HELPING KIDS WITH DISABILITY

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> *A major challenge that often affects families who have a child with a disability is social isolation. When families and schools take effective steps to include children with disabilities and ensure their social and psychological needs are met, they help foster positive mental health and wellbeing.*

In Australia, around 90 per cent of school-aged children with a disability attend a mainstream school. However, two-thirds of these children experience difficulties at school, and only some receive additional support. Helping children with disabilities can be challenging for schools and families. This chapter discusses strategies to better meet the needs of children with disability, by understanding that effective support for children's wellbeing involves efforts to meet the social, emotional and learning needs of all children. It considers how disability affects children and their families, why children with disabilities are at a greater risk of mental health difficulties, and how schools can promote mental health and wellbeing in children who have additional needs.

Seeing the whole child, not just the disability

Children with disabilities are sometimes seen as 'different'. The term 'disability' refers to a wide range of conditions that in some way limit a person's ability to manage everyday living. In schools these typically include communication disabilities (autism and Asperger spectrums), global developmental delay and intellectual disabilities, sensory disabilities (hearing and vision difficulties), physical disabilities and speech disabilities. Severe social and emotional mental health difficulties are also often recognised.

The real challenges faced by children at school as a result of any of these disabilities may lead to exclusion from day-to-day learning, play or peer relationships, and experiences of social isolation. Having a disability places limits on the things that children can do and may restrict them from participating in some activities with their classmates. Living with any type of disability that leads to experiences of isolation and exclusion can contribute to a child's mental health difficulties. That's why it is vital to see the whole child, not just the disability or illness.

In respectful and supportive environments that see the whole child and promote their strengths, children with disabilities can maintain good mental health and wellbeing. All children benefit

from a sense of belonging at school and having positive relationships with classmates and teachers, but these positive experiences are particularly important for children with disabilities. With careful planning and well-coordinated efforts between families and schools, children with disabilities can have their needs met and be supported so that they can participate and thrive at school.

Maximising their opportunities for success is also important. By providing support and solutions that reduce restrictions on their participation, children with disabilities can achieve more. This approach helps to build self-confidence and motivation for trying new things; it also promotes ways of valuing and including all children.

Supporting families

A family who cares for a child with a disability is faced with many challenges that can affect the whole family or particular individuals within it. One major challenge is social isolation. Friends and extended family may find it difficult to understand and support the family's circumstances. Going on holidays or catching up with friends may be distant memories as the family strives to meet the child's additional needs. For these families, the challenges often include the involved process of working out how to access the right services for their child, not to mention dealing with the roller coaster ride of emotions that can accompany parenting a child with a disability. There may be any number of challenges associated with physically and medically caring for a child's additional needs on a day-to-day basis. These may include managing the problematic behaviours that some children with disabilities have, coping with the need to administer daily treatments, or making sure that facilities can accommodate the child's needs outside the home, such as wheelchair access. It takes patience to help children with bathing, dressing and eating, and fortitude to advocate for the child's needs.

Siblings of a child with disabilities may need additional support. They may feel a range of emotions, such as jealousy because of less parental attention, guilt for complaining about the additional strains put on the family, or happiness when their brother or sister achieves something new. At school, siblings of a child with disabilities may sometimes get teased. So being in a school that takes a whole-school approach to wellbeing can reduce negative behaviour and benefit both the child with disabilities and their siblings. It is also important that siblings have a break from the family circumstances and spend time with friends. They should also have the opportunity to talk about how they feel and get support from their parents, the school or community support services.

The link between disability and mental health

There is a growing pool of evidence that children with disabilities are significantly more likely to develop mental health problems than children without disabilities. The chance is even higher in children with multiple disabilities. A study I conducted with colleagues in 2010 found that children with no disabilities had a 13 per cent chance of experiencing mental health difficulties; for children with one disability it was a 33 per cent chance, and with multiple disabilities, a 50 per cent chance. Some children with disabilities may find it difficult to form and maintain relationships because their disability limits them from participating in everyday activities with

their classmates. They may find it difficult to pick up social cues that allow them to participate cooperatively, like taking turns, or they may find social interaction confronting. Children with physical disabilities may be unable to fully participate in games that other children play. They are also more likely to experience situations that negatively affect mental health, such as rejection and bullying. As a result, children with disabilities may lose confidence in their ability to make friends or to participate in activities that other children their age enjoy. The combination of these sorts of factors can increase the risk of developing low self esteem, or disorders like depression.

Clearly, the key factors that influence the mental health and wellbeing of children with disabilities, aside from the extent of the child's disabilities, are the support and attitudes of others. When families and schools take effective steps to include children with disabilities and ensure their needs are met, they help foster positive mental health and wellbeing. When the child's individual needs are understood, their strengths built upon, and a supportive and respectful environment is provided, children with disabilities can maximise their learning potential and thrive.

Steps to supporting children with disabilities

Build strengths step by step. Break tasks into small steps to help ensure success and support children's learning. Support children's confidence by emphasising what they can do.

