



Steps to raise concerns and resolve a complaint with your school

This resource supports parents and caregivers of students with disability to raise, escalate and resolve concerns with their school.

About this resource

This resource was funded by the Australian Government. It was designed by students and young people with disability and their parents and caregivers, with help from Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA).

This toolkit provides general information only. It might not reflect how the law applies to your circumstances. It doesn't provide legal advice.

The Australian Government acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians of Country throughout Australia. We acknowledge their continuing connection to land, water, and community. We pay our respects to them and their Elders past and present. We pay our respects to the continuing cultural, spiritual, and educational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Note on language

This resource uses person-first language (e.g., 'student with disability'). But this approach does not suit everyone, and many people prefer identity-first language (e.g., 'disabled student').

It is up to each person how they choose to identify. We encourage you to ask people what they prefer. We also acknowledge the deep history behind all these terms.

This resource is for parents and caregivers of students with disability. When we say 'your child' this means any child you are responsible for.

Additional resources

This is one part of a group of resources. You can find them on the [Australian Government Department of Education website](#) or by scanning the QR code.



Scan the QR code

This resource is also available in Easy Read, Auslan, and several other languages. You can access those versions on the [Australian Government Department of Education website](#) or by scanning the QR code.

Content note: This toolkit mentions discrimination. For support you can call Lifeline on **13 11 14** or text **0477 13 11 14**.

Who this toolkit is for

This toolkit is for you if:

- you are a parent or caregiver, and
- you have a primary or secondary school child with disability.

What this toolkit is for

This toolkit is to help you:

- raise a concern about your child's education or safety with your school
- refer your concern to the right person
- escalate your concern if you need to.

Escalate, means take something to a higher level.

Note: This toolkit gives general advice and may not fit every situation.

What this toolkit covers

This toolkit goes through each step of raising a concern and escalating a complaint.

It covers:

- [Australian disability discrimination law](#) (p. 2)
- [Before you raise a concern](#) (p. 3)
- [Steps to raise and escalate a concern](#) (p. 6)
- [Raising your concern with the school](#) (p. 6)
- [Escalating your concern beyond the school](#) (p. 10)
- [Where to get support and information](#) (p. 16)

Australian disability discrimination law

All students with disability in Australia are protected by the **Disability Discrimination Act 1992** (DDA) and the **Disability Standards for Education 2005** (DSE). All schools must follow the DDA and the DSE.

Definition: Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA)

The DDA is a law that applies to everyone in Australia. It protects people from being discriminated against because of their disability.

Definition: Disability Standards for Education 2005 (DSE)

The DSE are a set of laws that come under the DDA. They clarify the obligations of education providers. The DSE tell education providers what they have to do to support students with disability.

Schools can follow the DSE by making changes that support students with disability to take part in education on the **same basis** as their peers.

These changes are called **reasonable adjustments**. They can be:

- people (e.g., support staff)
- materials (e.g., screen reader)
- changes in how things are done (e.g., rest breaks).

Schools generally have to make changes unless it would cause **unjustifiable hardship**. They must also make sure your child is supported to learn in a safe environment free from **harassment** and **victimisation**.

You can learn more about the DSE and key words like ‘same basis’, ‘reasonable adjustments’, ‘unjustifiable hardship’, ‘harassment’ and ‘victimisation’ in our [Explaining the Disability Standards for Education resource](#).



Before you raise a concern

If you have a concern or think your child's school isn't following the DSE, you can discuss this with them. You should do this as early as possible.

Before you raise a concern, look up the complaints process for your child's school. This will help you know who to talk to. You can find this on the school's website or ask them for a copy. It's a good idea to spend some time preparing before you raise a concern or complaint. We call this 'setting out your case'.

