



Government of South Australia

Department for Communities
and Social Inclusion

Ready Set Go Starting School

For families of children with disability

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Contents

Introduction	1
When is my child required to start school?	3
What types of schools are there?	4
How do I choose a school?	5
What do I need to think about before my child's first day?	6
How can I help prepare them?	7
Families as partners in education	8
What formal support may be available for my child at school?	10
How can we manage change?	11
Children's rights in education	14
Advocating for my child	15
Advocacy tips	17
You have the right to complain	18
Where can I find additional support for my child?	20



Introduction

This guide is for families of children with disability who are about to enter, or who are already in, preschool or school in South Australia. It aims to assist families to advocate for their child's learning needs.

The terms 'preschool' or 'school' are used throughout the guide but often the information is relevant to both settings.

Similarly, while the guide focuses on younger children and education, some of the information, suggestions and resources may also be helpful for families of children with disability when accessing other non-disability specific services or for those who are moving on to secondary school.

This guide offers tips and tools to help you to speak up for your child's needs. It contains practical information about your child's rights, inclusive education, and suggests ways to work with preschools and schools.

As some of the information explains special education options and enrolment procedures within South Australian government schools, it is recommended that you confirm what is available at your local government or non-government school.

When is my child required to start school?

In South Australia, as in other states and territories, the start date for school is the first day of Term 1.

Starting school is determined by the date of a child's fifth birthday. Those children who have a fifth birthday prior to 1 May are able to begin school on the first day of Term 1 of that year. Children who have their fifth birthday on or after 1 May will begin school on the first day of Term 1 in the following year.

In South Australia it is compulsory to be enrolled in school by six years of age. Children who turn six on or after 1 May are able to start school on the first day of Term 1 of that year, and not wait until the following year. Alternatively, they may begin on their sixth birthday.

Once a child is enrolled at school they are expected to attend every day.

In exceptional, unforeseen circumstances a child may extend their attendance at preschool for up to one term only. This transitional arrangement must be negotiated between preschool and school leaders in consultation with staff, parents/guardians and, where applicable, support services to meet the individual needs of the child. While attending preschool during this period, the child must be enrolled at the school.

For further information see www.decd.sa.gov.au/teachingandlearning/files/links/Frequentlyaskedquestions_u.pdf

What types of schools are there?

You can send your child to a public (Government), independent or Catholic school.

Government schools offer a range of options to cater for the education and care of students with special needs including:

- special schools - which provide structured learning environments for children with significant or multiple disabilities. Most government special schools are co-located with local mainstream (non-disability specific) schools.
- special classes to provide a setting for learners with special needs who need extensive curriculum support.

- special units which provide long-term educational options in a mainstream (non-disability specific) school. These units provide access to general education experiences – curriculum, extra-curricular and social experiences with age-appropriate peers and support seamless long-term educational pathways for children with disability. They can provide more possibilities for the inclusion of students in wider school activities.
- mainstream classes – which provide a structured learning environment for all children, including those with additional needs.

There are also non-government schools that provide education to children with disability.

What types of schools are there?



Association of Independent Schools of South Australia

South Australian Independent schools educate students within a curriculum underpinned by a diverse range of religious beliefs and educational philosophies. The sector also includes a number of secular schools and a special school which educates students with severe disabilities.

For more information visit www.ais.sa.edu.au or phone (08) 8179 1400.

Catholic Education South Australia

There are 103 Catholic schools across South Australia. They offer a choice of schooling options for students with disabilities including placement in mainstream schools and two special schools. They can offer enrolment advice.

For more information visit www.cesa.catholic.edu.au or phone (08) 8301 6600.

How do I choose a school?

Besides practical considerations, such as location, cost and eligibility, there are many considerations about the school environment and culture.

These questions may be helpful for you to ask prospective schools.

Practical Tips

- How does this school consider the interests, strengths, culture and individual needs of children?
- Does this school provide a quality education?
- Are staff warm, friendly, welcoming?
- Do staff include the family in discussions about planning?
- Do the teachers teach children to appreciate people for their differences and uniqueness?
- Where does my child want to go - what does my child think?
- Is the environment and teaching flexible enough to support my child's learning?
- What expectations can I have about how information will be communicated about my child's learning?
- What is the school's understanding of inclusion? How is this demonstrated?
- What friends does my child already have? Where are they going to school?
- Does the school have specific policies or behaviour-support strategies? What supports are available to parents and how can I access them?
- Do staff know where to access additional support for my child?
- How do parents manage, in partnership with schools, the balance of therapy and medical appointments with learning outcomes throughout the week? How is it possible to meet the needs of my child?

Contact the school early to confirm the enrolment process and any special programs for your child.



