better equipped to face life's challenges. Academic success and a positive school experience contribute to a sense of accomplishment and self-efficacy, impacting their overall well-being into adulthood. Inclusive or neurodiversity-affirming practice benefits all children even if they are not disabled and thus should be provided as standard rather than requiring a diagnosis verified to access support. In contrast to a deficits-based approach, which focuses on “fixing” the impairments associated with neurodevelopmental conditions, a neurodiversity-affirming approach acknowledges that all neurotypes have unique strengths, interests, and support needs. Moreover, this approach highlights the role of the environment and societal barriers in further exacerbating challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals.

Furthermore, an inclusive school environment fosters empathy, understanding, and acceptance among all students, cultivating a society that values diversity and embraces the strengths of each individual. We know that students, parents, schools, communities and various departments and agencies at central and local levels need to work in partnership to improve the transition experiences and post-school outcomes of students with disabilities (Riches, 1996). When children and young people with disabilities are adequately supported, the family and community are supported.

F. the social, economic and personal benefits of improving outcomes for students with disability at school and in further education and employment

Improving outcomes for students with disabilities yields significant social, economic, and personal benefits for both individuals and society. Socially, fostering an inclusive educational environment promotes diversity, empathy, and understanding, contributing to a more compassionate and accepting society. Students with disabilities who receive tailored support experience enhanced social integration and build positive relationships with their peers, fostering a sense of belonging. Economically, investing in inclusive education prepares students with disabilities for meaningful participation in the workforce, reducing dependency on social support systems and contributing to a more skilled and diverse labour market. It also fosters innovation by tapping into the unique perspectives and talents of individuals with disabilities. On a personal level, improved educational outcomes empower students with disabilities, boosting their confidence, self-esteem, and overall well-being. By breaking down barriers and providing equal opportunities, society benefits from the diverse contributions and achievements of individuals with disabilities, fostering a more equitable and thriving community. The concept of wellbeing from disabled children’s perspective is described as feeling supported, included, and respected, as well as feeling valued and capable, and this needs to sit in the centre of the schools’ policies and practices (Foley et al., 2012).

G. the experiences of teachers, early childhood educators, learning support staff and others with a role in educating children with disability and measures to adequately resource and empower those educators

The AAPI suggests mental health resourcing in NSW to support children and young people with a disability, including increasing the provision of psychologists in schools to address the growing mental health needs of students, ensuring early intervention and support, and

raising the Medicare rebate to \$150 for all children and families to eliminate access and affordability issues related to psychological services.

Disabled students do not exist in silos; students with self-reported disabilities exhibit attitudes and behaviours that are consistent with studies of students who are alienated from their school communities. Community-based health promotion interventions are required to address these issues in order to prevent the onset of secondary disease processes or additional disability (Hogan, McLellan & Bauman, 2006)

We further encourage school-wide neurodiversity-affirming practices that embrace the uniqueness and strengths of neurodivergent children and provide them and their families with the skills, tools, and strategies to allow for improved participation within the home, school, and play environments. This may involve:

- Seeking to understand the needs of neurodivergent children from their perspective and adapting the environment to meet these needs.
- Understanding and respecting neurodivergent communication styles.
- Understanding and accommodating individual sensory needs.
- Encouraging neurodivergent rather than neurotypical listening skills.
- Assisting in developing self-advocacy and problem-solving skills.
- Teaching children to understand better the emotions, behaviours, and communication of other people around them so they can better choose how they want to respond.
- Validating children's feelings, helping them recognise their triggers, and assisting in identifying calming strategies.
- Recognising the need for processing time and safe spaces.
- Encouraging safe self-regulation skills, including stimming.
- Adopting neurodiversity-affirming language

Neurodiversity-affirming therapy does not involve:

- Promoting masking, loss of autonomy, or loss of personal agency.
- Eliminating stimming behaviours.
- Developing goals that seek to "cure" neurodivergent behaviours.

