

# Navigating *School*



A practical guide for parents and carers of children with disability, delay and Autism

Belongsides  
*Families*

# Welcome

Welcome to the Navigating School Guide, created by Belongside Families for parents and carers of children with disability, developmental delay and Autism.

If you are reading this guide, you are likely trying to understand how to best support your child at school. You might be wondering how support works, what to ask for, who to speak to, or what to do when something doesn't feel quite right.

For some families, school brings excitement. For others, it brings worry. Often, it brings both.

At Belongside Families, we are parents too. We've been in school meetings, asked difficult questions, celebrated progress, and worked through decisions about support for our own children. We know that navigating the school system can sometimes feel confusing and overwhelming, especially when you are already carrying so much as a parent.

This guide was created so you don't have to figure everything out on your own.

It is here to help you feel more prepared, understand how schools support students with disability, and feel more confident when talking with your child's school.

You will find helpful information, tips from other parents, and practical tools to organise your thoughts, prepare for conversations, and keep track of what's been discussed.

Wherever you are in your child's school journey — whether you are just starting out or have been navigating it for some time — we hope this guide helps you feel more informed, more confident, and more supported along the way.



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# How to Use This Guide

The Navigating School Guide was created to help you understand how school works, build confidence in supporting your child, and feel prepared for the conversations and decisions that come with the school journey.

## *Who this guide is for*

This guide is for families who have a child with disability, developmental delay, additional needs or Autism, who are supporting their child in primary school, or preparing for the transition to school.

While this guide focuses on the New South Wales public primary school system, many of the ideas and templates can also be useful if your child attends a Catholic, Independent or other school setting across Australia.

## *What you'll find inside*

This guide was shaped by the experience of parents and carers. It covers:

- how schools support students with disability
- how decisions about support are made
- how to prepare for school meetings
- ways to build positive relationships with teachers
- what to do if concerns arise
- practical tools to help you prepare, communicate and keep track of next steps

## *Using the guide*

There is no single right way to use this guide. You can read it from start to finish or go straight to the sections that feel most relevant. Many families return to different parts of the guide as their child grows or new questions come up.

## *Using the digital toolkit*

This guide is supported by a digital toolkit which includes practical templates, scripts and reflection tools.

You can print the templates and write on them, or download the editable versions to complete digitally.

## *Accessing links and resources*

Throughout this guide, you will see underlined text. These are links.

In the digital version, you can click on the links to go to other sections of the guide or to additional information and resources online.

If you are using the printed version, you can scan the QR code below to access a webpage that lists all the links.

## *A note on language*

In this guide, we use the term disability. However the information and tools apply whether your child has a developmental delay, Autism, a genetic condition, or other additional needs.

At times we use the term parent. This guide is for you whether you are a parent, family member, foster carer, friend, or anyone caring for and supporting a child with disability.

Scan the QR code  
to access a digital  
version of the guide

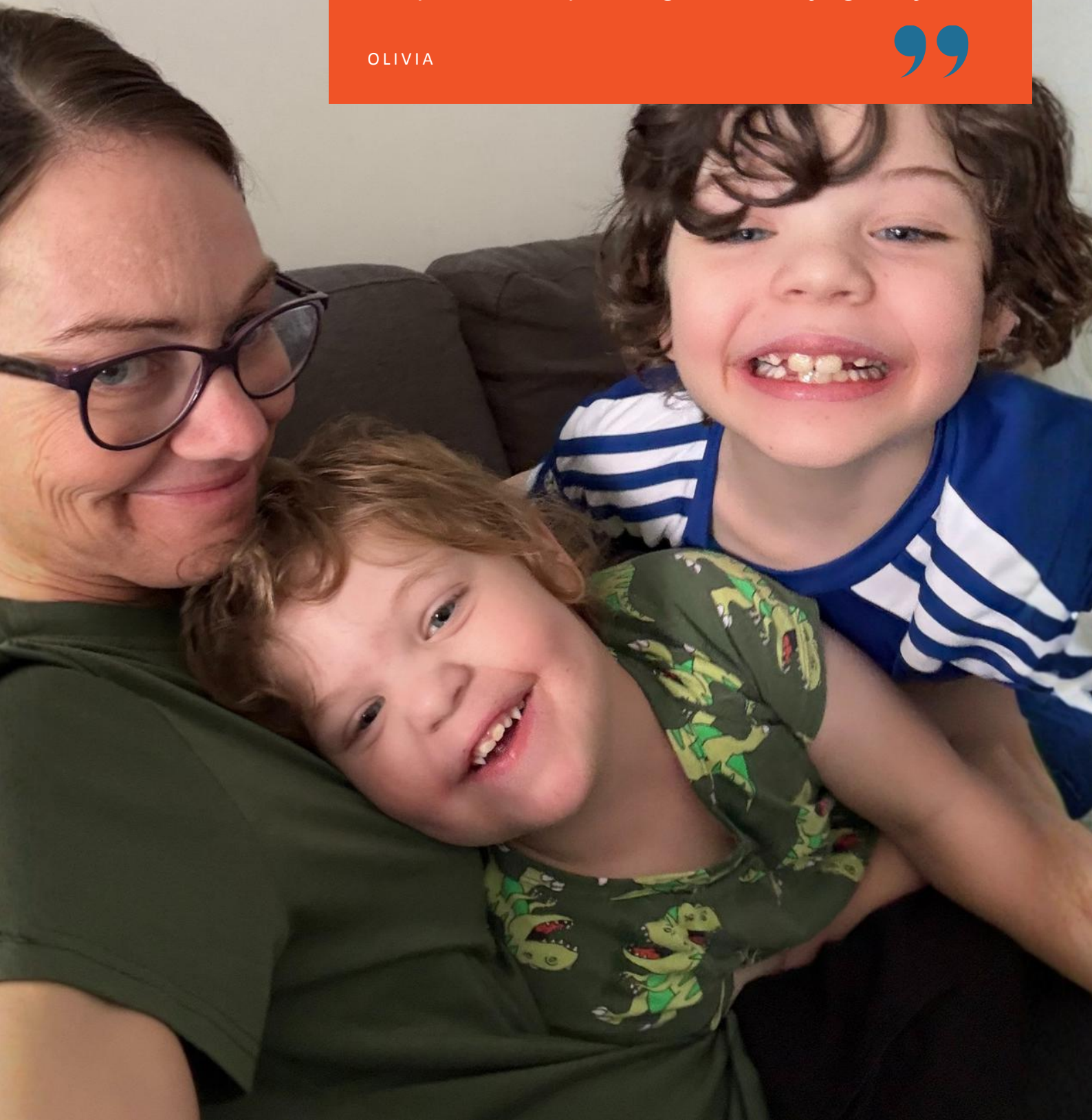




*One of the things that matters most to me is that Belongside is built by families for families like mine. It's comforting to know the people involved have faced similar challenges and are sharing what helped them. Support feels different when it comes from other parents who just get it.*

*I never have to explain or justify my experiences. There's a shared understanding that makes it easier to talk about the hard moments. Being able to have those conversations has lifted so much of the weight I was carrying on my own.*

OLIVIA





# About Belongside Families

If you're raising a child with disability, developmental delay or Autism, you don't have to navigate this journey alone. We're here to walk beside you.

Belongside Families is an independent, family-led not-for-profit organisation in New South Wales. We offer free, trusted information, practical programs, and peer support to help you feel more confident, connected, and empowered.

Whether you're noticing early differences, trying to figure out the NDIS, juggling therapies, or facing school challenges, we're here to help make things feel a little less overwhelming.

Each year, we support thousands of parents and carers, helping them to feel less alone and more equipped to navigate complex systems and the day-to-day realities of disability parenting.

Every member of our team is raising a child with disability or developmental delay, so we understand the challenges families face. Our work is grounded in real-life experience, informed by evidence, and shaped by what families tell us they need most.

***Because when families thrive, children thrive.  
And that's what matters.***

# How We Support Families



## Workshops

Join our online workshops on topics like advocacy, how to use therapy, and ways to support your child's development. These small group sessions are practical and interactive, helping you grow your knowledge and learn useful tools and strategies.



## Parent Support Group

Connect with parents in online or in-person groups. These are welcoming spaces led by our trained parent facilitators. We have topic-based and casual discussion groups where you can share your experiences or just listen and learn from other families.



## Webinars

Watch our online webinars live or at a time that works for you. Hear from professionals and experienced parents to get helpful tips and learn about ways to support your child and family.



## Online Community

Join our private Belongside Community Facebook group to connect with other parents and carers online. Ask questions, share advice and feel supported any time, day or night. It's a safe, supportive and moderated community.



## One-on-One Support

Talk with a Belongside Peer Navigator who can help you navigate the systems around your child, including education, NDIS, health and carer supports. They can help you make sense of what is happening, understand your options, and work out your next steps.



## Resources

Explore our fact sheets, guides, and family stories for information you can trust. Learn more about the NDIS, school, therapy, and looking after yourself without having to spend hours searching online.