Setting out your case

You can use these tips to help you prepare to raise a concern:

- *Have a clear goal.* Think about what you want to happen.
- *Involve your child.* Ask them what they think and what they want to happen. Ask how they want to be involved in the process.
- *Gather any information or records that you need or would find helpful.* E.g., ask for a letter from your child's occupational therapist that you can share with your child's school.
- *Keep a record of everything that happens.* Make notes, save emails, and put everything that you agree in writing. Keep a record of dates, conversations and agreed outcomes.
- *Learn about the DSE.* This includes knowing key words like 'reasonable adjustments', 'same basis' and 'unjustifiable hardship'. You can learn more in our [Explaining the Disability Standards for Education](#) resource.
- *Get support if you need it.* E.g., bring along a friend or an **independent advocate**. See [Advocacy support](#) (p. 16).



Taking your place at the table

We all have different circumstances that can make it easier or harder to raise concerns.

Where we live, work and grow up all affect how we think about speaking up. So can things like gender, partner status, culture and religion. They may also affect how other people respond to us.

It's important to know:

- You're allowed to raise a concern when you believe something isn't right.
- Your child's school needs to follow the DDA and DSE, which are Australian law. If they don't, you can ask the school to follow them.
- You (and your child) should not be punished for this.
- There are services to support you. See [Where to get support and information](#) (p. 16).

You can learn more about speaking up in our resources:

- [Advocating for your child: The early years](#)
- [Advocating with and for your child: Primary school](#)
- [Working together: Moving through secondary school.](#)

Think about how you communicate with the school

You should try to maintain a good relationship with the school. This will help you to work together with the school staff to resolve any concerns.

You can use these tips to help you communicate in a way that works for you.



Tips on communicating with the school

Tip	How it helps
Try to focus on a positive outcome	<p>It's important to discuss what went wrong or didn't happen. Try to be constructive. Explain how the change or support you're asking for will help your child. This will help the school to understand your child better and what their goals are for education.</p> <p>E.g., You might meet because of a concern about how spelling tests are run. But your goal is for your child to develop their literacy skills.</p> <p>You should involve your child in setting goals for their education.</p>
Acknowledge the school	<p>Consider the school's point of view during your meeting. This will help you both to share your ideas in a respectful way. You may be able to come up with new ideas together.</p> <p>Acknowledge the things the school has done well. You might be able to learn from these successes. Mentioning some good points will also help things go better than if you only talk about what needs to be fixed.</p>
Notice how you communicate with school staff	<p>This affects the relationship. It can potentially change how they respond to you. Try to stay open and friendly and be constructive. If you're feeling frustrated, find a healthy way to express this – be mindful of what you say on social media.</p>
Stay calm and centred	<p>This can be hard when you're discussing your child's education and wellbeing. Try to find the thing that keeps you focused. E.g., bring a toy or photo as a reminder.</p>
Focus on the actions they can take, not the people	<p>You might have a complaint that involves a particular staff member. But you need to focus on what you want them to change or do better, not on what they're like as a person.</p>
Resolve any big issues first	<p>There may be another issue that concerns you. It's not the focus of the conversation but you need to raise it and deal with it before you can move on. E.g., the school gets your child's name wrong.</p>

You can find more ideas in our other [DSE resources](#).

Steps to raise and escalate a concern

Below are steps to help you raise and escalate concerns about your child's education. They take you through who to contact at different stages of the process. This will depend on your school and situation. Every school has a different way of responding to complaints.

Before you raise a concern, look up the complaints process for your child's school. This will help you decide who to talk to. You can find this on the school's website or ask them for a copy.

Resolve within the school:

Step 1: Raise it with the teacher or other education staff ([p. 7](#))

Step 2: Raise it with the year level coordinator or head of learning support ([p. 9](#))

Step 3: Raise it with the principal ([p. 10](#))

Escalate beyond the school:

Step 4: Escalate it within the school education system ([p. 11](#))

Step 5: Complain to another authority ([p. 13](#))

You might have moved through some of these steps already. Or you might be at the start of the process. You can skip to the part that is most relevant to you.

Raising your concern with the school

Who you raise your concern with will depend on what concern you have. As a first step, it's best to try to resolve your concern by raising it with your child's teacher.

You can use the steps below to find the best person for your situation. If you can't resolve your concern with them, you can move on to the next step.

