

Let's Meet!

A toolkit for meetings between parents & schools about students with disabilities

Based on a resource developed by the National Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (An Australian Government Initiative) www.nccd.edu.au/disability-standards-education

Adapted by Disability Rights
Advocacy Service



**Disability Rights
Advocacy Service Inc**

Introduction

Students with disability have the right to:

- participate in education on the same basis as students without disability
- be consulted before their education provider makes adjustments to help them participate

These rights are enshrined in the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2016C00763) and the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2005L00767).

Anyone in a personal (like parent or guardian) or professional relationship with the student can ask for a meeting.

Everyone should know the purpose of the meeting and who will attend.

Talking through the issues and using an agenda can assist participants to focus on the best outcomes for the student.

Keeping records of meetings is useful for monitoring and review.

Meetings called for a particular purpose are often useful to support the education of students with disability. Education providers must consult students with disability and their families in deciding on reasonable adjustments.

Consultation meetings might involve only two people, such as a parent, guardian or carer and a teacher; or may include others, such as the student, a support person, an advocate or people with specialist expertise. Meetings usually involve a formal discussion leading to an agreement.

This guide provides useful information on how to structure meetings with schools where the needs of a student with disability will be discussed.

For the purposes of this booklet, the definition of disability as explained in Section 4 of the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 is used.

Why organise a meeting to discuss a student with a disability?

There are a lot of reasons to have a meeting with a school about a student with a disability. Most of them will be because the school and the parents/guardians want the best educational outcomes for the student possible.

Some of the most common reasons include:

- **You want to plan for a student's learning.**
This is a planning meeting where people share knowledge of the student's strengths, goals and needs increases the school's understanding of the student.
- **The student is experiencing problems at school.**
Talking through these problems can provide information that can be used by staff to support the student.
- **The student is experiencing significant changes at home.**
It is helpful for the school to know about these changes if they affect the student's learning or participation at school.
- **The student has received a report card and the family would like this explained in more detail.**
Understanding the student's progress can help the school and *home work* together.
- **Discussion about an adjustment that is needed for a student with disability.**
The school should consult the student or their parents, guardians or carers about making adjustments. The parents, guardians or carers should make sure they can provide functional assessments and diagnosis documents.

What to expect

I am a student with a disability

I can expect that:

- I (or my parent, guardian, carer or other associate) will be invited to a meeting at the school to talk about what the school can do to help me - *whenever it is needed.*
- I (or my parent, guardian, carer or other associate) will be able to ask for a meeting to talk about my needs and what is needed to support me
- I (or my parent, guardian, carer or other associate) can decide whether or not to attend all or part of any scheduled meetings.
- **I can contribute by:**
- Telling the people at the meeting what I think. I can also ask someone else to speak for me.

I am a school principal

I can expect that:

- I will initiate a consultation meeting to discuss adjustments for a student with disability when necessary

- I will respond to a formal request from a student with disability or their associate to organise a meeting
- I will prepare for a consultation meeting, including by drafting an agenda if necessary
- I will chair a consultation meeting if required

I can contribute by:

- inviting people with relevant knowledge and expertise to attend a scheduled consultation meeting to discuss reasonable adjustments
- arranging an appropriate place to meet
- making sure someone takes accurate notes of the meeting
- keeping the meeting focused on its agreed purpose
- ensuring a record of the meeting is circulated to relevant people afterwards
- nominating an appropriate member of the school staff to perform this role if I am unable to do it myself.

I am a parent, guardian or carer of a student with disability

I can expect that:

- I will be invited to a consultation meeting about adjustments for my child when necessary
- I will be able to request a meeting to discuss my child's needs
- I will be able to propose items for the agenda
- I will be consulted about who should be invited to the meeting
- I will be consulted about the time and place of the meeting
- I can decide whether or not I will attend all or part of the meeting
- I can bring a support person to a meeting if I wish.

I can contribute by:

- nominating people with relevant expertise to attend the meeting
- asking for the draft meeting agenda beforehand
- advising the convenor of the meeting if I am bringing a support person
- expressing my views during the meeting or nominating someone else to speak for me.

I am a consultant with specialist expertise

I can expect that:

- I may be invited to a meeting about issues that affect a student's participation in education
- I will be able to request a meeting to discuss a student's participation in education.

I can contribute by:

- expressing my professional opinion in a way that everyone understands.

I am a support person

I can expect that:

- I will be able to attend a consultation meeting about issues that affect the person I support, such as a student or a parent, guardian or carer, if that person has invited me.
- I will be able to speak on behalf of the person I support when they require me to.

I can contribute by:

- discussing the issues with the person I support prior to the meeting so I understand their perspective.
- expressing the views of the person I support during the meeting when required.
- ensuring that the views I express are those of the person I support, rather than my own.
- being available to provide support after the meeting if required.

Comments...

Requesting a meeting

When to call a meeting

It is okay for students and parents to ask for a meeting.

Meetings to discuss adjustments should be arranged promptly as it can take time to organise people to attend, which might make matters worse for the student. Also, the sooner the meeting occurs, the sooner reasonable adjustments put in place.