## SECTION 1

# Helping School Understand Your Child

One of the most important things you can do to support your child is to help their school understand who they are. You know your child better than anyone else — what they enjoy, what helps them feel safe, what builds their confidence, and what makes things harder. This section helps you share all that important information with the school.

### *What helps school support your child*

When teachers understand who your child is — their strengths, interests and support needs, they are better able to plan learning, adjustments and classroom supports that work. There are three key areas that make a real difference.

#### **Your child's strengths**

Every child has strengths. Strengths do not have to mean something your child does better than others. They may simply be things that come more easily, or that your child enjoys.

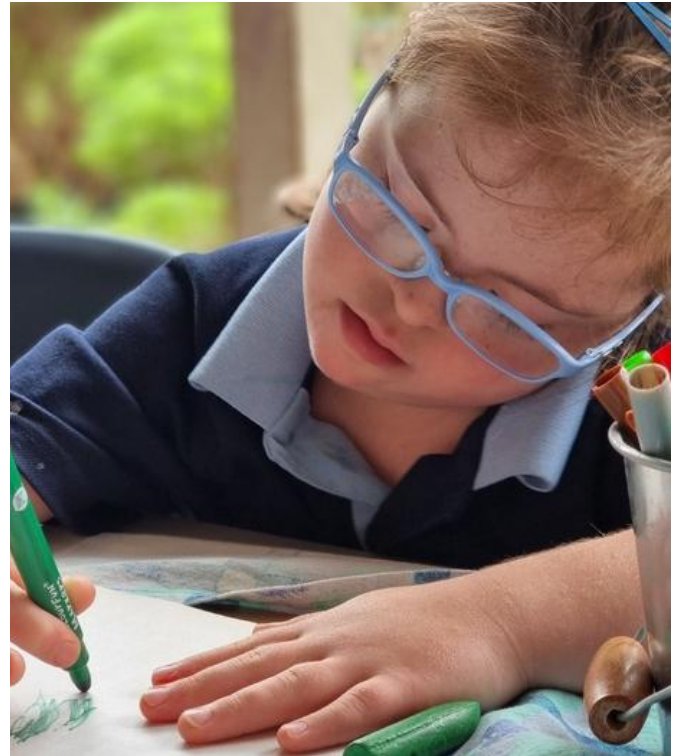
For example, your child might be kind to others, curious about how things work, determined when interested in something, good with routines, creative, funny, or knowledgeable about a favourite topic.

When schools understand a child's strengths, they can build on what the child can do rather than focus only on what is difficult.

#### **What helps your child**

Some children do better with, for example, clear instructions, extra time, visual supports, movement breaks, predictable routines or quiet spaces.

When schools know what helps your child, they can put supports in place early rather than waiting for problems to emerge. Early adjustments can make a significant difference to your child's experience.



#### **What makes school harder**

School can be hard for many reasons. From noise and changes in routine to accessibility, social situations, and certain learning tasks. Identifying what makes things harder helps schools understand the barriers so they can plan supportive responses.

For example, teachers may adjust transitions, provide warnings before changes to a routine, or offer alternative ways for your child to participate.

When schools understand the barriers your child faces, they are better able to help your child feel safe, included and ready to learn.

## The All About Me Profile

An All About Me Profile is a simple way to bring information about your child together in one place. It focuses on who your child is, so the school staff working with them can understand how to support your child day to day.

All About Me Profiles give teachers and support staff a quick overview of:

- who your child is
- their strengths and interests
- what helps them
- what can be challenging
- what makes things harder

### Why it's useful

An All About Me Profile can help you share important information clearly and consistently. It can:

- help teachers get to know your child quickly
- ensure more consistent support across staff
- help new or relief teachers to understand what works

### Who to share it with

Share your child's profile with anyone who supports them at school, including:

- classroom teachers
- learning support staff
- school leaders
- relief or casual teachers

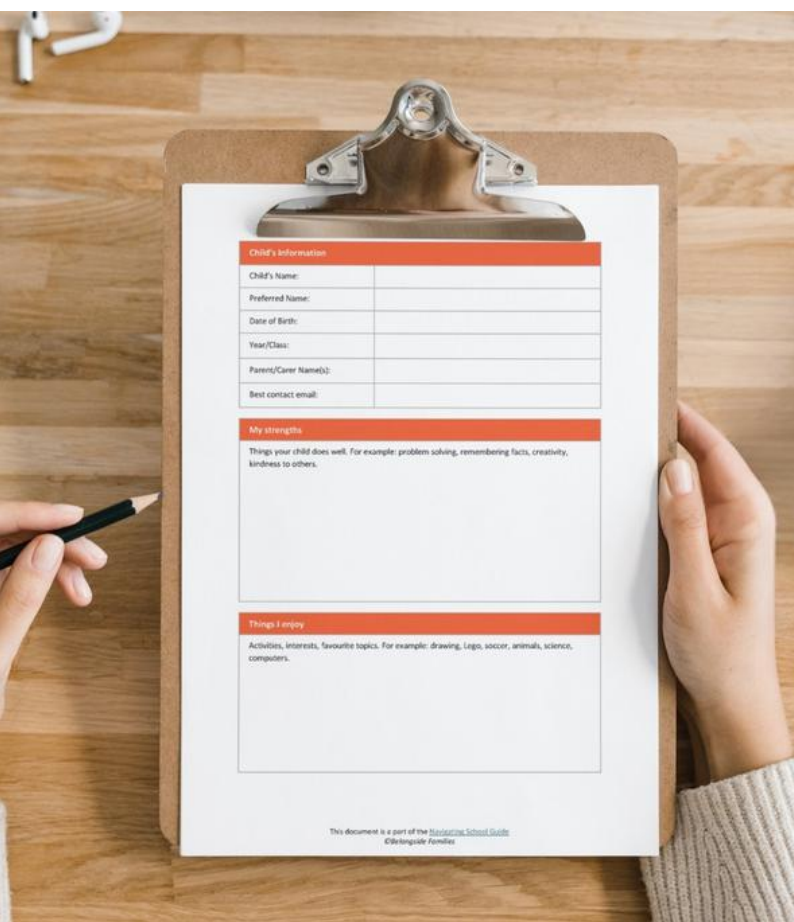
### When to use it

You might share or update this profile:

- at the start of the school year
- when your child moves to a new teacher or class
- before a school meeting
- if your child's needs or interests change

### How to create one

- Use the template in the toolkit, or create your own in Word or Canva. Some families design one on paper.
- Join a Belongside All About Me Workshop to create one and learn what information is most helpful to include.
- You don't need professional language; clear, everyday examples are most helpful. Short sentences or bullet points work best.



*All About Me Profile*

A simple way to share key information about your child's strengths, needs and what supports their learning and participation at school.

## SECTION 2

# Understanding Your Child's Rights

Australian law protects students with disability, through the [Disability Discrimination Act](#) and the [Disability Standards for Education](#). These laws require schools to ensure students with disability can access education on the same basis as other students, with the adjustments they need to participate. This section explains your child's rights at school and where to go for support if needed.

### *The right to enrol*

Children living within a public school's [catchment area](#) have the right to enrol at that school. A school cannot refuse enrolment on the basis of disability, behaviour related to disability, or the need for adjustments.

Families may also apply to enrol at a school outside their catchment area. These applications are considered under Department of Education policy and are not automatically guaranteed. Talk to the school if you want to explore this.

### *The right to be included*

[Inclusion](#) does not mean doing everything in the same way as other students. It means a school making [reasonable adjustments](#) so your child can participate in a way that works for them.

Your child has the right to:

- be part of the school community
- learn alongside other students
- participate in school activities such as sports days and excursions
- be treated with dignity and respect

### *The right to adjustments*

Schools must make reasonable adjustments for students with disability. Adjustments are changes that help your child learn and participate in school life. They should be based on your child's individual needs and determined in consultation with you.



They may include:

- extra time for tasks
- different ways to show what they know
- visual supports
- movement breaks
- support from staff
- changes to routines or the classroom environment

Schools typically document adjustments in an [Personalised Learning Plan](#) (PLP) developed in partnership with families.

### **A diagnosis is not required**

Your child does not need a formal diagnosis to receive adjustments. If your child has learning, emotional, behavioural or developmental needs that affect participation, the school still has obligations under the Disability Standards for Education.

## What adjustments are considered reasonable

There is no set list of adjustments that every school must provide. What counts as reasonable is decided case by case through consultation between the school and your family.

Under the Disability Standards for Education, an adjustment is considered reasonable when it balances the needs of your child with the impact on staff, other students and the school.

Schools must consider adjustments that support your child to participate in education on the same basis as other students. In limited situations, a school may decide an adjustment is not reasonable if it would cause unjustifiable hardship — for example, if the cost, resources required or impact on the school community would be excessive.

If a school decides an adjustment is not reasonable, they should explain their decision and work with you to explore alternative ways to support your child.

