
School support for children with special needs

Summary

- Helping your child move into primary and then secondary school can require careful planning.
 - There is a range of disability support services in place to help your child at school including their dedicated Student Support Group and various government programs.
 - Your child's Individual Learning Plan will outline their learning needs as well as their safety, access, behavioural, medical and personal care needs.
 - Spending time to get to know your child's school and sharing important information about your child will help you develop a positive partnership with the school.
 - You can help support what your child learns at school by talking to them about their day, asking about what they are learning and helping with homework.
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Going to school is an exciting and important time in your child's development. Supporting your child to make the transition to primary and then secondary school can require careful planning and extensive research to make sure the school will be the right fit for your child.

It's best to start planning early and there are a range of supports in place to help, including your child's dedicated Student Support Group and various government programs.

Developing a positive partnership with your child's school

Developing a positive partnership with your child's school is the basis for a positive and successful school experience for your child and family.

Spending time to get to know the school, its facilities, routines, staff and students and sharing important information about your child will help to develop and maintain this ongoing relationship.

Making sure there is good communication between you and the school will mean you are always up to date with your child's progress. This communication can be formal (through regular Student Support Group meetings and parent-teacher interviews) or informal (quick catch-ups with teachers, email and phone communication as needed). To communicate regularly with your child's school, you could use your child's school diary or planner, or even use a 'communication book' that travels between home and school in your child's bag.

Student Support Groups

Student Support Groups support individual students with additional learning needs. The group that comes together to support your child will include:

- you (and your child's other parent or guardian, if appropriate)
- your child's class or homeroom teacher
- the school principal (or a nominee)
- a parent advocate (if you request one)
- your child (if appropriate)
- other people who could support your child's learning such as their therapist or other consultants.

The Student Support Group's role is to:

- identify your child's needs
 - consider any adjustments to the curriculum
 - regularly review and evaluate your child's needs (for example, once a term)
 - let the principal know about your child's additional education needs and the resources required to meet those
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needs

- develop an Individual Learning Plan, discuss it with teachers and help to implement the plan.

Individual Learning Plans

One of the first tasks of the Student Support Group is to develop an Individual Learning Plan for your child. The plan should not only focus on the academic needs of your child but also their safety, behavioural, medical and personal care needs. The Individual Learning Plan should be flexible enough to allow for changes.

Individual Learning Plans are only developed for those areas of the curriculum where your child will need extra education support. This may only be for certain parts of the curriculum or it may be for the whole curriculum.

Program for Students with Disabilities

Government schools that enrol students with a moderate to severe disability are eligible for funding to support those students under the Program for Students with Disabilities. Applications for this education support funding are made through the child's Student Support Group.

Funds from the Program for Students with Disabilities can be used to provide:

- specialist staff
- professional development
- education support staff
- specialist equipment.

The school can also apply to the Department of Education and Training for building modifications such as ramps and toilet facilities. It is up to the Student Support Group to plan how to use funds and to make recommendations for the principal's approval.

Choosing a school

There are many things to consider when choosing the right school for your child, including their strengths and interests, school facilities and the needs of your family. Every child and family is different and the school you choose should meet your child's needs.

Planning for primary school should ideally begin when your child is in kindergarten. Speaking with the kindergarten teacher is a good place to start. For more information about making the transition from kindergarten to primary school see the [**Starting school for children with disabilities**](#) page.

It is a good idea to start planning for secondary school when your child is in grade four or five. This will allow plenty of time to explore and consider your options.

When considering your choices, think about:

- your child's strengths and interests – they might be academically minded or more interested in the arts or sports
- your child's wishes – they might feel more comfortable at one school than another
- your own instincts – do not undervalue your gut reaction to a school.

To help make your decision:

- Attend school open days, information evenings and join school tours to give you a feel for the school, its facilities, its focus, values and approach to learning.
- Meet with the principal – you will get a good sense of the school from the principal's responses to your questions and the attitude of other staff when you visit.
- Physical environment – if you can foresee access issues for your child, speak with the principal early about what modifications could be made to accommodate your child's needs.
- Program and curriculum – students with disability can access and participate in education on the same basis as other students.
- Schools must abide by the Disability Standards for Education 2005. See the fact sheet [**Disability rights, discrimination and the law**](#)

- Care needs – ask how the school can help meet your child’s medical or personal care needs.
- Social issues – ask how the school creates social interaction and find out about its anti-bullying policy.
- Distance and travel – how will your child get to and from school? Some transport support is available from the Department of Education and Training for eligible students with additional needs attending specialist schools. There is also the Conveyance Allowance, which is available to some students in rural and regional Victoria.

Government schools in Victoria are zoned, meaning that they can restrict entry to children who live within a certain geographical area close to the school. However, if the school has space, it can enrol children who live outside the zone.

Government specialist schools

There are more than 80 government specialist schools in Victoria. Each specialist school is, by definition, more accessible than mainstream schools in terms of the environment and curriculum. However, this may mean that the subjects on offer are more limited than in a mainstream school. Class sizes at specialist schools are smaller than mainstream schools and many also have therapists on staff.

Like all schools, students must meet the specialist school’s enrolment criteria. Contact the principal or the Department of Education and Training for more information. If you live within the specialist school’s designated transport area your child may be eligible for travel support to school (usually a school bus).

