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## Zain's story



Zain is a three-year-old boy with a physical disability. When he first started at his ECEC service, Zain's family and educators met to discuss his needs, strengths and interests. In particular, they discussed how they could talk to the other children at the service about Zain's disability and help them to include Zain in their play.

Together they decided that rather than talking specifically about Zain to the other children, they would wait for them to come and ask questions about him and his equipment (e.g., his wheelchair) and provide an explanation for how it helped him. By making sure everyone had the opportunity to join in learning experiences, the other children were supported to understand Zain's additional needs and include him in their play.

## The importance of families

Families play the most important role in helping children with additional needs reach their potential, because they are the main source of care and support. Families know their child best. They also develop a wealth of knowledge about their child's condition or disability and strategies they can use to support them. Families understand children want to be loved, have fun and enjoy their lives, and play regardless of whether they have additional needs or not. Families also understand how important it is for children to be valued and understood for who they are, rather than being defined by their additional needs and the challenges they face.

## Families and educators working together

Families and educators at the ECEC service can also work in partnership to help children reach their potential. When families and educators begin to form partnerships with each other, educators can become more aware of the challenges individual families may face. This is an important first step in working together and educators offering support to families with children with additional needs. When a family feels their situation has been acknowledged, it can make a big difference to their sense of belonging and connectedness within a community, improving their mental health and wellbeing.

An ECEC service can also be a great source of support to families with children who have additional needs, because it can be a place where:

- ▶ families are able to connect with each other
- ▶ information about support available in the community is shared
- ▶ families can discuss concerns about children's abilities and difficulties
- ▶ families are able to share children's achievements and positive experiences
- ▶ families have the opportunity to participate in activities and build positive relationships
- ▶ families and educators can work together to address difficulties that may be occurring within the service environment.



## Understanding difficulties children face

In order to help children with additional needs to reach their potential, it is helpful to understand what kind of difficulties they might encounter and how these might affect them. Many children encounter difficulties in their everyday lives—these can relate to anything from specific medical conditions (e.g., diabetes) through to lifelong disabilities. These difficulties can affect the child, their family and the community that supports them. Different conditions or disabilities are sometimes grouped together in categories. Specific conditions or disabilities may be sensory (e.g., a hearing or visual impairment), developmental (e.g., autism, speech and language disorders), medical (e.g., epilepsy), physical (e.g., cerebral palsy), or intellectual (e.g., Down syndrome), or relate to mental health difficulties (e.g., anxiety). Children may also be affected by more than one condition or disability, and in some cases they can be enduring throughout the course of their life. Although these conditions can sometimes place limits on what children can do, it is vital to see ‘the whole child’ not just the disability, condition or illness and to offer support to reduce stress, build self-confidence and create a sense of belonging and inclusion.

Children with additional needs may also need to manage a number of challenges in their day-to-day lives. They can experience frustration due to having difficulties in communicating their needs, being challenged by certain situations, or because they are constantly faced with assessments, medical appointments and visits to various support professionals. Being aware of the different challenges a child may be experiencing can prevent other difficulties that have the potential to influence children’s overall sense of wellbeing and mental health.

Families may also experience higher levels of stress because they too need to manage a number of challenges. Families may be time poor because of frequent medical appointments; they may have financial stress because of medical bills or being unable to take paid employment, or they may feel tired from the physical and emotional toll that can sometimes be a part of supporting a child with high needs. As parents play the most important role in a child’s life, they can also benefit from access to supports which help them cope with these challenges.

**Being inclusive means planning and implementing a curriculum that enables children with additional needs to participate fully; and ensures equitable opportunities to support their mental health and wellbeing.**

## When a child receives a diagnosis

Sometimes the process of identifying a child’s difficulties and needs involves them being assessed by a health professional (e.g., a paediatrician, psychologist or speech pathologist). This can mean a child is diagnosed with a specific condition. Diagnosing children with specific medical conditions, disabilities or disorders can have both advantages and disadvantages. Some of these are outlined below.

### Advantages of a diagnosis

When a diagnosis is made, families can feel a sense of relief, because it gives an explanation for their child’s feelings and behaviours. A diagnosis can also provide guidance about the next steps a family can take to support their child with additional needs (e.g., a child with Autism may need reminders and prompts to use social greetings). It can assist families in accessing information and allows them to make informed decisions about treatment options and strategies to support their child in collaboration with health professionals. Other advantages of a diagnosis include reducing misunderstandings about a child’s feelings and behaviour, gaining access to appropriate treatment, early intervention and support services (e.g., speech and language therapy) and the possibility of accessing funding to support their child’s development.