## The right to be safe

Your child has the right to feel safe at school. This includes protection from:

- bullying or harassment
- exclusion from learning or activities
- unfair or inappropriate discipline
- discrimination because of disability

Schools have legal responsibilities to protect students from discrimination and keep them safe.

## What schools cannot do

- refuse enrolment at your local catchment school because of disability
- require a diagnosis before beginning reasonable adjustments
- expect families to privately fund supports that are the school's responsibility
- exclude your child instead of considering adjustments
- ignore concerns about safety or wellbeing
- say "we don't have the resources" without exploring available supports

## If you are worried your child's needs are not being met

1. Speak with your child's classroom teacher. See [Section 10: Speaking Up for Your Child](#).
2. Request a meeting with the learning and support team or school leadership. See [Section 7: Getting Ready for Meetings](#).
3. Contact your Department of Education [Local Education Office](#) for clarification or advice (general enquiries: 131 536).
4. Seek independent free advice from a [disability advocacy organisation](#).

### Information about how to handle complaints is outlined in:

- [Section 11: Where to Get Help and Support](#)

## Helpful Links

Click the link in the digital guide, search the title online, or scan the QR code at the beginning of this guide to access these links.

[NSW Education — Primary school adjustments](#)

[NSW Education — Types of adjustments](#)

[NSW Education — Inclusive education](#)

[NSW Education — Choosing a school setting: enrolment](#)

[NSW Government — Students with disability](#)

[Department of Education — Respect at School](#)

[Department of Education — Disability Standards for Education](#)

[Australian Government — Disability Discrimination Act](#)

[Belongsid Families — Advocacy Support](#)

## SECTION 3

# Schooling Options in NSW

In New South Wales, families can choose from several schooling options for their child. Many children successfully attend their local public school with adjustments in place, while others may enrol in specialist support classes or non-government schools. This section explains the main schooling options available in NSW so you can better understand how they work.

### *Mainstream class in a public school*

A mainstream class is a classroom where students with and without disability learn together. Many children with disability successfully attend their local public school in a mainstream class with support in place.

Public schools are run by the NSW Government and are free for Australian residents. Every child has a local public school based on where they live, called a catchment school. Children who live within the catchment area have the right to enrol at that school. You can find your local school using the [NSW Department of Education School Finder](#).

Students receive different types of support depending on their needs. This may include:

- adjustments to teaching and schoolwork
- extra help from a School Learning Support Officer (SLSO)
- input from specialist teachers
- a Personalised Learning Plan (PLP, IEP or ILP)

### *Support classes in public schools*

Some public schools have support classes. These are smaller classes within mainstream schools that provide more individualised support.

Support classes may include:

- Autism-specific classes
- classes for students with intellectual disability
- behaviour or emotional support classes
- classes for students with physical disability

Placement in a support class is not automatic. Schools submit an application through an



Access Request based on a student's support needs. Decisions are made through a Department of Education placement process. Placement depends on eligibility criteria and available places.

### *Schools for Specific Purposes*

Schools for Specific Purposes (SSPs) are standalone public schools specifically for students who need moderate to high levels of support.

SSPs typically offer:

- smaller class sizes
- specially trained teachers
- learning spaces designed for higher support needs

Placement in an SSP also happens through an Access Request and panel process. Decisions are based on documented support needs and available places. Families cannot directly enrol in an SSP without this process.

## *Non-government schools*

Some families choose non-government schools, including Catholic or Independent (also known as private) schools. There are also specialist schools, such as ASPECT (for Autistic students) and NextSense (for children who are deaf or have hearing loss).

These schools:

- have their own enrolment processes
- usually charge fees
- must comply with disability laws

Each school offers different types of support. It is helpful to ask detailed questions before enrolling, including how adjustments are provided, how learning support operates, and how the school works in partnership with families.

## *Other schooling options*

Children learn in different ways, and some families explore options beyond a regular school setting.

These may include:

- Home schooling – where you register with the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) and take responsibility for teaching your child at home
- Distance education – where your child learns from home with support from a school and qualified teachers

## *Finding the right fit*

Every child is different, and school settings vary in how they provide support. A setting that works well for one child or family may not be the right fit for another. What matters most is finding a school environment where your child feels safe, supported, included, and able to learn.

If you're unsure, you might speak with professionals who know your child or connect with other families who have navigated similar decisions.



“

*There's a lot to weigh up and it can feel like a lot of pressure to get it right.*

*We had this picture in our heads of what we wanted for our son. For him to feel settled, have friends and actually wanting to go.*

*We talked to people who knew his needs and visited a few schools. We left most visits with a better gut feeling which really helped us figure it out.*

SARAH

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“

*Not long after Dax was diagnosed with congenital cytomegalovirus (cCMV), we moved to a regional town. We assumed he would attend the specific purpose school in our local area. But when we went to visit the local public school where his older sister was going to go, something Dax did really surprised us.*

*We walked into one of the mainstream classrooms, and Dax completely lit up. The students gathered around him straight away. They were curious and excited to meet him. You could see how much he loved being part of it. That pretty much made the decision for us about where Dax was going to go to school.*

*Because Dax is non-speaking and uses a wheelchair, we spent time educating not only his teachers, but his classmates too. Each year we've shared an All About Me with the students and sent a letter home to families in his class. I've also gone into the school to talk about Dax and his disability.*

*Over time, Dax has become a familiar face at the school. Students across all year groups know him. Families recognise him when we are out around town.*

*That sense of being known really helps Dax feel like he belongs. It also helps our whole family feel part of the local community too.*

BREE

”





## SECTION 4

# School Staff and Their Roles

Schools have lots of different staff members, and it's not always clear who does what. When your child needs support, knowing who to speak to can make things feel simpler and less stressful. This section explains key roles in NSW public schools and who to contact if you have a question.

### *Reaching out to the right person*

Every school is slightly different. Job titles can vary and smaller schools may combine roles.

Speaking to the right person early on can help your child get support sooner, prevent delays and strengthen your working relationship with the school.

### *Key Roles*

#### **Classroom Teacher**

Your child's classroom teacher is your main point of contact. They see your child daily, plan lessons, monitor progress and implement reasonable adjustments in the classroom. Even when other staff are involved, the classroom teacher remains responsible for how support is delivered in day-to-day learning.

#### **Learning and Support Teacher (LaST)**

The Learning and Support Teacher helps plan and coordinate support for students who need additional help. They may work with your child, support the classroom teacher, and help develop strategies or adjustments.

#### **Learning and Support Team**

Every school has a learning and support team. This is a group of staff who meet to discuss students who may need extra support. They help identify needs, plan support, and coordinate what is put in place across the school.

#### **School Learning Support Officer (SLSO)**

An SLSO supports your child's participation in the classroom and school day. They work under the direction of the classroom teacher and may assist with learning activities, routines, or additional support needs.

#### **School Counsellor or Psychologist**

The School Counsellor or Psychologist supports students' wellbeing, learning and behaviour. They may be involved in assessments, provide support to your child, and help connect families with services outside of school.

#### **School leadership (Principal or Deputy Principal)**

School leaders oversee how support is planned and delivered across the school. They may be involved when decisions need to be made about funding or support, or concerns are ongoing and not yet resolved.



## Common roles in NSW public schools

Every school is slightly different. This is a quick guide to common roles. If you're unsure, your child's teacher can help guide you to the right person.

For a full list of school roles and responsibilities, visit the [NSW Department of Education website](#).

Role	What they do	When you might contact them
<b>Classroom Teacher</b>	Plans and delivers daily lessons, monitors progress and makes adjustments to support your child.	Your first step for questions about learning, participation, behaviour, wellbeing or day-to-day concerns.
<b>Learning and Support Teacher (LaST)</b>	Works with teachers to plan strategies and coordinate additional support. May also help develop personalised learning plans.	After speaking with the classroom teacher, if you have questions about adjustments or additional support.
<b>School Learning Support Officer (SLSO)</b>	Supports your child's participation in the classroom and school day under the teacher's direction.	Usually contacted through the classroom teacher if you have questions about how support is provided during the day.
<b>School Counsellor / Psychologist</b>	Supports student wellbeing and may complete assessments. Can help connect families to services.	For concerns about anxiety, emotional wellbeing, or social challenges (usually arranged through the school).
<b>Principal / Deputy Principal (School Leadership)</b>	Leads the school and oversees safety, inclusion and decision-making.	When concerns are ongoing, complex or unresolved.
<b>School Office / Administration</b>	Manages enrolments, absences and general enquiries.	They can also be a helpful point of contact if you're not sure who to speak to.



### Tip

If you are ever in doubt about who to contact, you can ask:

*"Who is the best person to speak to about this?"*

### For more guidance see:

- [Section 11: Where To Get Help and Support](#)

## SECTION 5

# How Support and Funding Work

Public schools in New South Wales use a formal process to identify, plan and review support for students with disability. Understanding this process helps you know what to expect and how decisions are made. This section explains what schools must provide, how support is planned and reviewed, and how families are involved.