Step 1: Raise it with the teacher or other education staff

Is your concern about:

- a specific educator, such as a teacher?
- a specific subject or subject content?
- the classroom, playground, or excursion set-up?
- other students?
- general inclusion?

A teacher might be able to solve your problem directly. It could be a simple process, such as sending them an email or calling the front office. Or you might need a meeting to discuss things in more detail.

You might need to talk to them a few times to find a solution that works for everyone. You may also need to try different things to figure out what works best for your child. Your child should be placed at the centre of every decision.

The best outcomes are achieved when students, teachers, parents and caregivers work together.

If you don't feel comfortable raising your concern with the teacher, or the issue is about the school, you can skip to [Step 2](#) (p. 9).





Before taking the step

1. Ask to meet
2. Make a list of what you want to cover
3. Organise support (see [p. 16](#))



Taking the step

1. Explain:
 - a) the impact on your child
 - b) any suggestions you have
2. Have a conversation with the teacher to share thoughts and ideas
3. Take notes and tick off your list



After taking the step

1. Email everyone to:
 - a) thank them for their time
 - b) summarise what happened and what was agreed
2. Keep in touch
3. Remember that some changes take time to make
4. Check if changes:
 - a) have been made
 - b) are working



Tip: Keep track of how long it's been since you asked to meet, or since your meeting. It's a good idea to agree on timelines for things to happen. This way everyone in the school team can work towards them.

Step 2: Raise it with the year level coordinator or head of learning support

Sometimes your concern might be bigger than one classroom or one teacher. You should contact your child's year level coordinator or head of learning support if your concern:

- requires changes in many parts of your child's school life
- involves another student or their family.

Your child's year level coordinator may be able to make changes to your child's individual education plan, send a message to your child's teachers, or meet with another student.

You might need to go to another member of the school leadership team. Who you decide to talk to will depend on:

- the school's complaints policy (you can look on the school's website or ask them for a copy)
- your previous experiences with key staff
- how big or urgent your concern is.

Taking the step

1. Tell them:
 - a) what your concern is
 - b) what the impact has been
 - c) what has been done so far
 - d) what you want
2. Agree on a plan for:
 - a) what will happen
 - b) who will do it
 - c) when it will happen by
3. Follow up with staff

Step 3: Raise it with the principal

Does your concern:

- involve other staff members?
- involve another student or their family?
- require changes in how the school operates?
- require changes to the school buildings or grounds?

If so, raise your concern with the principal of the school.

You can follow the advice from [Step 1](#) (p. 7) and [Step 2](#) (p. 9) to help raise your concern with the principal.

Escalating your concern beyond the school

In some cases, you and your child's school may be able to find a solution. In other cases, you may need to escalate your concern because:

- you can't come to an agreement, or a deadline set between you and the school passes
- the school says they can't take the action you feel is needed
- you have had a decision reviewed and you're not satisfied with the outcome.

Definition: Escalate

When you escalate a concern, that means you take it to the next level.

For example, this might mean raising it with a staff member who is more senior or with a **complaints body**.

Definition: Complaints body

A complaints body is an independent organisation that deals with concerns and complaints.

Step 4: Escalate it within the school education system

You can take your complaint to the group or organisation that's in charge of the school. Sometimes they are called an **educational authority**. This could be your state or territory education department, the school board or the diocese (such as the Catholic Diocese).

You may be able to ask them to review the school's decision.

This step is different for government and non-government schools. But all schools must follow the DSE.

Your school can give you details of how to raise concerns or make a complaint with the educational authority.

Note: Sometimes raising a concern with a school board is part of a school's complaints process.

What you will need to do



1. Look up the school's complaints process



2. Decide who to make your complaint to



3. Gather information:
 - a) that they ask for
 - b) that gives enough detail



4. Focus on your main concern



5. Make the complaint and keep a record



6. Put key dates in your diary



7. Wait for a response



8. Try to reach a compromise together



9. (If that doesn't work) Think about further action

Steps to raise concerns

Before you make a complaint to someone, check what types of complaints they can deal with. You may wish to get further advice before escalating beyond the school if you haven't already. See [Where to get support and information](#) (p. 16).