**All children are unique individuals and have the right to be treated with respect and dignity.**

### Disadvantages of a diagnosis

Sometimes families avoid seeking help because they are worried about what being diagnosed with a specific condition might mean for their child. Families may worry that a diagnosis will become the focus of attention rather than their child, and that their child will be ‘labelled’ as a result. People can also make assumptions that all children with the same diagnosis show the same characteristics, so families can worry that their child’s individuality might be lost. Focusing on each individual child and how a condition does affect them (e.g., their behaviour, emotions and thoughts) rather than on the diagnosis and how a condition could affect them (according to the descriptors in the diagnosis) can be a more helpful approach to understanding children’s difficulties.



## After a child receives a diagnosis

When a child receives a diagnosis, a family can experience a range of feelings and emotions which may change over time including grief and loss, guilt, anger, sadness, uncertainty and relief. With the support of ECEC services and resources (e.g., supportive health professionals, such as paediatricians, psychologists and allied health professionals) families can access the assistance they require, helping them to cope with the challenges of supporting a child with additional needs. For some families, loss and grief occurs instantly, for others it takes time to settle in. Sometimes families need time and space to process that their child is identified as having additional needs. Every family's experience is unique to their circumstances.

Feeling informed and having access to information can assist families to manage some of these feelings and to make decisions about how to care for and support their child. It can sometimes help to hear information more than once. Access to resources and support can help families feel empowered and work through their unique experiences.



## Families taking care of themselves

A family who cares for a child with additional needs is often faced with many challenges in their day-to-day experiences. These challenges can affect the whole family and perhaps some members more than others. For example, meeting their child's additional support needs may not leave families a lot of time to do other things (e.g., visiting friends). This means that families can feel isolated and experience a loss of flexibility. When parents and carers take time to look after their own mental health, they are best able to support their children. Some ways families can do this are by:

- ▶ talking to a partner or a close friend about how you are feeling
- ▶ taking a break when you need to (e.g., taking up offers of support from family and friends)
- ▶ doing some things you enjoy or that relax you
- ▶ seeking support from a health professional if you feel this would be useful or you are having difficulty coping.

For more information on self-care, refer to *Component 3: Working with parents and carers: 'Positive mental health for parents and carers'*.

### Some suggestions for families about how to access resources and support are to:

- ▶ visit your local GP for further advice about your child's development
- ▶ seek a referral to a paediatrician if there is concern about your child's difficulties
- ▶ get in touch with local support groups or organisations (e.g., Diabetes Australia)
- ▶ talk to your ECEC service for support and information when needed
- ▶ access information from reputable sources, such as government websites, regarding resources for children with additional needs (e.g., Medicare rebates)
- ▶ speak to a trusted friend or another family member
- ▶ take care of yourself by doing things that are enjoyable (e.g., read a book, go for a walk)
- ▶ remember to have fun with your child by doing things together (e.g., cooking, watching a movie)
- ▶ talk to other families in a similar situation
- ▶ develop a plan that takes into account your child's needs, strengths, goals, support strategies and resources required.

**Supporting a child with additional needs means recognising their strengths, abilities and opportunities.**



When something big is happening in a family like the adjustment to a child's diagnosis, this can have an impact on all family members. During these times, it can be helpful for family members to share information and coping strategies, and express emotions in a safe, non-judgemental environment. Allowing everyone in the family, including siblings, to share their experiences makes them feel valued and respected. Brothers and sisters of children with additional needs can sometimes experience difficulties themselves. Families may notice that brothers and sisters experience and express a range of feelings, such as uncertainty and confusion; worry and guilt; and sometimes even resentment and anger. It can be helpful for siblings to have time and a space to discuss how they are feeling and for parents and carers to remind siblings that they are an important part of the family. When siblings are supported themselves, all family members' social and emotional wellbeing and relationships are attended to. When parents and carers have expectations that match all of their children's abilities, this conveys respect and supports positive family relationships.

## Supporting children's development and building on their strengths

The next step after a child is identified as having additional needs is to develop strategies to support their development and social and emotional wellbeing, as well as build on their strengths. When families and educators work together and share their knowledge and experiences, this helps to create an environment where children feel understood and accepted.



<sup>1</sup>Early Childhood Australia and Early Childhood Intervention Australia, (2012). *Position statement on the inclusion of children with a disability in education and care*. Canberra: Authors.

