Inclusive School Practices Toolkit

Parent Perspective Tool 1: Learning from and Working with the Student and Family

This tool has been developed as part of the *Inclusive School Communities Project*, funded by the National Disability Insurance Agency. The project is led by JFA Purple Orange.

## Introduction

This tool is the first in a series of three related tools written by Michaela Banks from her perspective as a parent.

Finding a school can be a complex process for many parents, add to this the layer of disability and historically accepted expectations of special education and parents are now faced with a far more challenging decision. Selecting a school that aligns with a family’s values, location and economic situation is a starting point, but also finding a school that is willing to learn from the student and family is vital for successful inclusion. Partnership with families and high expectations for students are at the core of the South Australian education system.

This tool is written for parents/carers and school staff (leaders, educators, teacher aides, office staff, and other site staff) about creating the conditions for a collaborative relationship from the start; specifically, how schools can learn from the student and family.

Teachers are the experts in the classroom, but parents are the expert on their child – working together and regularly sharing information and feedback makes inclusion happen!  Teachers and parents say that a collaborative relationship is the most important factor in successfully including a student with disability.[[1]](#footnote-1)

## Ideas

Parents know their children best and by the time a student living with disability reaches primary school they have, in many cases, already received 4-5 years of Early Intervention therapy services. This means that, in addition to having personal insight, parents have also received advice and learning from highly skilled doctors, therapists and Allied Health professionals. Parents are, therefore, in a unique position to provide a rich array of anecdotal and professionally provided information to school staff.

A school that is willing to learn from parents and students will be armed with specific and relevant information to enable them to provide the best academic and social support to students with disabilities. The following indicators are helpful for parents in identifying whether the school is willing to work collaboratively with them and their child:

* They won’t profess to know it all, they may be honest and say that they have a lot to learn about your child
* They will ask you for information and insight about your child
* They will ask to meet with you regularly to establish good habits for sharing information
* They will involve you in Individual Education Plan (IEP)/Negotiated Education Plan (NEP) meetings

Every student living with disability is unique as a person and as a learner and will, therefore need individually tailored supports to meet their specific physical, sensory and communication needs if they are to receive a truly inclusive education. Without individual learning assessment, planning, implementation and review, students living with disability may receive similar or identical modifications and supports that may not be tailored to their specific strengths and needs. Sometimes these supports can hinder students’ progress and could prevent them from reaching their full potential. Keep in mind, though, that application of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) will optimize teaching and learning for all students and reduce the need for individually tailored supports (for information on UDL visit <http://www.cast.org/>)

## Actions

Schools are encouraged to learn from and collaborate with the student and their family to ensure the student’s school experience is successful.

The following questions, informed by strengths-based practice, are suggested starting points for school leaders to get to know new students and discover how best to engage and support them:

* What do you love to do?
* What are you good at?
* What sorts of things or situations do you find challenging?
* What strategies have your teachers used in the past that you’ve found helpful?
* How can we support you to be as independent as possible at school?

Schools are encouraged to embed these questions in their student enrolment and orientation procedures; ensuring the school has this information about all students and not only students with identified learning support needs.

The following example illustrates the importance of the school providing individually tailored supports to a student living with disability based on their strengths, capacity, and the goal of increased efficacy and self-direction. Schools leaders may use this example with their educators and teacher aides as prompts for reflection and conversation and to build staff capacity.

# *Example Student 1:*

Student 1 who lives with a physical and communication disability starts at a mainstream school. The school has not thoroughly consulted with the family and has accommodated for the child based on assumptions.

Student 1 has been provided the following:

* Full time 1:1 support with a wide range of support staff including a teacher aide for robust support
* Complete visual schedule showing their day to ensure predictability
* Scheduled movement breaks every 30 minutes to optimize concentration

These supports may sound reasonable, but how do we know they are all required? And now that they are in place, how will the school learn what the student does and doesn’t require to be as independent as possible in their learning?

Now let’s consider that the school consulted with the family and put in place a few strategies and tools to get the student off to a successful start. Then across the school year, they continued to meet with the family and student to discuss current strategies and consider future adjustments.

Student 1:

* Full time 1:1 support with a wide range of support staff for robust support
* This was required from the start and for the rest of the student's schooling to ensure physical access across the day
* Over time, staff stood back when possible to allow the student to take the lead in their learning and peer interactions
* Full visual schedules showing their day to ensure predictability
* No schedules were provided at the start of the year
* After 6 months, a small “next, then, last” schedule was implemented to assist with familiarity of routines
* Use of this tool was slowly reduced over time until it was only needed during major changes in staffing or schedule
* Scheduled movement breaks every 30 minutes to optimize concentration
* Movement breaks every 15 minutes were initially required
* Movement breaks were decreased to every 30 minutes, then a few times throughout the day and finally only at the student’s request

As shown above, a school that is willing to learn from the family and student ensures that the student is not encumbered with interventions, modifications and supports they don’t need. School staff are also not using tools and completing activities that are of no benefit to the student and that can become a distraction or barrier to the student’s progress. Looking forward, we can ensure that students are in a position to be in control of their learning, self-regulation and peer interactions with a school willing to understand the student’s requirements and adapt their strategies in a manner that benefits the student’s ongoing social and academic growth.

## More Information

Inclusion Toolkit for Parents on the All Means All website, written with leading inclusive education experts to guide parents in supporting their child’s inclusive education journey <http://allmeansall.org.au/for-parents/>

A letter template to your child’s teacher for the new school year from The Growing Space website <https://www.thegrowingspace.com.au/tip-a-letter-to-my-childs-teacher-for-the-new-school-year/>

## Acknowledgement

This tool was written by Michaela Banks and edited by JFA Purple Orange.

You can read Michaela’s blog about her son, Harry who experienced a severe traumatic brain injury at 11 months old and her family’s journey https://givetheboyachance.wordpress.com/about/



1. All Means All (no date). For parents. Retrieved from <http://allmeansall.org.au/for-parents/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)