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## The role of educators in inclusion



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*Be a strong advocate for the rights of all children. Aim for equity not equality.”*

– Educator insight

# The role of educators in inclusion

## Every educator contributes to inclusion in the learning community.

While the leadership teams of early learning services and schools have a vital part in creating and achieving inclusion in a learning community, every educator plays a significant role.

“Because children and young people spend such a significant amount of their time in early learning services and schools, educators are really well placed to support and promote inclusion by modelling and facilitating the idea that everyone is valued, supported and connected to each other,” says the Be You Clinical Lead at headspace Schools.

According to Early Childhood Australia: “Regardless of what is happening in your learning community, whether leadership is emerging or there are structural barriers, you can – and do – make a difference as an educator. You have the agency to get to know families, build relationships to facilitate collaboration, be committed to identifying

the strengths of every child and implement strategies and change.”

“Educators have great insights, as well as training and knowledge of a child or young person’s development. As such, they can be great advocates for children and young people with developmental delay or disability,” says headspace Schools.

This can be incredibly helpful for a family, particularly for those who are just embarking on a diagnosis of developmental delay or disability, according to headspace Schools.

“This may even involve a sense of loss or grief in the early days,” notes Early Childhood Australia. “Families find themselves very quickly having to navigate how to advocate for their child using a system that may be quite unknown to them. It can be incredibly challenging, which is why educators can be supportive by sharing their observations and insights.”

# Lara's story

In this story, an educator established a trusting relationship with Lara's family to identify both strengths and developmental concerns related to Lara's expressive language.

- Lara has just turned five. She's curious, plays well on her own and joins others' play mostly by observing what they're doing from a safe distance. She enjoys watching other children using paints and clay but prefers not to participate, and becomes distressed by certain textures. She does seek out her educators for book-sharing, and lights up when she sees her key educator, Tina. Lara's expression, coupled with her body language, communicates her needs and preferences effectively. Her expressive language is limited to "no", "more" and a high-pitched vocalisation when she's frustrated. Her receptive language is more developed, and she can follow simple requests. Lara's educators have documented both her strengths and their developmental concerns for her over a six-month period, and have discussed these with her family. The family's response was that they believe she's "developing normally" and that she'll "pick these skills up in time".
- Recently, Tina has adopted a new approach, sharing Lara's strengths and daily learnings during every encounter with Lara's family to build trust. This has paved the way for Tina to suggest to Lara's family that they start using a journal to facilitate their daily communication with her, as Lara's key educator. The journal would include a space for Lara's family to share what she's doing at home, and reflect on her development and learning. One of the aims of this journal is to identify Lara's strengths and areas where she may need support at home. This has allowed Lara's family to feel like they're partners with Tina – and that their knowledge is valued. This has also led to Lara being booked for an assessment with a paediatrician and some shared planning to support Lara's expressive language.



## For reflection

- How did Tina's approach affirm the role of Lara's family as the most important people in Lara's life and avoid positioning herself as the expert on Lara's expressive language?
- How do you think this strategy supported and facilitated shared goal setting and planning for Lara?
- Tina always made sure to highlight Lara's strengths throughout the day, while also sharing her concerns sensitively. What might be the response from families if, instead of doing this, you focus solely on your concerns for a child or young person in your care?



## Developing skills in inclusion

The following suggestions are a useful place to start in increasing your skills and knowledge of inclusive practices.

### Understand what you're working towards

Know that you're not expected to have all the answers when it comes to inclusive practices. Aim to create a learning environment where children and young people of all abilities feel respected, safe, included and can participate in meaningful ways.

"You don't need to be an expert," says Early Childhood Australia. "When it comes to inclusion every community and every child is different, so even educators who are experienced in this space are always learning. Acknowledge that you're feeling uncertain and that this may be new for you because that will give you the permission, space and opportunity to learn more, whether that's via a family partnership, a colleague, a speech pathologist or from professional development resources."

### Consider your image of the child

Your image of a child or young person with a developmental delay or disability affects how you, as their educator, talk, listen and relate to the child. According to the [Australian Alliance for Inclusive Education](#), this can influence how a child or young person's peers, the families of their peers and other educators will relate to them, too.

Instead of using language to describe a child or young person by their restrictions, describe what they do instead. For example, rather than "Georgia is wheelchair bound" think "Georgia uses a wheelchair for mobility". And acknowledge that everyone has unique strengths, interests and abilities, regardless of the presence – or absence – of a disability or developmental delay.

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*Model inclusion! Reflect on your own responses, tone of voice and the language you use.”*

– Educator insight

Identify these and create opportunities for a child or young person to use them to experience success in their development and learning. See also the [Quick guide to inclusive language](#) for more on language to use and to avoid.

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*Develop your knowledge of the attitudes, beliefs and stigma about disability.”*

– Educator insight

### **Have high expectations**

It's important to have high expectations for everyone in your learning community. While a child or young person with a developmental delay might learn or achieve in a way that is not the dominant way, or it may take longer or require different resources to support participation, have the same expectations of them. Support their participation by tailoring tasks to their strengths and abilities. Sending the message to a child or young person and their peers that you, as their educator, believe they can do it is one of the strongest messages around inclusion that you can adopt.

### **Learn what you can do**

The strategies you choose to use as an educator will vary widely depending on a range of factors including your knowledge of the child's disability or developmental delay, your relationship with the child, family and extended support group (including health professionals), the child's strengths and abilities, and the education setting where you work.

For example, while using visual aids in addition to spoken instructions may support some children and young people in your learning community, providing more time

and opportunity to practise a task may be more useful for others. There's no one-size-fits-all approach.

Having a framework or some fundamental principles to guide you in identifying and removing barriers to inclusion in your learning community's environment can also make a big difference. The framework called Universal Design for Learning can be useful; read more about [Universal Design for Learning](#) later in this guide.