### *What support schools must provide*

Schools must provide reasonable adjustments when a student's disability affects their ability to participate in education.

These adjustments are part of a school's core responsibility and do not depend on a formal diagnosis or additional funding approval.

Adjustments can include:

- changes to teaching strategies
- modified tasks or assessment approaches
- support from a School Learning Support Officer (SLSO)

### *How support is planned*

When a child requires additional support, the school documents this in a Personalised Learning Plan (PLP). It is also sometimes called an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or Individual Learning Plan (ILP).

A strong plan should:

- reflect your child's strengths and interests
- include clear and achievable goals
- outline the strategies and adjustments being used
- include a date when a review will take place

### *Requesting additional funding*

When students have moderate to high support needs, the school may apply to the NSW Department of Education for additional resourcing through a process called an Access Request. This is used to request additional funding or a placement in a support class or SSP.

Not every student with disability will require additional funding through an Access Request. Many students receive effective support through reasonable adjustments funded through the school's existing resources.



Teachers must consult with students and their parents or carers on the student's learning goals, adjustments and progress on an ongoing basis.

NSW DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



## *How decisions about additional support are made*

After an Access Request is submitted:

1. The Department reviews the documentation provided by the school.
2. A panel considers the request against eligibility criteria.
3. A decision is made regarding funding or placement.
4. The school and family are informed.

Panels meet at set times during the year, so decisions can take time. The school should explain expected timeframes and what support will continue in the meantime.

## *Your role in the process*

Families are an important part of planning and funding requests. You may be asked to:

- share what your child finds challenging
- explain what helps your child learn and participate
- provide reports from therapists or specialists
- review documentation before it's submitted

It is appropriate to ask questions, request clarification, or suggest changes if something does not accurately reflect your child. Support works best when schools and families plan together.

## *Reviewing support*

Children grow and change, and their support needs may change. If you notice changes in how your child is managing at school, you can request a meeting with the school at any time.

If support is no longer working, or your child's needs increase, plans can be updated, the school can request a review or a new Access Request can be submitted if appropriate.

## Helpful Links

Click the link in the digital guide, search the title online, or scan the QR code at the beginning of this guide to access these links.

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[NSW Education – Personalised learning and support planning](#)

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[NSW Education – Access Requests](#)

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[NSW Education – Inclusive learning and support](#)

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[Belongside Families – Applying for Extra Support and Funding at School](#)

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[Belongside Families – Understanding the IEP process](#)

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## SECTION 6

# Working in Partnership With Schools

Supporting a child at school works best when families and schools work in partnership. Partnership doesn't mean agreeing on everything or avoiding difficult conversations. It means sharing information, listening to different perspectives, and working together to understand your child's needs and what support may help. This section explains what partnership looks like in practice and how you can strengthen it over time.

### *The building blocks of partnership*

At Belongside, we describe partnerships as three building blocks:

- shared priorities
- respectful relationships
- good communication

When these building blocks are strong, working together with the school usually feels productive. When one becomes strained, misunderstandings and tension can grow. Recognising which building block needs attention can help you decide what might help.

### *Shared priorities: aligning on what matters most*

Families and schools do not always begin with the same priorities. A school may be focused on attendance, classwork or routines. You may be focused on anxiety, friendships or confidence. Both perspectives are important. Shared priorities mean agreeing on what is most important to focus on for your child right now.

For example, if Marley is refusing writing tasks, the school may be concerned about being able to demonstrate their learning, while you may be worried that writing is causing frustration or anxiety. A shared priority might become: Helping Marley feel confident to show what they know.

### **Ways to strengthen shared priorities**

- name your main priority at the start of meetings
- ask the school what they see as the current priority
- agree on one or two clear goals

### **You might say**

- *“What do you see as the main priority for my child at school?”*
- *“From my perspective, one of my priorities is \_\_\_\_\_. How could we work towards that together?”*
- *“Could we agree on one or two priorities to focus on right now?”*





### *Respectful relationships: valuing each person's role*

Families and schools each bring important knowledge about a child. You know your child's personality, strengths, history and what helps them feel safe and confident. You see how they respond at home, after school and across different situations. Teachers see your child in the classroom and school environment and bring professional knowledge about learning, curriculum, classroom dynamics and how supports work within the school environment.

Partnership works best when both perspectives are valued and shared openly. When families and schools combine their knowledge, it becomes easier to understand what is happening and decide what support may help.

For example, Marley's teacher has told you that Marley often leaves their seat during independent work and finds it difficult to stay focused. At home, you have noticed that Marley often needs short breaks when concentrating on tasks. You might say:

*"Thanks for telling me. At home we've found a few things that help Marley when concentrating is hard. I'm happy to share those."*

#### **Ways to strengthen respectful relationships**

- share what you notice about your child's experiences at home
- ask teachers about what they are seeing in the classroom
- recognise the expertise each person brings
- focus on understanding the situation before deciding on solutions
- acknowledge effort when things improve
- pause if emotions rise during conversations



#### **You might say**

- *"I'm noticing something a bit different at home. Can we compare what we're each seeing?"*
- *"This is what usually helps at home. Do you think something similar could work at school?"*
- *"What strategies tend to work for other students in situations like this?"*
- *"Is there anything in the classroom routine that might be affecting this?"*



## *Good communication: clear and constructive conversations*

Many partnership challenges begin with misunderstandings. Clear communication helps families and schools stay informed and develop a shared understanding of what a child needs.

Good communication can include knowing who to contact about different concerns, agreeing how and when updates will be shared, asking questions to clarify what has been discussed or decided, and setting a time to review what is working.

For example, if you receive a behaviour report that surprises you, you might respond:

*“Thank you for sending this. I wasn’t aware this was happening. Could we set up a time to talk through what led to this and what the next steps are?”*

“*For a long time it felt like us on one side and the school on the other. We'd go into meetings braced for a fight and they could probably feel that.*

*While we had genuine concerns that needed to be addressed, it took a while to realise that going into meetings with that mindset wasn't helping anyone, least of all our child.*

*Once we started treating it more like a shared problem we were trying to solve together, the whole dynamic shifted. It didn't happen overnight but it changed things.*

TOM



## **Ways to strengthen good communication**

- share your concerns early and clearly
- ask questions if something is unclear
- agree how and when updates will be shared
- send a short follow-up email if needed
- acknowledge progress or effort when things are going well



### **You might say**

- *“How would you prefer we communicate about this?”*
- *“How often will we receive updates?”*
- *“Can we clarify who is responsible for this strategy?”*
- *“I’ll send a short summary so we’re aligned.”*

## *When partnership feels difficult*

Even strong partnerships experience tension at times. Identifying which building block doesn't feel strong, can help you work out what you can focus on to strengthen the partnership.

Join Belongside's [Partnering with Your Child's School workshop](#) to learn more about the building blocks and what to do if relationships feel strained.



# Parent tips

"I introduce myself at the start of the year and don't wait for a problem to happen. The teacher knew my face and that made everything easier."

"I send a quick email at the beginning of each year with a one-pager about my son. His triggers, what helps, what he loves. Teachers always said it was the most useful thing."

"Even when things felt really hard, realising that my son's teacher wasn't the enemy. We were both exhausted and both wanted the same thing. It just took a while to find that."

"I ask the teacher how they want to be contacted. One year the teacher said he preferred a quick chat at pick up, while another year the teacher said emails were easier."

"I got really frustrated once and nearly sent an email I would have regretted. A friend told me to wait 24 hours before sending anything when I was upset. I still do that now."

"Most teachers genuinely want to help. They're not always sure how. Sometimes you just have to give suggestions and tell them some of the things that work well for your child."

"I remind myself that I'm allowed to disagree. I spent two years just nodding along and leaving meetings feeling awful. You can push back respectfully and the relationship survives."

"Consistency matters more than any one conversation. It's not one big meeting that builds the relationship, it's all the small stuff over time."

"Saying thank you when something went well."

"Don't wait until you're at breaking point to raise something. I did that for a whole term and it made everything so much harder to repair."



# Helpful Tools

The [following tools](#) can help you share information about your child, communicate clearly with the school and keep track of important conversations.



## *All About Me Profile*

A simple way to share key information about your child with teachers and school staff.



## *School Conversation Scripts*

Examples of ways families might start conversations, ask questions or discuss support with the school.



## *Four-Part Conversation Framework*

A simple structure that helps explain concerns clearly and keep conversations focused on solutions.



## *School Communication Log*

A simple log to help you keep track of important communication with the school.



Belongsideto Families offers a practical [Working in Partnership With Schools Workshop](#), where parents learn strategies for building strong relationships, preparing for conversations and navigating challenges with confidence.



“ I had to remind myself that everyone is doing their best, including our child. We all have limits on time, energy and resources, so showing each other a bit of compassion really helped. But that didn't mean staying quiet. I still spoke up when something wasn't working for my child.

