

Additional needs: Where to start?

What are additional needs?

Differences exist among all people, making the world interesting and at times challenging. One such difference is when a child has a condition or disability that requires extra support. This may be, for instance, a developmental disability (e.g., autism), a medical condition (e.g., diabetes) or a mental health issue (e.g., anxiety). Children with additional needs may face challenges across a number of areas including their physical health, mental health or ability to learn, or they may face difficulties when trying to do things other children can do.

Supporting children with additional needs enables them to participate and feel included; this also helps promote their strengths and may reduce their risk of developing mental health difficulties. Strategies for supporting children with additional needs can vary greatly, because every child is unique. For example, one child may use pictures or photos to help them communicate while another child may need regular reminders to help them complete a task.

Children with additional needs, and their families, can experience stress because of the daily challenges they may face. These challenges can mean children with additional needs are at higher risk of developing social, emotional and behavioural difficulties that may further impact on their daily experiences. This is not to say that all children with additional needs will develop mental health difficulties, though having to rise above multiple challenges can increase stress and reduce wellbeing.

It can be helpful to remember there are many things we can do to reduce the stress that children with additional needs and their families experience. Some of these things are at the level of an individual child (such as encouraging them and building on their strengths); some are at the level of families (such as being understanding and placing ourselves in their shoes); some are at the level of the early childhood education and care (ECEC) service (such as finding ways to help all children participate); and some are at the community level (such as being conscious of attitudes towards people with additional needs). When we do these things, we are able to support children with additional needs and their families in respectful and sensitive ways. This creates an environment that fosters belonging, inclusion and positive mental health.

For more information on promoting children's mental health, refer to *Component 4: Helping children who are experiencing mental health difficulties: 'Promoting children's mental health'*.

What does it mean to support children with additional needs?

All children benefit from feeling a sense of belonging, experiencing warm and responsive relationships and having opportunities to develop positive friendships and play with other children. With careful attention and planning between families, educators and other involved professionals, children can be well supported, included and encouraged to participate. In this way, families and educators can work together to develop a partnership with trust, respect and understanding.



Every child is different and the support that helps one child may not work for another. Children are likely to benefit more when the support they receive is tailored to their individual needs. Families may be aware of individualised strategies that help support their child. When families share these with their ECEC service, educators can feel confident in how to respond and support children with specific needs. For example, a child who becomes overwhelmed by changes in routine may be prepared by their family by talking through what the changes will be and practising them with support from an educator with whom they have developed a strong relationship.

Families can support children with additional needs by:

- ▶ sharing their child's strengths and needs with educators
- ▶ discussing and developing strategies with educators that will help support their child's participation
- ▶ encouraging communication between health professionals and educators about the strengths and additional needs of their child.



Educators can support children with additional needs by:

- ▶ working with families to meet children's physical, developmental, social and emotional needs
- ▶ building on children's strengths and capabilities
- ▶ working with health professionals and families together to discuss and plan ways of best supporting children
- ▶ talking to children about differences and how they can include children in their play
- ▶ explaining the importance of caring and understanding in an early childhood setting
- ▶ providing opportunities for all children to play and learn together and promoting cooperative, caring and helpful behaviours in all children at the service
- ▶ celebrating all children's identities (e.g., culture, race, ethnicity, age, language, gender, ability).

All children have different abilities and benefit from support to participate at their ECEC service and in the community.

This resource and further information on the national KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative is available to download at www.kidsmatter.edu.au.

The KidsMatter Early Childhood team also welcomes your feedback which can be submitted through the website.



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