#### K. the impact of policies regarding the use of restrictive practices

The psychological impacts of policies allowing the use of restrictive practices can be profound and detrimental, especially for individuals with disabilities. The implementation of restrictive practices, such as seclusion or physical restraints, can lead to increased stress, anxiety, and a sense of powerlessness among those subjected to them. Teachers in NSW need support to understand and work with disabled children, and psychologists can support this. Research shows that teachers in NSW report significant difficulties with disabled students that they encounter a 'lack of time', combined with difficulty balancing the demands of all students. Specific obstacles to implementing inclusive practice included class size, lack of appropriate teaching resources, behaviour problems exhibited by some students (resulting in a need for constant behaviour management), and lack of appropriate professional training in inclusive methods (Westwood & Graham, 2003). These practices not only infringe upon an individual's autonomy but can also result in long-lasting psychological

trauma. The need to eliminate and minimise restrictive practices whenever possible is rooted in ethical and human rights considerations. Restrictive practices undermine the dignity and well-being of individuals, fostering an environment of fear and distrust. Emphasising alternative, person-centred approaches that prioritise communication, understanding, and personal agency protects individuals' psychological integrity and promotes a culture of respect and inclusion. By embracing strategies that prioritise individual needs and rights, schools can create environments that support the psychological well-being of all individuals, fostering a more humane and compassionate approach to care.

#### L. the effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs

The effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs in schools for young people and children with disabilities offer substantial psychological benefits. Early intervention provides timely and tailored support that addresses the unique needs of children with disabilities during crucial developmental stages. Access to specialised services, such as speech therapy and psychological support, enables these individuals to build essential skills and cope with challenges early on. The psychological benefits include increased self-confidence, improved emotional regulation, and greater competence and independence. Early intervention programs also foster a positive attitude towards learning, social interactions, and overall well-being. By identifying and addressing challenges at an early age, these programs contribute to preventing or minimising the development of psychological issues, creating a foundation for positive mental health outcomes throughout a child's life. The availability of effective early intervention programs not only supports the individual psychological well-being of children with disabilities but also contributes to building a more inclusive and supportive educational environment for all students. Australian research has demonstrated that students with a disability are more likely to remain out of the full-time workforce, and providing early intervention support is a key mechanism to change this data meaningfully (Winn & Hay, 2009).

The AAPI appreciates the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry and urges the Committee to consider the comprehensive recommendations outlined above. We remain committed to collaborating with stakeholders to foster inclusive, supportive, and psychologically informed educational environments for all children and young people in NSW schools.

Warmly,

Carly Dober

Psychologist

Policy Coordination & Practice Support, Australian Association of Psychologists Incorporated

## References

- Foley, K. R., Blackmore, A. M., Girdler, S., O'Donnell, M., Glauert, R., Llewellyn, G., & Leonard, H. (2012). To feel belonged: The voices of children and youth with disabilities on the meaning of wellbeing. *Child Indicators Research*, 5, 375-391.
- Hogan, Lyndall McLellan, Adrian Bauman, A. (2000). Health promotion needs of young people with disabilities-a population study. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 22(8), 352-357.
- Riches, V. (1996). A review of transition from school to community for students with disabilities in NSW, Australia. *Journal of intellectual and developmental disability*, 21(1), 71-88.
- Robinson, S. (2015). Preventing abuse of children and young people with disability under the National Disability Insurance Scheme: A brave new world?. *Australian Social Work*, 68(4), 469-482.
- Westwood, P., & Graham, L. (2003). Inclusion of students with special needs: Benefits and obstacles perceived by teachers in New South Wales and South Australia. *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties*, 8(1), 3-15.
- Winn, S., & Hay, I. (2009). Transition from school for youths with a disability: Issues and challenges. *Disability & Society*, 24(1), 103-115.
- Winn, S., Hay, I., Parmenter, T., & Riches, V. (2010). Making the move: Information for families of children with a disability making the move from primary to secondary school.