For a list of specialist schools, visit the [Department of Education and Training](#) website.

Independent and Catholic schools

If you are interested in exploring independent or Catholic school options for your child, you will need to contact individual schools to ask about their enrolment criteria. Independent and Catholic schools are eligible for disability funding but it is different from the funding available in government schools.

Other schools

Other options for educating your child include:

- dual enrolment, where your child is enrolled in both a specialist and mainstream school
- satellite units, where students with disabilities can access a special needs teacher, learning areas and facilities within a mainstream school
- community schools, which are government-run schools offering an alternative to mainstream schooling
- distance education if they meet the eligibility criteria in one of four categories: distance, medical, school referral or traveller
- home schooling, where you can educate your child yourself at home (in this case you must also register your child with the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority).

Preparing for secondary school

Preparing for your child’s move into secondary school can start as early in your child’s life as you like – waiting lists for some independent schools mean that a child’s name has to be added to a waiting list virtually from birth.

By the time your child is in grade five, it is a good idea to be thinking seriously about secondary school. Start talking to friends, neighbours and other networks about recommendations. Visit school websites and begin attending school information evenings, open days, tours and having meetings with principals.

By the beginning of grade six, it will help to have prepared a shortlist of secondary school options. Some of the things you could be doing during your child’s last year of primary school include:

Term 1

- Revisit the schools you are interested in, meeting with principals again if necessary.
- Take your child to visit your preferred school(s) and make a final decision about where to apply.
- Find out if any specialist appointments or special needs assessments need to be arranged to meet Program for Students with Disabilities requirements (these are usually required for the Year 6–7 Review).
- Start talking about the move to secondary school at your Student Support Group meetings.

Term 2

- If your preferred school is a mainstream government school, fill in the preference form provided by your child's primary school.
- Your school may submit a Year 6-7 Review application to the Program for Students with Disabilities.

Term 3

Government schools will let you know in Term 3 if your child has been offered a place.

Expect a Student Support Group meeting to take place with relevant staff from the secondary school (this should be organised by your child's primary school).

Term 4

- Complete the enrolment process for your child's secondary school.
- Ask the school about organising an extended orientation for your child.
- Request a Student Support Group meeting for Term 1 of Year 7.
- Ask if your child can visit the school on the day before other students begin so they can locate their locker and orient themselves with where the bathroom and other facilities are located. This would be a good opportunity to meet with their teachers as well.
- Spend some time with your child to familiarise them with their timetable or class schedule and talk about their expectations and concerns.
- If your child will be taking public transport to school, practise the route they will take during the school holidays.

Disability supports at school

Government schools provide a range of resources and programs to help students with a disability. It might take some time for your child's Student Support Group to become familiar with your child's strengths and needs, but this will happen through developing the Individual Learning Plan.

Once the Individual Learning Plan is complete you can begin looking at additional resources your child might need. The group will make recommendations to the principal, who will then make the final decision.

Available supports include the following:

- **Student welfare coordinators** are available in all government secondary schools to help students handle issues such as truancy, bullying, drug use, family conflict and depression.
- The **Secondary School Nursing Program** promotes healthy living in about two-thirds of Victoria's most disadvantaged schools.
- **Student support services officers** are employed by the Department of Education and Training to support all students and include psychologists, social workers, visiting teachers (for students with visual, hearing or physical impairments) and speech pathologists. Referral is from the principal.
- The **Language Support Program** provides schools with resources to help provide teaching and learning programs for students with language disorders.
- **Medical Intervention Support** funding is available to supplement the salary costs for staff members who work with students requiring regular, complex medical support at school.
- The **Electronic Communication Devices Scheme** provides a subsidy to buy electronic communication devices and training through the Victorian Aids and Equipment Program (A&EP). There are also specific grants for students with vision impairment.
- The **Schoolcare Program** works with the Royal Children's Hospital to provide school staff with specialised training to support students with complex medical needs.
- Students with severe multiple disabilities may be eligible for the **Conveyance Allowance** to help with travel costs to and from school.
- If major building modifications are required to make sure your child can access the school grounds, the school can apply for special needs modifications such as ramps through the **Accessible Buildings Program**.

Supporting your child's learning at home

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You can continue to support your child's learning throughout their school years and, no doubt, their adult lives. You will have a good understanding about how your child learns and can help reinforce what your child learns at school by talking to them about their day, asking about what they are learning and helping with homework in the later years.

However, it is essential that your child actively participates in their learning. It is important that you provide help without creating dependence.

Raising concerns with your child's school

If you are concerned about something at your child's school, it is best to address it as soon as possible. Schools are usually very open to feedback and will be as keen as you to make sure a situation does not worsen.

If you raise a concern, the school should address it in a way that respects your child and family's privacy and confidentiality.

1. If your complaint is about an issue or incident at school, these are best directed to the relevant teacher first.
2. For an issue about your child's program, raise it first at a Student Support Group meeting.
3. Concerns about teachers or other staff should be referred to the principal.

If you are not satisfied with the outcome from the school you can contact the community liaison officer at your regional **Department of Education and Training office**.

Where to get help

- Your child's school principal
- Department of Education and Training
- Catholic Education Office
- Association of Independent Schools

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Better Health Channel - (need new cp)

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