Who to contact in the school education system

What type of school	Who to contact	Why
Government school	<p>Contact the education department in your state or territory.</p> <p>You can do this online or at any of their offices.</p> <p>Some states and territories have a local or regional office that you can contact first. If they can't help, you can contact the head office.</p> <p>For more information, see State and territory contacts (p. 19).</p>	<p>Government schools are run by the state or territory education department.</p>
Non-government school – Catholic or independent	<p>Contact the organisation that is responsible for your school – e.g., the school board for independent schools, or the local Catholic Diocese.</p> <p>If your state or territory has a complaints body for non-government schools you could contact it instead.</p>	<p>Non-government schools are run by other organisations. For example, there are faith-based schools and independent schools.</p> <p>Some states and territories have complaints bodies for non-government schools.</p> <p>These bodies can suggest solutions to the school.</p>

Step 5: Complain to another authority

You may wish to make a complaint to another authority if you:

- couldn't resolve your concern with the previous steps, and/or
- believe your child has been discriminated against.

This might be to the Australian Human Rights Commission or the anti-discrimination authority in your state or territory.

Definition: Discrimination

Disability discrimination is against the law. It means:

- someone is being treated worse than they would be if they were not disabled
- someone is required to do something they cannot do because of their disability and changes are not being made.

You can learn more in our [Explaining the Disability Standards for Education](#) resource.

Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC)

The AHRC is an independent body. It investigates complaints about unlawful discrimination under the DDA or DSE.

How do I make a complaint?

The AHRC has information on how to make a complaint on its website (<https://humanrights.gov.au>).

If you aren't sure if you can make a complaint about something, you can contact the AHRC's Complaint Information Service:

- by phone on 1300 656 419
- by email to infoservice@humanrights.gov.au.

State and territory anti-discrimination agencies

All states and territories have anti-discrimination and/or human rights and equal opportunity laws. Depending on your circumstances, you may choose to make a complaint under your state's or territory's legislation.

For more information visit the anti-discrimination agency website for your state or territory.

See [State and territory contacts](#) (p. 19) for links to their websites.

State and territory Ombudsmen

Depending on your situation, you might make a complaint to the Ombudsman in your state or territory. An Ombudsman may be able to help you in limited circumstances. They can check to see if a complaint was handled properly in a government school. However, they can't:

- investigate or handle a discrimination complaint itself
- overturn a decision made by your school.

For more information visit the Ombudsman website for your state or territory (see p. 19 for [website links](#)).



Summary: 5 Steps to escalate your concerns

Step 1

(p. 7)

Raise your concern with the teacher or other education staff

Follow the complaints policy of your child's school and if your concern needs to be addressed by someone more senior than your child's teacher, go to Step 2.

Step 2

(p. 9)

Raise your concern with the year level coordinator or head of learning support

Your child's year level coordinator may be able to make changes to your child's individual education plan, send a message to your child's teachers, or meet with another student.

Step 3

(p. 10)

Raise your concern with the principal

If your concern involves other staff members or students, or requires changes to school operations, buildings or grounds, then raise your concern with the principal of the school.

Step 4

(p. 11)

Make a complaint with an education authority

If your concern cannot be resolved within your school, you can take it to the authority in charge of the school.

Note: This step is different for government and non-government schools.

Step 5

(p. 13)

Make a complaint or seek a review from another authority

If your complaint could not be resolved, or you believe your child has been discriminated against, you can make a complaint to another authority.

This could be an:

- Ombudsman
- anti-discrimination authority.

Where to get support and information

You don't have to do everything by yourself. You can ask a friend or support person to help you gather documents or fill out forms. They can also come with you to meetings.

Advocacy support

You can get professional help from an **independent advocate**.

Independent advocates

An independent advocate is someone who has specialised training and knowledge to help you to make a complaint. They can:

- explain the process to you
- help you figure out your goals
- help you with paperwork and forms
- come with you to meetings
- contact the school on your behalf.