## Elsie's story



Elsie is a four-year-old girl who has been having trouble separating from her mother, Alice, when arriving at her ECEC service. The educators had noticed this becoming more stressful for Elsie and Alice over time. Alice had already talked to the educators about her and Elsie seeing a counsellor to think together about Elsie's anxiety and find some ways to support both of them. When Alice and the educators talked, they decided to arrange a joint meeting with the counsellor. That way, everyone could share their understanding about how to best support Elsie transition into her ECEC service.

**Children progress well when their families, early childhood educators and support professionals have high expectations for their learning and development.<sup>1</sup>**



## Supporting children's development

All children develop at different rates and stages. Supporting children where they are at allows them to learn at a pace that is suited to their abilities. This shows respect for the child and allows them to build confidence as they gain new skills, increasing their self-esteem and overall wellbeing. Children learn from family members, friends and educators.



### Some suggestions for ways that families can support children's development include:

- ▶ Watching your child's behaviour to give you a sense of where they are at and what support they might need.
- ▶ Keeping instructions clear and simple. Try to give explanations in ways your child understands.
- ▶ Allowing extra time when your child is learning something new.
- ▶ Building your child's confidence by:
  - ▶ noticing when your child does something well and let them know (e.g., 'I liked how you shared your toys with your brother')
  - ▶ encouraging your child when they find things hard (e.g., 'I can see you're having trouble with the train track, let's find a piece that will fit')
  - ▶ be understanding when your child finds things hard (e.g., 'You must be frustrated your blocks fell down. Shall we rebuild them together and put the big blocks on the bottom?')
  - ▶ encouraging them to try new things (e.g., 'Do you want to try doing up your button today?')
  - ▶ helping children to know what they are good at (e.g., 'You've done a really good job putting your toys away').

### Educators can also play a significant role in supporting children's development by:

- ▶ welcoming children of varying abilities
- ▶ creating learning environments that encourage children to play and explore
- ▶ learning about children's needs through seeking out and sharing information
- ▶ having a positive attitude towards children and families
- ▶ focusing on children's abilities and achievements rather than what they can't do
- ▶ providing opportunities for all children to play and learn together
- ▶ teaching children that everyone has a right to be respected
- ▶ engaging directly with children as well as their families
- ▶ working within children's skill level and pace
- ▶ communicating openly and frequently with children and families
- ▶ developing creative ways to ensure the ECEC service is inclusive.

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'*.

**Supporting children where they are at allows them to learn at a pace that is suited to their abilities. This shows respect for the child and allows them to build confidence ...**

## Setting goals and building on children's strengths

To build on children's strengths it is helpful to consider what they already do well and encourage opportunities for success in other experiences. Knowing each child's individual strengths, interests, difficulties and fears helps families and educators to work together to support them. Children's strengths and interests often go together. For example, if a child loves building with blocks, they might have very good fine motor skills, be able to concentrate on their building and be developing skills to cope if their play does not go to plan.

Building children's strengths can encourage them to try new and unfamiliar things, can promote resilience for when things are hard and strengthen children's concept of themselves. This provides a basis for social and emotional wellbeing, lifelong achievement and learning. Things that can help children build their confidence, coping skills, motivation and strengths are to:

- ▶ help them feel safe and secure
- ▶ let them know they are loved
- ▶ promote a sense of control and encourage decision-making
- ▶ have people to care for and support them
- ▶ practise communication skills in a way that is meaningful to them
- ▶ give them the opportunity to try new things and develop their skills
- ▶ help them succeed by setting achievable tasks
- ▶ pay attention to their interests to find ways of engaging them in new experiences
- ▶ provide feedback and encouragement for children's efforts.

When families and educators reflect on and celebrate children's current achievements, they can also plan goals for the future. In working through this process, families and educators can identify where children (and families and educators themselves) have experienced success as well as where children require further assistance. By taking a step-by-step approach, children can be assisted to start with achievable tasks then move towards more challenging goals at their own pace and as their skills develop.

**Educators who are attuned to children's thoughts and feelings, support the development of a strong sense of wellbeing.<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>2</sup>(*Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p. 12.)

## Creating supportive and inclusive environments

There are many environmental factors that can be adjusted to meet children's individual needs and promote inclusion. For example, in an ECEC service it might mean planning experiences that allow all children to participate. At home, other children can be invited to come and play. Creating supportive environments assists children to feel respected, encourages participation, promotes learning and development and helps them function to the best of their ability.

**Capture children's motivation through their interests and strengths.**



This resource and further information on the national KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative is available to download at [www.kidsmatter.edu.au](http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au).

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



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