EMILY



## SECTION 7

# Getting Ready for School Meetings

School meetings are part of how schools plan and review support for your child. They provide a chance to share information, ask questions and work together to decide next steps.

Planning ahead can help you feel clearer, more organised and more confident. This section explains the different types of meetings, how you can prepare, what can help during meetings and how to follow up afterwards.

### *Types of school meetings*

Schools use different names, but types of meetings often include:

Meeting	Purpose	Who often attends
<b>Planning or PLP meeting</b>	To develop or review your child's <u>Personalised Learning Plan</u> (PLP) and adjustments.	Parents, classroom teacher, Learning and Support Teacher (LaST), school leadership. You may also invite your child's therapist.
<b>Parent-teacher meeting</b>	To discuss your child's learning progress and how they are going at school.	Parents and classroom teacher.
<b>Transition meeting</b>	To plan support during periods of change, such as starting school, moving classes or transitioning to high school.	Parents, current and future teachers, support staff and your child's therapist.
<b>Behaviour or wellbeing meeting</b>	To understand concerns and plan supportive strategies.	Parents, teachers, school leaders, learning and support teacher, counsellor, your child's therapist.



### Tip: Ask questions



If you are invited to a meeting, you can ask:

- Who will attend?
- What is the purpose of the meeting?
- What decisions are likely to be discussed?
- Can I have an agenda in advance?

Knowing this ahead of time can reduce uncertainty and help you prepare.



### *Before the meeting*

School meetings can feel like a lot. This section outlines what to do before, during and after a meeting.

#### **1. Know your goal**

Think about what you would like to get out of the meeting. It may be to:

- understand how your child is going
- discuss concerns
- review adjustments
- agree on next steps

Share your goal at the beginning of the meeting to help keep the conversation focused.

#### **2. Write key points or questions**

Dot points are enough. For example:

- What is working well?
- What is hardest for my child right now?
- What adjustments could we try?
- How will we know if this is helping?

Having notes can reduce pressure and help you stay on track if emotions rise during the conversation.

### **3. Gather helpful information**

You may wish to bring:

- recent reports or assessments
- therapist recommendations
- examples of strategies that work at home
- notes about recent changes

This is not just about preparing reports or letters. Even sharing a few key examples verbally can help the school better understand your child's needs.

### **4. Consider bringing support**

Many families find it helpful to bring another person to meetings. This might be a partner, friend or family members, a support worker or a therapist. They can help take notes, ask clarifying questions or simply provide reassurance.

Let the school know in advance if you plan to bring someone.

You can use the [Meeting Preparation Worksheet](#) in the toolkit to organise questions and key points.

### *During the meeting*

- take notes to help you remember key points
- ask for examples if something is unclear
- clarify next steps so everyone is on the same page
- pause if needed to give yourself time to think
- ask questions to build a shared understanding



#### **You might say**

- *"Can you explain that in a different way?"*
- *"What would that look like in the classroom?"*
- *"Can we write down what we've agreed to try?"*
- *"I'd like some time to think about this before deciding."*
- *"I need to take a short break."*

## Sharing information about your child

Schools see your child in one environment. You see the broader picture. Sharing what you notice at home can help staff understand your child's strengths, challenges and patterns. This information can help the school plan strategies and support.

### For more guidance, see:

- [Section 1: Helping School Understand Your Child.](#)

## If emotions rise

You may hear information that is difficult to process or feel caught off guard. If this happens, it's okay to slow the pace. You can say:

- "I need a minute to think about that."
- "Can we pause briefly?"
- "I'd like time to think about this for a few days before making a decision."

### Tip



You do not need professional language or specialist knowledge to participate in meetings. Your knowledge of your child, along with your observations and questions, is enough.

## After the meeting

Following up helps keep communication clear and prevents misunderstandings. You might:

- review your notes
- write down agreed actions
- save documents in one place
- check how adjustments will be communicated with relevant staff
- confirm how and when progress will be reviewed
- send a short follow-up email

Example: *"Thank you for meeting today. My understanding is that we will trial visual supports during writing tasks and check in again at the end of Term 2. Please let me know if I have misunderstood anything."*

You can use the [Email Scripts](#) in the toolkit when following up.

## Reflecting on how the meeting went

Afterwards, it can help to briefly reflect on:

- What felt constructive?
- What still feels unclear?
- What support do I need before the next step?

Reflection is about preparation, not self-criticism. You may find the Reflection Tool – [Was I Heard? What Next?](#) helpful.

## If a meeting was difficult

Some meetings are more challenging than others. If a meeting didn't go as well as you'd liked, you might:

- request another meeting
- bring a support person next time
- involve school leadership

### If you need more support, see:

- [Section 10: Speaking Up for Your Child](#)
- [Section 11: Where to Get Help and Support](#)





# Helpful Tools

The following tools can help you prepare for meetings, organise your thoughts and reflect on what was discussed afterwards.



## *Meeting Preparation Worksheet*

Helps you organise your questions, priorities and key points before a meeting.



## *Meeting Summary Template*

Helps you record what was discussed in a meeting and any agreed actions or next steps.



## *Was I Heard? What Worked? What Next?*

A reflection tool that helps you think about how a meeting went and what you may want to do next.



## *After the Meeting Reset*

A short wellbeing tool to help you pause and regroup after a difficult or emotional conversation.

# Parent tips

"If the school requests a meeting, ask for an agenda and who will be there. This helps you prepare and know who to invite on your child's team. It also helps bring the conversation back to the agreed-upon purpose of the meeting if things go off track."

"Don't be fixed on what the solution should look like. Sometimes having a fixed idea can close you off to other possible solutions."

"Having another person in the meeting can really help. A partner, therapist or friend can listen alongside you, help remember key points and be someone to debrief with afterwards."

"If the conversation starts moving too quickly, it's okay to pause and ask to come back to something. Meetings can move through a lot of topics and it's reasonable to make sure your concerns have been properly talked through."

"If therapists can't attend, ask for their ideas and input so you can share it at the meeting. This is still super valuable if your child sees multiple therapists and may be a better use of your funding."

"Schools will use acronyms for many things. Ask what they mean and ask as many questions as you need too."

"Always contribute to the agenda. I write my own agenda and send it and ask them to add to mine or mine to theirs. I use this to make sure I mention all the issues I need to and don't blank on the day."

"Go in with a positive attitude and don't be antagonistic - you are working together as a team for the good of your child."

"I send documents ahead of time - About me pages, history of issues, suggested solutions to discuss."

"Trust your gut, if something doesn't feel right or add up, ask questions, be that squeaky wheel. And don't be afraid to advocate for your child."



“ *Never go alone if you can help it. Bring your partner, one of your child's therapists, even a friend. It takes the pressure off knowing you're not the only one keeping track of what's being said. And having someone to debrief with afterwards matters more than you'd think.* ”

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## SECTION 8

# When Things Are Going Well

There will be times when school feels settled and your child is doing well. These periods matter. Understanding the supports, strategies and relationships that are making a difference can help you protect and build on them over time. This section explores how you can recognise what is working and help ensure these supports continue.

### *Notice what is helping*

When things are going well, it can be easy to move on without thinking about why. Taking a moment to reflect can help you understand what is supporting your child to learn and feel settled at school.

You might notice things such as a teacher who understands your child well, routines that help them feel comfortable during the school day, or strategies that make it easier for them to participate.

Being able to name what is helping makes it easier to keep those supports in place and build on them.

### *Share what is helping*

Schools often hear from families when something is not going well. Letting teachers know when something is helping is just as valuable.

You might share when a strategy has helped your child feel more confident, when a routine has made the school day easier, or when you notice positive changes at home.

### *Keep track of what works*

When something is supporting your child well, it can be helpful to keep a simple record.

Over time, routines can change or new staff may become involved in supporting your child. Having a record can make it easier to share what has been helpful and ensure helpful supports continue.



Some families keep brief notes. You may also find it helpful to update key documents, such as your child's [All About Me Profile](#), to reflect what is working well.

### *Stay connected*

Strong partnerships are built through regular communication. Quick check-ins, sharing positive updates, or acknowledging what is working well can help maintain trust and mutual understanding.

As discussed in [Section 6: Working in Partnership With Schools](#), these small moments of communication can strengthen relationships and make it easier to address challenges if they arise later.



“ *School was not always easy for me. There were times I found it really hard. I struggled academically and often felt anxious.*

*My family stood beside me through it all. They never stopped advocating for me. They did everything they could to support me to get the best education possible. I am incredibly grateful to them.*

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## SECTION 9

# When Concerns Begin

Concerns can arise from time to time. You might notice changes in your child's mood, hear something from your child that worries you, or receive feedback from the school that raises questions. This section outlines steps you can take to think through concerns and respond in a constructive way.

### *Steps to take when concerns arise*

Not every concern signals a major problem. Some issues are temporary and resolve quickly, while others may need further attention. Taking a moment to understand what is happening can help you decide the most helpful next step.