The following people can request a meeting:

- A student with *disability*;
- the student's parents, guardians or *carers*;
- a school staff *member*; or
- a consultant with specialist expertise can request a meeting to discuss adjustments.

The request can be made by a telephone call, email, letter or in person.

A request for a meeting should be addressed to the person who is responsible for making decisions, such as:

- the student's *teacher*;
- the school principal; or
- another member of staff.

When a meeting is proposed, everyone has the right to know the purpose of the meeting and

who else will be there. Schools shouldn't organise a meeting with a large number of staff without telling the student and/or parents as this is very intimidating. Likewise, the student and/or their parents should let the school know if they are bringing others to the meeting and explain why they will be there.

Meetings should involve active discussion. If the purpose is simply to give information, there may be more efficient ways to do this, such as email or telephone.

- Students with disability often struggle to speak up for themselves, or don't have the ability to do so. They may not feel comfortable having their parent speak for them. They may need support from an advocate.

What information should be provided when requesting a meeting?

- **Background information**
Describe the person and their disability and include any other relevant information.
- **Why the meeting is needed**
Be specific about the purpose of the meeting and what you need to discuss, for example, to 'discuss an excursion' or 'to review a learning plan'.
- **Who should be invited**
Nominate people, such as specialists, who would contribute different perspectives to the discussion.
- **When the meeting should be held**
Indicate if the meeting is urgent and propose times that would suit you to attend.

Requesting a meeting: In practice

Here is an example of an email requesting a meeting to discuss adjustments:

Dear Mr Di Masi

I am writing to request a meeting with you to discuss the learning needs of our son, Jack, who will be enrolled in your school next year.

Jack currently loves attending his local pre-school and is looking forward to coming to school with his friends. He has a great sense of humour and loves being the centre of attention. Jack also has cerebral palsy, so I am writing to request a meeting with you to work out what he needs so he can participate on the same basis as other students.

Jack is working with a speech therapist to improve his communication, and also with a physiotherapist. I think it would be useful to invite them to this meeting too, so I have copied them into this email.

We would prefer to have a meeting with you between the hours of 12 and 2 pm or after 5 pm on weekdays.

Kind regards

Jane Walsh and Simon Walsh

Managing meetings

Chair: the person holding the position of authority in a meeting (also known as a chairperson)

Agenda: a list of items to be discussed at a formal meeting

Everyone at the meeting should know why the meeting is being held and the topics for discussion. An agreed agenda, which lists what will be discussed and when, is not always necessary but can be useful.

Everyone in the meeting should listen to each other's views and work towards arriving at an agreed solution. It is rarely helpful when participants aim to convince everybody that their view is the only solution.

Chairing a meeting: In practice

The chair of the meeting is responsible for:

- introducing participants to each other
- making sure that a note-taker is appointed to take notes of the discussion
- making sure everyone's view is heard respectfully
- keeping the discussion focused on achieving the purpose of the meeting
- summing up the decisions of the meeting at the end

- circulating a draft record of the decisions and actions to all participants for confirmation, after the meeting.

Attending a meeting: In practice

The way participants approach a meeting can make it easier to explore solutions and reach agreement. In meetings to discuss adjustments, it helps when participants:

- limit outside distractions, for example, by turning off mobile phones
- are open to each other's ideas
- look for advantages in every idea
- wait until all ideas have been discussed before considering which is best.

Conducting a meeting about adjustments: Six useful steps

1. Talk about the student, and their strengths, interests, needs and goals. Parents and other associates are well placed to help staff members think about ways to support the student's participation in education.
2. Consider whether adjustments are necessary, and in what situations.
3. Explore ways to address challenges through adjustments, including support services that will enable the student to participate on the same basis as other students. Put all options on the *table, and* list them. Include all relevant details, such as who makes the adjustment, and when.
4. Decide which adjustments or forms of support are reasonable, by considering their effects on the student with disability, other students and staff. Anyone can ask for more time to think before making a decision.
5. Agree on how the impact of the adjustments will be monitored and how progress will be communicated to all parties. Set dates for further meetings if necessary.
6. Close the meeting with a summary of what has been agreed, what each person will do, and when the agreement will be reviewed. It may be useful to send a summary of the meeting in the post or by email.

Getting prepared

Collect all relevant information.

When you are getting ready for a meeting, it can help to think, clarify and collect.

Think about:

- questions to ask (writing these down can remind you to discuss them at the meeting).
- what you will say to contribute to each stage of the discussion.
- what action or outcome you would like from the *meeting*.
- what action or outcome others might like from the *meeting*.
- Clarify the goal you want the meeting to achieve and the best outcome for the student with disability (eg 'Andy needs to participate more in class'), rather than a set strategy ('Andy must have a teaching assistant').

Collect information that may be useful in the discussion, including:

- relevant records, such as copies of emails and previous communications.
- examples of educational plans, adjustments and actions that have been useful previously (even strategies that didn't work in the past can be useful in planning for the future).
- professional information such as specialists' reports, letters or plans with recommendations.
- other information to help the group's understanding, such as photos of equipment that could assist the student.