What do I need to think about before my child's first day at school?

In starting school, it is useful to think about what specific supports might assist your child to participate. For example, supporting your child might involve having photographs to assist communication; setting up informal meetings and using schedules to structure routines. You can discuss these ideas, and other ideas that may assist your child, with the school.

Questions you may want to consider:

- What type of activities take place at the school? What will my child be doing?
- What kinds of individual supports are available to assist my child?
- How long is the school day and who are the people who will work with my child?
- How will the school make sure my child is included in all of the activities?
- Does the school include families when planning for children?

When starting school, many practical considerations are important, including orientation. Orientation is an opportunity for children and their families to spend time at their new school. It may involve spending time in the classroom or a formal session with set activities to help children become familiar with staff and surroundings. Often schools run parallel parent morning teas, which provide good opportunities to meet other families.



How can I prepare my child for starting school?

Giving your child the time they need to start building connections and relationships can help make starting school easier for everyone. You might like to start by finding small ways to help your child get to know the new setting.

Practical Tips

- walk your child to the new school
- explain what the siren or bell means
- go to school over the weekend and have lunch there as a family
- organise regular visits before officially starting
- have a buddy go with or meet your child at the school and during refreshment breaks at least in the early weeks until they feel comfortable
- prepare for the school routine – pack a bag, eat from a lunch box, sit in a circle with other children

Families as partners in education

The school will need to learn about your child's interests, likes and dislikes, strengths, needs, routines and experiences. Identifying what options or adjustments are available for your child will not happen automatically and needs to be worked out in discussions between schools and families. Families can help build a stronger understanding of the child by the school and the best way to provide support to their child.

Sharing family knowledge of your child with the new school, including the specific supports that will assist your

child (e.g. visual aids) and family expectations (goals) is essential. Having similar conversations with other mainstream (non-disability specific) organisations such as those providing health and transport services, or when your child is ready to move on to secondary school, are also very important.

The information you provide will assist develop learning plans for your child at school. Formal plans are made regarding support, learning needs and goals when schools seek additional funding to support children with disability at school.



What information should I provide?

It is important to consider what information to provide about your child and to be clear about what will assist your child's learning. It is reasonable to ask teachers or other staff what information would be useful to them and to query why certain questions are being asked. Schools will also have regulations around privacy which detail how personal information is respected.

Practical Tips

When deciding what information to provide the school, the following questions may assist you:

- Is the information going to be helpful in supporting my child's learning?
- Is certain information required to apply for funding?
- Is there a formal requirement that specific information be shared?
- What does my child think about me sharing this information? (Even with young children, it is necessary to consider their perspective)



What formal support may be available at school for my child?

For preschool children with verified special needs, the Preschool Support Program fosters the inclusion of children with additional needs into their local preschool. It funds additional staff to maximise the child's learning, minimising the impact the disability and/or development delay has on individual development. It is available for both government and non-government preschools.

The Preschool Access Profile guides preschool staff teams and support services in the identification of a child's functional needs and this

information is used to allocate appropriate resourcing to the child and the preschool.

If your child has a verified disability, your child will have a Negotiated Education Plan. The Negotiated Education Plan helps teachers support children with disability to meet their educational goals.

Besides talking to the school about your child's learning needs, it is also important to discuss any cultural needs. There are a range of supports available for children from diverse cultural backgrounds, including through the Aboriginal Education Program offered by the South Australian Government.

see www.decd.sa.gov.au



It is critical to have good communication with your child's school so you know how your child is going. You should be kept informed on how your child is developing socially and how their learning is progressing. You should also share what your child's support needs are and be kept informed about how supports are being provided at school. It is important that you share your opinions and knowledge about how your child is coping with school.

All families have a role in supporting their child's schooling. There may be established ways for you to meet and talk to the school about your child. While each school has its own systems and

rules which you will get to know over time, it is relevant and reasonable to ask the principal or director:

- How their school works with families of children with disability. Are there formal meetings, staff contacts or other information families should have?
- For information about your child's learning and participation at school.
- What specific supports and resources, if required, will be provided?
- Any questions or raise any concerns.

Practical Tips

Once your child starts preschool or school it is important to find ways to regularly communicate with teachers and others who are involved with your child. Some families find using a communication book – a notebook that families and staff write in daily – a helpful way of obtaining information about

the child's day, and relaying other messages. It can also be helpful when talking with your child about what has happened each day. Such tools assist with staying informed and knowing when formal meetings need to be organised. There may also be other ways of communicating regularly that work better for you and the school, such as emails or making a regular 'catch up' time.

How can we manage change?

Children and families experience change all the time. Moving from preschool to school or onto secondary school can be a big change, as is moving to a different classroom or changing schools. These changes are significant and it may be important for you to speak up about your child's needs at these times.