#### **Step 1: notice when concerns begin**

Parents often notice small changes before others do. Your child may say something about school, seem reluctant to attend, or show changes in behaviour or mood after the school day.

Concerns may also arise through feedback from the school, such as a message about behaviour, learning progress or participation in class activities.

Paying attention to these early signs can help you understand what your child may be experiencing and decide whether further discussion with the school might be helpful.

#### **Step 2: clarify the concern**

When something feels concerning, it can help to pause and clarify what you have noticed.

Try to identify:

- what has changed or raised your concern
- when the concern occurs
- how often it happens
- what your child has said about it

Clarifying the concern can help you understand the situation more clearly and prepare for a constructive conversation with the school if needed.

#### **Step 3: consider the size of the concern**

Not every concern requires immediate action. Some concerns may relate to a temporary change, a one-off incident, or a short period of adjustment.



“*Early on I had a list of about fifteen things I wanted to fix. I'd go into every meeting with all of them and come out feeling like nothing had moved. Someone eventually told me to pick the thing that matters most right now for my child and it changed everything. Letting some things go isn't giving up. It's being strategic about where your energy actually makes a difference.*”

MARIKA



It can be helpful to consider whether the concern:

- has happened once or repeatedly
- seems to be increasing or improving over time
- is affecting your child's learning, wellbeing or participation at school

Thinking about the pattern of the concern can help you decide whether to monitor the situation, gather more information, or raise the issue with the school.

#### **Step 4: decide the next step**

Once the concern is clearer, you can consider what next step may be helpful. This might include:

- speaking with your child's classroom teacher
- asking the school for more information
- requesting a meeting to discuss the concern further

Many concerns can be resolved through early conversations and shared problem-solving between families and schools.

#### *Trust your instincts*

You know your child's usual patterns, behaviour and wellbeing. If something feels consistently wrong, it is appropriate to keep asking questions and seeking clarity.

#### **If you need more support navigating challenges, see:**

- [Section 7: Getting Ready for School Meetings](#)
- [Section 10: Speaking Up for Your Child](#)
- [Section 11: Where to Get Help and Support](#)



## SECTION 10

# Speaking Up for Your Child

Speaking up for your child at school can feel uncomfortable. Many parents worry about being seen as “difficult” or damaging their relationship with the school. At the same time, you want your child to feel safe, supported and included. Navigating this can feel like a delicate balance. Advocacy does not have to mean formal complaints or conflict. This section explains what advocacy can look like in practice and what to do if concerns are not resolved.

### *You may already be advocating*

Many parents feel unsure about the word advocacy. It can sound formal or confrontational, or like something only experts do.

In reality, many parents are already advocating for their child in everyday ways. You are advocating when you share information about your child with teachers, ask questions about support, raise a concern, or suggest strategies that help them. These everyday conversations help schools understand your child and respond to their needs.

### *Different types of advocacy*

Advocacy can take different forms depending on the situation.

Most communication with the school happens through everyday conversations and collaboration. This is what we refer to as “little a” advocacy.

At times, concerns may require more formal steps, such as escalating concerns. This is what we call “Big A” advocacy.

Understanding the difference can help families feel more prepared if challenges arise.

### *Little a advocacy*

Little a advocacy happens through conversations and collaboration. It is part of building a working partnership with the school.

It might include:

- asking questions
- requesting clarification
- suggesting adjustments
- following up on agreed actions
- sharing observations about what is and isn't working



“ I had to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. Saying this isn't working or my child is struggling more than the reports suggest isn't easy when you're sitting across from professionals.

But I kept coming back to the fact that I'm the only person in that process whose entire focus is her. That's not nothing. That's actually everything.



The tone is collaborative and solution focused.

For example:

- “Can we try a different approach to writing tasks?”
- “I’ve noticed transitions are hard. What could help?”
- “Can we review how this adjustment is working?”
- “Can we agree on what we’re trialling and when we’ll review it?”

Many concerns are resolved through these everyday conversations.

### *Including your child’s voice*

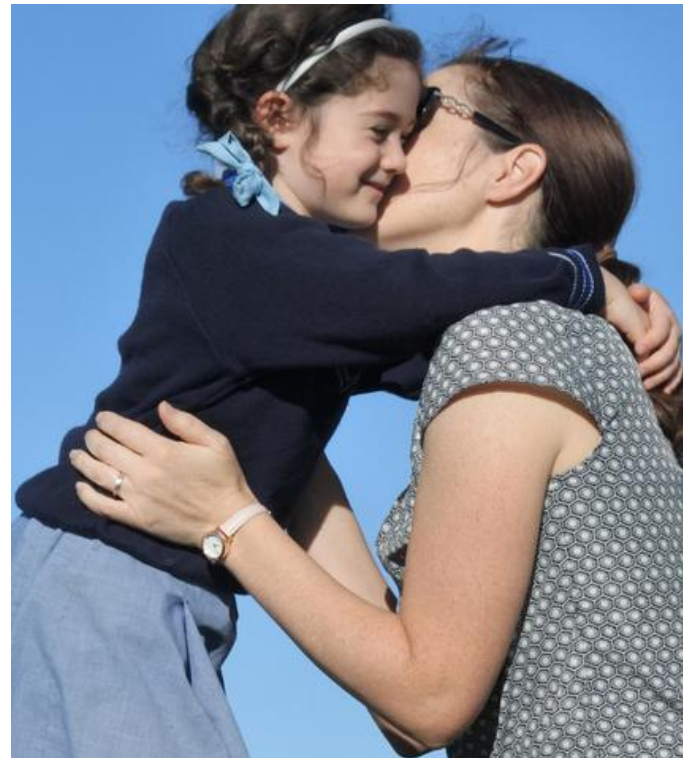
Where appropriate, consider how your child’s views can be included.

This might mean:

- asking your child what feels hardest at school
- checking what is working well
- sharing their words or experiences in meetings

Even young children can express preferences. Whether that is choosing between choices or communicating using visuals.

Including your child’s voice, in a way that is appropriate to them, can help ensure decisions reflect their experience and what matters to them.



### *When little advocacy may not be enough*

Sometimes concerns continue despite conversations and meetings. You might notice:

- agreed adjustments are not implemented
- communication becomes inconsistent
- safety concerns are not addressed
- you are told support cannot be provided without clear explanation

When this happens it may be time to consider a more formal approach.





### *Big A advocacy*

Big A advocacy involves taking formal steps when needed to make sure your child's needs, safety and right to learn are taken seriously and acted on.

This might include:

- raising concerns with school leadership
- contacting the [Local Education Office](#)
- seeking support from an [independent advocacy organisation](#)
- writing a formal complaint

### *Preparing for Big A advocacy*

If you decide to take a more formal approach, preparation can help your communication stay clear and focused.

You might:

- gather dates of conversations and meetings
- collect relevant emails or documentation
- identify what was agreed and whether it was implemented
- clearly describe the impact on your child
- decide what outcome you are seeking

For example:

*"I am concerned that the agreed visual supports have not been implemented consistently. We discussed this on 10 March and 24 March. My child is now refusing literacy and reporting distress. I am requesting a review meeting within the next two weeks to clarify next steps."*

### *Choosing your approach*

Not every concern requires Big A advocacy.

Before escalating, it can help to pause and ask:

- Have I clearly explained my concern?
- Have agreed steps been documented?
- Have I allowed reasonable time for the school's response?
- Is this a misunderstanding, or a refusal to act?
- What outcome am I seeking?

### *Understanding your child's rights*

Your child has legal rights to access [education on the same basis](#) as other students. Schools have obligations to make reasonable adjustments and to support students with disability to participate and learn.

You do not need to become an expert in education law. However, knowing that these rights exist can strengthen your confidence when raising concerns.

#### **If you need more information, see:**

- [Section 2: Understanding Your Child's Rights](#)

### *If you need additional support*

If you feel unsure about your next step, you can:

- speak with another parent who has navigated similar challenges
- connect with experienced parents in a peer support group
- contact an independent disability advocacy service
- Join Belongiside's [Advocacy at School Workshop](#)

#### **For more guidance, see:**

- [Section 11: Where to Get Help and Support](#)



# Helpful Tools

The [following tools](#) can help you organise your concerns, communicate clearly and follow up with the school when you need to speak up for your child.



## *Advocacy Planning Worksheet*

Helps you think through a concern and organise the key information you want the school to understand.



## *School Conversation Scripts*

Examples of ways families might start conversations, ask questions or discuss support with the school.



## *Email Scripts*

Examples of short emails you can use when raising concerns or following up after meetings.



## *AI Prompts for Parent*

Example prompts you can use with AI tools such as ChatGPT to help organise your thoughts or draft messages.