Advocate for children with disabilities. Making sure that others understand the need to include and value all children benefits the individual child and promotes a caring community.

Focus on the whole child and their individual needs. Children's needs should be assessed individually and regularly. Avoid assuming that all children with a particular disability have the same problems and needs. An individual child's needs may also change over time.

Build a positive community. Be mindful that children with disabilities have a greater chance of developing mental health problems and act to reduce negative experiences. All children will benefit.

Build partnerships: Parents and carers cannot meet the complex needs of children with disabilities or chronic illness alone. Collaborative involvement between families, schools and health professionals helps to ensure the best outcomes for children's development and mental health. It takes a village to raise a child.

Using KidsMatter to help kids with disabilities

Recognising the need for schools to adopt a population health model, the Australian Department of Health and beyondblue funded an initiative called KidsMatter Primary, aimed at improving the mental health and wellbeing of children. The whole-school mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention initiative provides schools with proven methods, tools and support for nurturing happy, balanced kids. Because KidsMatter uses a whole-school approach, it does not focus on specific groups of children, like those with a disability, but acts to destigmatise groups known to be at greatest risk of mental health problems.

*I think it's demystifying and destigmatising mental health, because I think mental health, it's mental – you know, mental , it's got a bad label … it was never talked about. Now it's like fitness or a cold. It's OK to talk about it and I really am enjoying being in a school where that is so open (*KidsMatter school teacher).

KidsMatter Primary was found to have a positive effect on children with disabilities by strengthening their wellbeing and reducing mental health difficulties. Below are some ways of using the KidsMatter framework to help children with disabilities.

1. ***Creating a positive school community for children with disabilities***. Developing a culture of belonging and inclusion at school is especially important for children with disabilities and their families. This involves finding out about the particular needs of children with disabilities, tailoring teaching practices accordingly and collaborating effectively with parents and carers. Schools can also support belonging and inclusion by promoting values of friendship, cooperation and respect, and by ensuring that the school's policies and practices address instances of bullying or harassment quickly and effectively when they occur.

2. ***Social and emotional learning (SEL) for children with disabilities***. When planning a SEL curriculum, teachers of children with disabilities should take into account their particular learning needs. By assessing each child's social and emotional skills individually, a learning plan can be developed to build skills step-by-step. Select appropriate teaching and learning materials. Breaking down complex skills into smaller concrete steps is important for ensuring success. Opportunities for children to practise should be provided for each step. Providing structured peer-to-peer learning activities, in which children learn social skills through direct interaction with one another, is often helpful. Praise or rewards given for effort and achievement of each step helps to consolidate new skills.

3. ***Supporting families of children with disabilities***. Having good support is especially important for families of children with disabilities. Schools can provide support by listening to parents and carers, finding out about the particular needs of their children, and collaborating to meet those needs. Schools can assist families by providing relevant information and links to services. By facilitating access to support networks and professional services, schools can help families of children with disabilities get the range of support they require.

4. ***Helping children with mental health difficulties***. Getting help early in the lifespan can make a significant difference to ensuring that a child's disabilities are appropriately identified, and that professional help and learning support are provided as soon as possible. This helps to minimise the effects of the disability and provides developmental support. Some disabilities, particularly those involving learning and social difficulties, may only become apparent after children begin school. In these circumstances, schools can provide crucial assistance through facilitating children's referral for specialist assessment and services.

The KidsMatter website (www.kidsmatter.edu.au/primary/resources-your-journey/mental-health-information) provides resources that specifically support children with diverse needs, and includes information under the headings of:

- Additional needs
- Mental health difficulties and early intervention
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Anxiety problems
- Depression
- Serious behaviour problems
- Autism Spectrum Disorders.

At the heart of KidsMatter is a model of inclusivity such that all children with diverse needs, including those with mental health difficulties, are given the best possible opportunity to participate and learn as part of a coherent school-wide approach. Schools can increase the protective factors that support children's mental health by providing an inclusive and accepting environment for *all* children. It also helps to have effective working relationships with services, including clear referral pathways, and to work in partnership with parents and health professionals in order to meet the additional needs of children with disabilities. By paying attention to the mental health needs of children with disabilities and identifying mental health concerns, schools can facilitate appropriate support and make a positive difference in children's lives.

Dix, K.L., Shearer, J., Slee, P.T. and Butcher, C. (2010). *KidsMatter for Students with a Disability: Evaluation Report*. Adelaide, Ministerial Advisory Committee: Students with Disabilities.

Dix, K. et al. (2013). *KidsMatter Early Childhood and Children with disabilities*. Adelaide, Ministerial Advisory Committee: Students with Disabilities.

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KidsMatter and Principals Australia Institute have been key Positive Schools partners since 2011. To find out more about KidsMatter visit their website (www.kidsmatter.edu.au). To find out more about Principals Australia Institute (PAI) visit their website (www.pai.edu.au). PAI provides quality professional learning, leadership development and support to principals and school leaders.