Practical Tips

When changes happen consider:

- the different people involved (students, families, teachers or other staff) and their relationship with your child
- your child's feelings, including how comfortable your child is in the new setting. How does your child respond to change, small or big?
- formal and informal support networks – not just for your child but for the whole family, including support from family friends, your child's friends and others that could assist in preparing your family and child to be a part of a new school
- how information is shared between education settings? For example, does the preschool talk to and share information with the school?



Preschools and schools can also assist a child through changes by:

- meeting and listening with your family and looking at what supports and resources may assist your child at school
- communicating with previous schools. Families need to consent to the sharing of information. Consider any programs/teaching methods/ individual approaches that families, other educators or allied health professionals have used that are helpful and if possible need to be continued
- respecting your child's thoughts, ideas and preferences in the process
- contacting other professionals who could provide information to assist in meeting your child's learning needs. Your consent is required for this to occur
- making changes, where needed, to the learning, social or physical environment
- seeking funding for support where needed.

Children's rights in education

Both the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* state that children with disability have rights to education that are fair and equal.

Commonwealth and South Australian anti-discrimination laws contain standards that all schools have to meet. The rights of children with disability to participate fully in education and community life are protected under the *Disability Standards for Education (2005)*. Knowing the rights of your child and being aware of what schools and other community services are legally required to do is crucial in advocating for your child's learning needs.

Sometimes specific support is needed for children with disability to participate in school. Learning may need to happen

differently or class activities adjusted to include children with disability. Schools are obliged to provide reasonable supports, resources or make changes for students with disability.

Schools have certain legal obligations under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and the *South Australian Equal Opportunity Act 1984* to ensure they do not discriminate against children with disability. As mentioned, schools also need to make reasonable adjustments to their programs to ensure all children can be included. Under the *Disability Discrimination Act*, it is the school's responsibility to make these adjustments.

The *Disability Standards for Education* outline what schools need to do to make sure that students with disability access and participate in education the same as other students.

Disability Standards for Education:

The Disability Standards for Education (the Standards) are part of the national disability anti-discrimination legislation as it applies to education. The Standards set out a range of obligations that educational institutions must meet to make sure that students with disability are able to access and participate in education and training on the same basis as other students. Regardless of whether the child is eligible for additional funding the school must still provide reasonable adjustments for children with disability. This is so your child can participate in their learning and other school activities on the same basis as other students. It is beneficial that students and families are aware of the Standards and their rights.

The Standards cover the following areas:

- enrolment
- participation
- curriculum development, accreditation and delivery
- student support services
- elimination of harassment and victimisation

The Standards set out the:

- rights of students with disability in relation to education and training to help people understand what is fair and reasonable
- legal obligations or responsibilities of education providers
- measures that may be implemented to comply with the requirements of the Standards.

The Standards are available at the Australian Government's Department of Education website

www.education.gov.au/disability-standards-education or by calling 1300 363 079.



What are *Reasonable Adjustments*?

Reasonable adjustments are changes or additions made (to services, resources or physical facilities) in the school environment that ensure children with disability can participate fully. These changes may include adjusting the physical environment (e.g. adding a ramp or moving furniture) or changing the way teaching happens (e.g. more visual learning with aids or using technology). Under the law, *reasonable adjustments* mean making any changes that are possible and that don't place unjustifiable hardship

on the preschool or school. An unjustifiable hardship is anything that is unfair or unreasonable for the preschool or school to do (e.g. because no funding is available). Schools however have to show that an adjustment is actually unreasonable and unjustifiable if they wish to argue that this is the case.

For more information see www.ddaedustandards.info/oblig_adjust.php

More information about rights and legislation can be found from Children with Disability Australia's website www.cda.org.au/rights_and_legislation

Advocating for my child

While knowing your child's rights is important, families have a critical role in ensuring that these rights are actually upheld. *Advocacy* is speaking-up or raising awareness by talking to others (e.g. teachers, principals, other parents) about issues or situations that require change to make life better.

Asking questions, getting support and communicating with others (such as other families, friends, teachers or health professionals) about your child's education are part of advocating for the needs of your child. This also helps in weighing-up the different educational options and supports you will have. Communicating with others is part of what every family needs to do in making choices about their child's schooling.

Practical Tips

The following factors can be helpful in advocating for your child at school.

- your knowledge about your child
- understanding your child's and family's rights and the duties and obligations of educational services under the law
- knowing where to get good information, support and advice
- being prepared to raise concerns
- communicating expectations with teachers and other professionals working with your child
- keeping good records. It is recommended that you and the school keep a record of discussions and meetings. It can be a useful reminder of what's been said; what information has already been shared; and meeting outcomes. Families are typically very busy and meeting records are a useful way of keeping track of what's going on over the course of a child's education.