# Parent tips

*"Speak your mind, even if your voice shakes — is something I always try to remember."*

*"You do not have to be the perfect advocate. It is okay if it feels hard. It is okay if you are nervous, if you do not say everything the right way, or even if you get teary."*

*"Don't give up, your voice and your child's voice matters."*

*"Try to collaborate and bring solutions to the table. If there is a challenge, highlight the problem but also offer solutions."*

*"Starting a meeting by sharing what is most important to your child and your family can really help frame the conversation. It gives everyone a clearer understanding of what matters most from the beginning."*

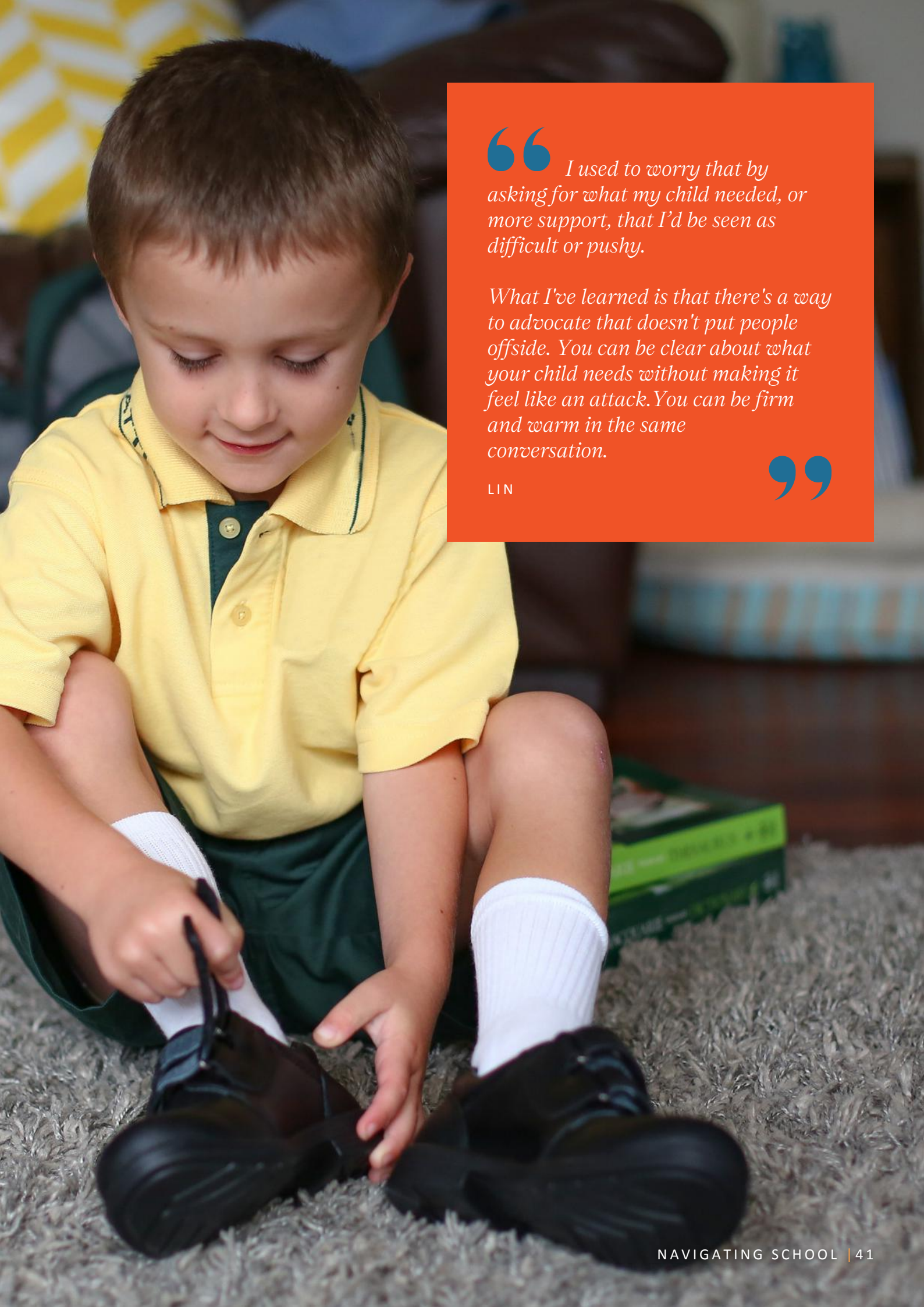
*"Know your rights."*

*"Sharing positives, like what is working well, is also a helpful way to set the tone. It can help the meeting start on a collaborative and respectful footing before moving into the challenges."*

*"If things are not improving after trying to resolve, drop the Disability Discrimination Act or Disability Standards into the conversation...lightly, but enough so they know that you know!"*

*"Try everything you can with the school first. A formal complaint to the Department of Ed can be necessary, but it can also really shift the dynamic with your child's school."*

*"If you feel uncomfortable or unsure about something the school is suggesting, it is okay to ask questions. Those questions can help you better understand the situation and give you a clearer way to raise any concerns, rather than jumping to conclusions."*



“ I used to worry that by asking for what my child needed, or more support, that I'd be seen as difficult or pushy.

What I've learned is that there's a way to advocate that doesn't put people offside. You can be clear about what your child needs without making it feel like an attack. You can be firm and warm in the same conversation.

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## SECTION 11

# Where to Get Help and Support

If you have ongoing concerns about your child's education, support exists both within and beyond the school. There are pathways for advice, escalation and formal complaints. This section outlines the main options available.

### *Steps to address concerns*

#### **Step 1: work with the school**

In most situations, the first step is to work with the school to review the concern. You can start by speaking with:

- your child's classroom teacher
- the Learning and Support Teacher (LaST)
- school leadership (Principal or Deputy Principal)

If a decision has been made that you do not understand, ask for clarification before considering escalation. You might say:

- *"Can you explain how that decision was made?"*
- *"Can we review the documented plan for my child?"*
- *"Is there a process for reviewing this decision?"*

#### **Step 2: Local Department of Education Office**

If concerns remain unresolved at a school level, you may contact your [Local NSW Department of Education Office](#).

They can:

- help you understand departmental policies
- check whether correct procedures have been followed
- provide advice where school-level resolution has not been successful

Contacting a local office does not automatically mean lodging a formal complaint. Families sometimes seek advice or clarification before deciding on next steps. You can call 131 536 and ask to be directed to your Local Education Office.



#### **Step 3: formal complaint**

If you believe a concern has not been addressed appropriately, you may submit a formal complaint through the NSW Department of Education complaints process.

Formal complaints may be appropriate when:

- agreed adjustments are continually not implemented
- safety concerns remain unresolved
- discrimination is suspected
- the decision-making process did not feel fair or transparent

Information about the NSW Department of Education's complaints process is available on its [website](#).

In most cases, families are expected to first try to resolve concerns with the school. If this hasn't happened, a complaint may be referred back to the school for review.



## *Things to consider before escalating*

Before raising a formal complaint it can be helpful to pause and consider your escalation pathway. Involving others outside the school may change how communication feels with your child's school or how relationships work day to day.

Escalation can be an important and necessary step when concerns are not resolved. If you do decide to escalate, continuing to communicate clearly, respectfully and with a focus on your child's needs can help maintain a working relationship with the school.

## *Advocacy and legal support*

### **Independent advocacy services**

Free advocacy services are available to support people with disability and their families.

Advocates are independent from schools and government. They can:

- explain your child's rights and available options
- help you prepare documentation
- support communication with the school
- sometimes attend meetings with you

[Find a disability advocacy service.](#)

### **Anti-discrimination and legal options**

If you believe your child has experienced unlawful discrimination, you may contact:

- [Anti-Discrimination NSW](#)
- [the Australian Human Rights Commission](#)

These organisations investigate discrimination complaints under state and federal law. Time limits may apply and formal processes can take time. Seeking advice from an advocacy organisation before lodging a formal complaint is often helpful.

### **Tip: Connect with other families**

Navigating school concerns can be exhausting. Join a Belongside [peer group](#) or [program](#) to speak with other parents who have faced similar situations. They can help you feel less alone, offer practical ideas and strengthen your confidence.



## SECTION 12

# Looking After Your Wellbeing

Supporting your child through school takes time, energy and emotional effort. It sits alongside work, family life and everyday responsibilities that continue well beyond the school day. This section shares practical ways to reduce that mental load and care for your wellbeing while navigating your child's schooling.

### *You matter*

Parents and carers are often the only constant across their child's education journey. Teachers, supports and school environments may change, but you carry knowledge, history and advocacy for your child over many years.

Looking after your wellbeing helps you think more clearly during meetings, respond calmly if challenges arise and sustain your energy over the long term.

### *Small habits that support your wellbeing*

Research shows that short pauses throughout the day, also known as microbreaks, can help reduce stress. Stepping outside for a minute, taking a few slow breaths, or stretching your shoulders can help your body recover from periods that feel overwhelming.

For more [practical strategies to look after yourself](#), read the article on the Belongsid website.