Managing emotions: In practice

To make it easier to understand your own emotions and to communicate effectively, these strategies might be useful:

- Practise what you intend to say with a trusted person before the meeting, so you know how it might feel to express yourself.
- Write what you want to say and take it to the meeting so it can be read by someone else if you have difficulty expressing yourself.
- Take an associate (a partner, friend, support person or advocate) to the meeting to support you in expressing your views.
- Ask for a break if you need to, so that you can remain calm and communicate effectively.

Managing your emotions

Prepare by writing and rehearsing!

Some meetings can be emotionally challenging. When a person feels strongly about something, emotions can unexpectedly rise to the surface when they try to speak. This is normal.

Different things might trigger an emotional response. Talking about a particular issue may

be upsetting or frustrating. Meeting in an unfamiliar place or meeting new people can also make people uncomfortable.

In a meeting, participants should respect that people have different ways of expressing themselves, and that emotional responses are normal. People feeling strong emotions should be respected and given time to express their view in a way that suits them.

Keeping records

A record of a meeting is a summary of the main points discussed, including what decisions and actions were agreed at the meeting, when they will occur, who will carry them out, and when they will be reviewed.

A useful record

Keep a record of decisions made at a meeting, and make sure everyone has a copy.

It can be useful to keep a record of what was discussed and agreed at the meeting.

A record of a meeting can be written by a note-taker, who is the person given the task of taking notes during the meeting.

A note-taker's role is to write down the main issues discussed and the agreed decisions and actions, including when these will occur and who is responsible for them. After the meeting, a draft record should be sent to relevant people to check that it is an accurate record of what was discussed and agreed. If a participant does not agree the draft is correct, they can request to have it changed and sent out again.

Recording informal meetings: In practice

Here is an example of a follow-up email from an informal meeting:

Dear Ms Allen

Thanks for taking the time to meet with me today to discuss how to keep Tai interested in writing. As we discussed, each week you will be provide me with some activities to do at home and I will check that he completes them. I'll let you know via the communication book how he goes this week with the foam writing and finger paint activities you recommended.

We also agreed to meet again in four weeks to discuss his progress. I'm looking forward to working together to help Tai.

Kind Regards,

Stuart Sung.

Was the meeting successful?

Making progress

In successful meetings, people achieve what they set out to do or make progress towards an agreed goal. Even when a participant did not get exactly what they expected, a meeting can be successful if:

- the agreed purpose is achieved or progress is made towards achieving it
- participants are beginning to work as a team
- participants show respect for each other's ideas and opinions
- communication channels have been kept open.

If a participant is not happy with the outcome of a meeting, it is a good idea to call another meeting to try to resolve the issue.

It might help to invite additional people with relevant expertise or authority. For example, if the first meeting was held with the teacher, the school principal could be invited to attend the second meeting to assist in resolving the issue. If a person remains unhappy with the outcome and it cannot be resolved at the school level, they may consider approaching another authority to make a formal complaint.

Notes...

A successful meeting: In practice

A checklist of questions for the group after a meeting about reasonable adjustments could include the following:

- Everyone had a chance to state their opinion
- Everyone understood the issue that was discussed
- We had all the information we needed to make a decision
- Everyone actively explored ideas for solutions and looked at all the options
- Everyone understood what it means for the student to participate on the same basis as other students
- Everyone agreed on how the decisions made at the meeting will be monitored
- A process was agreed to so that everyone could report back to the others about how things are going
- Everyone left the meeting knowing what they had to do before the next meeting.

Tips for reaching agreement

Look for solutions, not someone to blame.

- Listen to understand the problem, not to judge the speaker.
- Focus on the idea, not who suggested it.
- Think about different ways to meet the student's needs. The student is the most important person in this process.
- Consider what's best for the student, not whether your idea is chosen.
- Aim to improve the situation, not to control it.
- Use straightforward language – if you need to use specialist terms or jargon, make sure you explain them.
- Use debate and discussion, not argument and criticism.
- Prepare to compromise, not look for the perfect solution.
- Accept that several meetings may be needed before agreement is reached.

Disability Discrimination Act 1992: Section 4

“disability”, in relation to a person, means:

- (a) total or partial loss of the person’s bodily or mental functions; or
- (b) total or partial loss of a part of the body; or
- (c) the presence in the body of organisms causing disease or illness; or
- (d) the presence in the body of organisms capable of causing disease or illness; or
- (e) the malfunction, malformation or disfigurement of a part of the person’s body; or
- (f) a disorder or malfunction that results in the person learning differently from a person without the disorder or malfunction; or
- (g) a disorder, illness or disease that affects a person’s thought processes, perception of reality, emotions or judgment or that results in disturbed behaviour; and includes a disability that:
- (h) presently exists; or
- (i) previously existed but no longer exists; or
- (j) may exist in the future (including because of a genetic predisposition to that disability); or
- (k) is imputed to a person.