You have the right to complain

Should you have concerns about your child's educational needs and required supports, always discuss them with the teacher or principal in the first instance. If you are not happy with the school's response, you have the right to complain.

The Department for Education and Child Development works in partnership with parents to resolve any concerns and complaints about their child's schooling. When staff work with parents to resolve a concern or complaint they will follow a three stage process. The child's school is the first point of contact for parents, followed by the local education department office and then the Parent Complaint Unit if the complaint cannot be resolved at the school level. The Parent Complaint Unit has a dual purpose to:

- provide advice and support to parents about their concern or complaint
- objectively review complaints that have not been resolved at the school level.

You can expect your concern or complaint will be responded to in a courteous, respectful and timely manner and that staff will work with you to resolve the issue.

You have the right to have an advocate assist you in communicating your concerns to the school. There are various community advocacy agencies in South Australia who may be able to assist. Please see **www.dana.org.au/members/our-members/sa/**

At any point in the process you have the right to refer the matter to an external agency, such as the South Australian Ombudsman, **www.ombudsman.sa.gov.au**, phone (08) 8226 8699 or seek other independent advocacy support.

For information about other possible advocacy services, contact the Disability Information and Resource Centre, www.dircsa.org.au or phone (08) 8236 0555. Country Callers can call 1300 305 558.

Where can I find additional support for my child?

There are programs that provide additional support for children with disability in South Australian preschools and schools. It is essential that families and schools investigate whether children with disability are eligible for any of these support programs.

The National Disability Insurance Scheme may fund reasonable and necessary supports for eligible children attending school where these supports are required to help engage the child in a range of community activities, including school. These include:

- assistance with self-care at school (such as assistance with eating or mobility)
- specialist transport to and from school
- equipment that is transportable such as a wheelchair, personal communication device or a hearing aid
- specialised or intensive support to transition between schools, or from school to post-school options.

For more information including fact sheets, visit www.ndis.gov.au or call 1800 800 110.

The Disability Support Program

The Disability Support Program provides additional support to government schools to work with students with disabilities. There are clear eligibility guidelines. Decisions about the level of support are based on the nature of the disability and how it affects a student's school learning. There are many ways in which a school may use Disability Support Program funding to meet the needs of students.

More information is available from

www.decd.sa.gov.au/speced/pages/specialneeds/targetedsupport or by contacting the Manager, Resourcing and Adjustment, Department for Education and Child Development on (08) 8226 9852.

A Negotiated Education Plan

As mentioned in the section *Families as Partners in Education*, a Negotiated Education Plan is a guiding plan to help teachers to support children with a verified disability to meet their educational goals.

More information can be found at **www.decd.sa.gov.au/speced/pages/specialneeds/NEP** or by phoning the Special Education Unit, Department for Education and Child Development on (08) 8235 2871.

Learning plans for Aboriginal students

Throughout their time at school, Aboriginal students have an Individual Learning Plan to support literacy and numeracy development.

More information can be found at **www.sa.gov.au/topics/education-skills-and-learning/schools/curriculum-and-learning/learning-plans/aboriginal-students** or by contacting the Manager, Aboriginal Services, Department for Education and Child Development, (08) 8226 9074.

Families from non-English speaking backgrounds

Families from multicultural backgrounds may want support from someone from their own cultural background. A range of multicultural supports are available including interpreting and multicultural advocacy support.

More information can be found at **www.sa.gov.au/topics/community-support/disability/consumers/life-stages/adults-with-disability/multicultural-services** or by contacting the Department for Education and Child Development, (08) 8226 2756.

Non-profit, language and cultural centres (ethnic schools) operate out of usual schools hours and teach language; maintain the various cultures of Australian communities and promote cultural understanding and harmony.

More information can be found at **www.sa.gov.au/topics/education-skills-and-learning/schools/choosing-a-school/ethnic-schools** or by contacting the Ethnic Schools Board by email decdeethnicsb@sa.gov.au or phone (08) 8226 2423. Students with minimal English, over the age of five, who have recently arrived in South Australia, may be eligible for support to learn English from an Intensive English Language Centre.

More information can be found at **www.sa.gov.au/topics/education-skills-and-learning/schools/curriculum-and-learning/student-support-programs/minimal-english**



Conclusion

Starting school is an important time. For many children and families it is an exciting time. All children need support with adjusting to new people, settings and routines. Some children with disability will need specific supports that may need to be arranged with the preschool or school.

Although this guide focuses on the education journey, the information may also be useful to consider when accessing any non-disability specific service. Advocating for your child's needs is a continuous process that is beneficial for all involved.



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