There are many free and low-cost advocacy services around Australia where you can find support. Search for a service that meets your needs at:

- Disability Gateway (disabilitygateway.gov.au/legal/advocacy)
- Disability Advocacy Network Australia (dana.org.au/find-an-advocate)

Depending on your circumstances, you may be eligible for free or low-cost legal services and advice. Search at:

- Disability Gateway (disabilitygateway.gov.au/legal/legal-services)
- Community Legal Centres Australia (clcs.org.au/legal-help)
- Australian Pro Bono Centre (probonocentre.org.au/legal-help).

Communication support

Translating and Interpreting Service	National Relay Service	Free Translating Service
<p>They can help if you don't speak English</p> <p>Phone: 131 450</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Website: https://www.tisnational.gov.au 	<p>They can help if you need voice to text, text to voice, Auslan to English, or English to Auslan</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phone: 1300 555 727 (Speak and Listen) Website: https://www.accesshub.gov.au 	<p>They can translate key personal documents. Visit the website to find out who can use this service</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phone: 1800 962 100 Website: https://translating.homeaffairs.gov.au

Wellbeing support

You should seek support as soon as you think you or your child might need it. You don't need to be in crisis to ask for support.

Supports for parents and caregivers

- Carer Gateway (<https://www.carergateway.gov.au>)
- Helplines for parents and caregivers (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/grown-ups/services-support/about-services-support/helplines>)
- Raising Children Network (<https://raisingchildren.net.au>)

Counselling and mental health supports

These services can help you by phone, text or online:

- Blue Knot Foundation (<https://blueknot.org.au>)
- Lifeline (<https://www.lifeline.org.au>)
- Beyond Blue (<https://www.beyondblue.org.au>)
- Yarning Safe'N'Strong (<https://www.vahs.org.au/yarning-safenstrong>)
- QLife (<https://qlife.org.au>)
- Kids Helpline (<https://kidshelpline.com.au>)

More information

- Australian Federation of Disability Organisations (<https://www.afdo.org.au>)
- Children and Young People with Disability Australia (<https://www.cyda.org.au>)
- Disability Australia Hub (<https://www.disabilityaustraliahub.com.au>)
- Disability Gateway (<https://www.disabilitygateway.gov.au>)
- First Peoples Disability Network (<https://fpdn.org.au>)
- Inclusion Australia (<https://www.inclusionaustralia.org.au>)
- National Ethnic Disability Alliance (<https://www.neda.org.au>)
- People with Disability Australia (<https://pwd.org.au>)
- SNAICC (<https://www.snaicc.org.au>)
- Women With Disabilities Australia (<https://wwda.org.au>)



State and territory contacts

State/territory	Education department	Ombudsman	Human rights commission
Australian Capital Territory (ACT)	ACT Education Directorate: https://www.education.act.gov.au	https://www.ombudsman.act.gov.au	https://hrc.act.gov.au
New South Wales (NSW)	NSW Government Department of Education: https://education.nsw.gov.au/	https://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au	https://antidiscrimination.nsw.gov.au
Northern Territory (NT)	NT Government Department of Education: https://education.nt.gov.au	https://www.ombudsman.nt.gov.au	https://adc.nt.gov.au
Queensland	Department of Education Queensland: https://education.qld.gov.au	https://www.ombudsman.qld.gov.au	https://www.qhrc.qld.gov.au
South Australia	Department for Education South Australia: https://www.education.sa.gov.au	https://www.ombudsman.sa.gov.au	https://www.equalopportunity.sa.gov.au
Tasmania	Department for Education, Children and Young People Tasmania: https://www.decyp.tas.gov.au	https://www.ombudsman.tas.gov.au	https://equalopportunity.tas.gov.au/home
Victoria	Department of Education Victoria: https://www.education.vic.gov.au/	https://www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au/	https://www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/
Western Australia	Department of Education Western Australia: https://www.education.wa.edu.au	https://www.ombudsman.wa.gov.au	https://www.wa.gov.au/organisation/equal-opportunity-commission





[https://www.education.gov.au/disability-standards-education-2005/
information-resources-students-disability-and-their-caregivers](https://www.education.gov.au/disability-standards-education-2005/information-resources-students-disability-and-their-caregivers)