### **Collaborate**

Early Childhood Australia says it's important to remember that inclusion isn't an individual pursuit: "Reach out to colleagues and your leadership team and, of course, a child's family to help understand how you can best support them and so that you, as an educator, are also supported."

Include the child or young person in this collaboration. "Inclusion is about doing with the child," Early Childhood Australia points out.

"Drawing on the support from your peers and collaborating with them to find and introduce strategies, while at the same time continuing to build your relationship with the family can be particularly helpful" says the Be You Clinical Lead at headspace Schools.

headspace Schools also stresses the importance of working closely with any health professionals who may also be playing a role in a child or young person's life.

"As well as developing a good understanding of what different health professionals do, it's also important to know why a professional has recommended a certain approach or strategy," headspace Schools explains.

"So as well as finding out the 'how' of something ask 'why', too. As an educator, understanding the context and impact of a particular strategy will help you implement it more effectively."



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*Ask for help, try new things,  
and look for resources.”*

– Educator insight

# Bridget's story

**This story shares how an educator, parents and school counsellor work in partnership to support Bridget, who has a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).**

Bridget is a 10-year-old in Year 5 with a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). In class, Bridget absorbs new information very quickly and so loses interest in repetitive tasks. When this occurs, she begins to fidget, talk, sing and move around, which distracts her classmates. Managing time and resources, organising her thoughts into words and getting along with peers are also difficulties she encounters at school.

Mrs Flinders, Bridget's class teacher, contacted Bridget's parents to work together on strategies to support her in the classroom. Mrs Flinders has noticed that when Bridget is reprimanded for her disorganisation, there's no benefit – and her parents have identified the same. They've decided to focus on providing specific praise and recognition for all signs of Bridget's organisation. To support this, Bridget's parents and Mrs Flinders worked together to set up a weekly planner, including a checklist for packing Bridget's school bag before school and at the end of the day, as well as prompts to pack up five minutes prior to other students. Mrs Flinders also liaised with the school counsellor about how else to support Bridget in class. The counsellor recommended a sensory profile assessment to help outline Bridget's sensory preferences and how she processes sensory information in her environment.

After this was done, the counsellor worked with Bridget, her parents and Mrs Flinders to make sensory accommodations in the classroom to support Bridget. These accommodations included a tactile movement cushion from home for Bridget to sit on, and allowing Bridget to incorporate movement regularly into her routines, for example by handing out worksheets or participating in movement breaks with the whole class. To support Bridget's schoolwork, Mrs Flinders provides step-by-step instructions for how to complete the work to help keep Bridget on track. This improves her engagement, reduces disruption to peers and improves Bridget's peer relationships and self-esteem.



## For reflection

- What examples in this story highlight classroom challenges for Bridget, and for Mrs Flinders?
- What collaborative work practices can you identify? What were the perceived benefits for Bridget and her engagement in the classroom?
- Considering what we know about Bridget, can you think of how the strategies suggested could be applied in other areas of her school life (for example, in the playground, interacting with peers, or during whole-school events)?



## Learn more

Read AllPlay Learn’s Educator Guide for [early childhood services](#), and Teacher Guides for [primary](#) and [secondary](#) schools. Another useful resource is the [ABC approach to behaviour](#), an observational tool that teachers can use to find out what a child or young person is trying to communicate with their behaviours.

See also AllPlay Learn’s Educator Guides to Family-Educator Communication for [early childhood services](#), [primary](#) schools and [secondary](#) schools.

Check out the Australian Alliance for Inclusive Education’s [Inclusion Toolkit for Educators](#).

See also this information sheet about [supporting children to regulate their own behaviour](#) by the Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA).

Join the [School Inclusion Network for Educators](#) (SINE), an initiative of All Means All, the Australian Alliance for Inclusive Education, for education professionals seeking to collaborate on inclusive practices.

## References

AllPlay Learn, [Basics](#) (online document).

Australian Alliance for Inclusive Education, [Inclusion Toolkit for Educators](#) (online document).

Early Childhood Australia, [Inclusion is for every child, every time](#) (online document).

University of Southern Queensland, Open Access Textbooks, [Opening eyes to inclusion and diversity in early childhood education](#) (online document).



# Be You resources for educators

Delivered by Beyond Blue, in collaboration with Early Childhood Australia and headspace, **Be You** empowers educators and every learning community to be their most mentally healthy, positive and inclusive.

Now you've read the Be You Disability Inclusion Guide, browse the Be You website for educator resources related to supporting children and young people with developmental delay or disability.

## Fact Sheets

Gain knowledge and to share information with your learning community.

- [Overview of mental health services](#)
- [Help-seeking in early childhood](#)
- [Help-seeking for children and young people in schools](#)
- [Recommending additional support](#)

## Webinars

Learn from the Be You team and other educators across Australia through sessions, events and webinars.

- [Supporting Children with Complex Needs](#)
- [Professional Boundaries and Difficult Conversations](#)

## Educator wellbeing

**Wellbeing Tools for You** is a collection of online apps and resources that Be You has compiled for educators. This resource offers guidance and practical strategies to look after your wellbeing, and to put yourself in a better position to support others in your care.

## Join Be You today

Join **Be You** today and be part of building lasting positive mental health and wellbeing for children and young people in Australia.

The best way to sign up is as a **Be You Learning Community**, giving you access to the full range of resources and support from a Be You Consultant.

Be You resources include free online interactive sessions and events, accredited Professional Learning, Fact Sheets, a Programs Directory, planning and implementation tools, and more.

[Get in touch](#) to find out how Be You can support your early learning service or school.

Find out more at:  
[beyou.edu.au](http://beyou.edu.au)

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