### *Recognising your pressure points*

Certain moments in the school day or school year can feel more stressful than others. For some families this might include:

- school pick-up or drop-off
- unexpected emails or phone calls from school
- meetings where decisions are being discussed
- school report time
- yearly review meetings

Recognising these triggers can help you prepare.



### **Tip: Plan for challenging moments**

Some families find it helpful to prepare small strategies for times they know may feel stressful. For example:

- arranging a follow-up email instead of discussing concerns at the classroom door
- asking for a scheduled time to talk rather than trying to solve issues quickly

### *Taking pauses when things feel intense*

School communication does not always happen at convenient times.

Families often use simple strategies such as:

- waiting before replying to an email
- writing down key points before responding
- stepping away briefly or taking a short walk
- talking the situation through with someone you trust first

### *Protecting your energy over time*

Supporting your child at school is ongoing. Small habits can help prevent burnout and make challenges feel more manageable.

Many families find it helpful to:

- focus on the most important priorities
- postpone or give yourself more time for less important tasks
- prepare for busy periods such as transitions
- share responsibilities where possible

# Parent tips

*"This journey can be long. Looking after myself helps me keep going for my child."*

*"I've learned to celebrate the small wins, even when things improve just a little."*

*"Never write an email angry. If you do, don't send it. Burnt bridges are hard to rebuild and schools are less likely to negotiate with you. Breathe, leave it overnight, ask someone else to read it or ask AI for help. Yes, you could still be angry or upset tomorrow, but those future conversations are going to be easier to handle and less anxiety provoking."*

*"I try and reset after a hard conversation. Even just a walk around the block or a cup of tea before jumping back into the next thing. The school stuff can take over everything if you let it. Give yourself a moment to come back to yourself."*

*"What I would say to a parent who feels exhausted: please reach out and ask for help. There is no shame in it."*

*"Needing support doesn't mean I'm not coping. It just means the situation is hard."*

*"Talking to other parents who understand the school journey has helped me feel less alone."*

*"Sounds obvious but I stopped skipping meals on meeting days. I used to rush in running on coffee and anxiety. Eating something beforehand actually helped me think more clearly."*

*"I finally asked my GP for a referral to speak to a psychologist when I realised I was crying in the car park after every meeting. Best thing I did."*

*"I had to get strict about not checking school emails after a certain time at night. Nothing is ever so urgent it needs to be answered at 10pm, and I slept so much better for it."*

# Tools to Support You

The [toolkit](#) includes practical tools to support different parts of working with your child's school. You can use these tools before, during or after conversations with the school.

## Sharing information about your child



### All About Me Profile

A simple way to share key information about your child's strengths, needs and what supports their learning and participation at school.

## Preparing for conversations



### Advocacy Planning Worksheet

Helps you think through a concern and organise the key information you want the school to understand.



### Meeting Preparation Worksheet

Helps you identify questions, priorities and key points before a meeting.

## Communicating with the school



### School Conversation Scripts

Examples of ways families might start conversations, ask questions or raise concerns with the school.



### Four-Part Conversation Framework

A simple structure that helps explain a concern clearly and focus conversations on solutions.



### Email Scripts

Examples of short emails you can use when communicating with teachers or following up after meetings.



### AI Prompts for Parents

Example prompts you can use with AI tools like ChatGPT to help organise your thoughts or draft messages.

## Keeping track of communication



### Meeting Summary Template

Helps you record key points discussed in meetings and any agreed actions.



### School Communication Log

A simple log to keep track of important communication with the school.

## Reflecting and deciding what to do next



### Was I Heard? What Worked? What Next?

A reflection tool that helps you think about how a conversation went and what you might want to do next.



### After the Meeting Reset

A short wellbeing tool to help you pause and regroup after a difficult or emotional conversation.



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*I have a great team of therapists but honestly, I've learnt more from other parents than anyone else.*

*When it comes to supporting my daughter at school, being part of a community of parents that share their knowledge has helped me navigate new experiences and challenges at school.*

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# Glossary:

## Common School Words Explained

Schools often use words and abbreviations that may be unfamiliar, especially when you are new to navigating the school system. Over time, many families find the language becomes more easily understood. This glossary explains common terms used throughout this guide in plain language.

### *Access Request*

A school process to request additional support for a student with higher or more complex needs, which may include extra resourcing or consideration of a support class/SSP placement.

### *Advocacy*

Speaking up to make sure your child's needs, rights and wellbeing are understood and supported.

### *Adjustments*

Changes a school makes so a student can access learning and participate (for example: teaching approach, environment, routines, communication, or assessment).

### *Barriers*

Anything that makes it harder for a student to access learning or participate (for example: environment, attitudes, communication, policies, or lack of adjustments).

### *Behaviour support*

Strategies that help a child feel safe, regulated and ready to learn by understanding what is driving behaviour and what support may help.

### *Catchment school*

The local public school your child is entitled to attend based on your home address.

### *Department of Education (DoE) NSW*

Government department that runs public schools in New South Wales. It sets policies, supports schools and manages Local Education Offices.

### *Disability Discrimination Act (DDA)*

Australian law that protects people from unfair treatment because of disability, including in education.

### *Disability Standards for Education (DSE)*

Standards under the DDA that set out what education providers must do to support students with disability, including reasonable adjustments and protection from discrimination.

### *Inclusion*

Inclusion means students with disability are supported to learn, participate and belong at school alongside their peers.

### *Inclusive education*

An approach where schools plan for all students to learn together by removing barriers and providing the support each student needs to participate.

### *Learning and Support Teacher (LaST)*

A teacher who helps plan and coordinate support for students in mainstream classes who need extra support.

## *Local Education Office*

A local office of the NSW Department of Education that supports schools in a specific area. Families may contact a local office if concerns cannot be resolved at school level.

## *Mainstream class*

A regular classroom where students with and without disability learn together, with adjustments as needed.

## *Non-government school*

A school such as Catholic or Independent school not run by the NSW Government. These schools set their own enrolment processes and may charge fees but must still comply with disability laws.

## *Partnership*

Families and schools working together to support a child's learning and wellbeing through shared information, listening and agreed goals.

## *Personalised Learning Plan (PLP)*

A written plan outlining a student's strengths, goals, adjustments and supports, and how progress will be reviewed (also called an IEP or ILP).

## *Public school*

A government school funded and run by the NSW Government. Students have a right to attend their local catchment school, and schools must provide reasonable adjustments and follow disability law.

## *Reasonable adjustments*

Required changes to support a student with disability to access education on the same basis as other students, considering the student's needs and the school context.

## *Review meeting*

A check-in to see whether supports are working and whether changes are needed. Families can request a review at any time.

## *Rights*

Protections under Australian law that ensure students with disability can access education on the same basis as other students, including the right to enrol, participate, receive reasonable adjustments, and be protected from discrimination.

## *School Learning Support Officer (SLSO)*

A staff member, also known as a teacher's aide who supports students' access and participation under the teacher's direction.

## *Support class*

A smaller class within a mainstream NSW Department of Education public school for students with disability who need more intensive support, with additional staffing.

## *School for Specific Purposes (SSP)*

A separate public school, run by the NSW Department of Education, for students with higher or more complex support needs, with specialised staff and learning environments.

## *Transition*

A change in schooling (for example starting school, changing classes, or starting high school) that may need extra planning and support.

## *Wellbeing*

A child's emotional, social and mental health. At school, this can include feeling safe, included and supported.



### **Tip**

**If you ever hear a word you don't understand, it is always okay to ask:**  
***"Can you explain what that means?"***

# A Final Word

Navigating school with a child with disability can feel complex, emotional, and at times exhausting. There is no single 'right way' to do this, and no expectation that you will have everything figured out.

Over time, what matters most is understanding your child, building relationships with the school, and learning how to work through challenges if they arise.

For many families, confidence grows gradually. It develops through conversations with teachers, small challenges being worked through, learning how the school operates, and noticing what helps their child succeed. There will be periods when things feel settled, and times when new challenges emerge. This is a normal part of supporting a child through many years of education.

This guide is here to support you along the way. You may find some parts helpful now and return to other sections at different stages of your child's schooling.

At Belongside Families, we are parents and carers too. We understand how much energy this journey can take and how important it is not to carry it alone.

You are not alone in this. Connecting with other families who understand the experience can make a real difference. We encourage you to explore peer support groups and communities, including the [Belongside Community](#), where families share experiences, information and encouragement.





Get free tips, tools, and events  
to support your family—  
delivered to your inbox.



## Acknowledgements

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*This guide provides general information to help families understand and navigate school processes in New South Wales. It is not legal advice. Information in this guide is accurate as of March 2026. Policies and procedures may change over time, so families should check current information with their school or the NSW Department of Education.*

# Belongside *Families*

Belongside Families is an independent family-led organisation, for parents and carers raising children with disability, developmental delays and Autism. Through peer groups, workshops, educational resources and stories, we empower families to grow their skills, knowledge and confidence to support their children and family to thrive.



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