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Leading an
inclusive
learning
community



Leading an inclusive learning community

Leaders and leadership teams play an important role in developing and strengthening inclusive learning communities.

“Strong leadership is key for inclusion. If strong leadership isn’t present at all levels of a learning community, there will be gaps – or in other words, pockets of exclusion – in schools and early learning services,” says Professor Nicole Rinehart, founder of the AllPlay Learn program, which helps to create inclusive education environments for children and young people with developmental delay and disabilities.

Early Childhood Australia suggests leaders set the tone and, ultimately, the culture of a learning community.

“A team will naturally look to their leaders for guidance, direction and support. Leaders are not expected to be experts in inclusive practices, but they need to be committed to inclusion,” says Early Childhood Australia.

The following are some examples of inclusion strategies, suggestions and considerations to inform practice.

Share your vision

Take the time to share your vision for inclusion as a leader, and help your team understand that everyone in the learning community thrives when a community is inclusive.

Regularly review the philosophy and policies at your service or school and consider how they reflect inclusive values and beliefs, and a commitment to inclusion.

You may also want to consider an inclusion policy for your early learning service or school to reinforce the value of inclusive practices to both educators and children or young people, as well as their families. Among other things, this policy could outline expectations about inclusion in your learning community, as well as how you’ll ensure your team understands these expectations.

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Our school uses the first two weeks of the year to build relationships between students and the teacher, and set expectations. Students participate in learning opportunities to get to know their peers and develop a sense of belonging in the classroom through games and team-building activities.”

– Educator insight

Adopt a framework

Inclusive practices in early learning services or schools happen by intentional planning and design, and evolve to meet the changing needs of children and young people in a learning community.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an overarching framework that can help leaders and educators in learning communities design environments that are flexible and where barriers are minimised. You can learn more about UDL and how to adopt (and adapt) its principles to your learning community in the section on [Universal Design for Learning](#).

Facilitate professional development

Your team can learn or deepen their understanding of inclusion practices and principles with support.

“Every educator wants to be inclusive, but not every educator inherently knows how to be inclusive,” says Professor Rinehart. “It’s also true that different disabilities and developmental delays require different strengths-based inclusion strategies. Inclusion is never ‘one thing’. That’s where professional development comes in.”

There is a broad range of professional learning and development opportunities for educators related to inclusion, including the following:

- The Inclusion Agencies responsible for administering the Australian Government’s [Inclusion Support Program](#) across Australia’s different states and territories often facilitate or recommend relevant professional learning opportunities and events for educators working in some early childhood services such as long day care, school age care and family day care. Inclusion Agencies also have a network of Inclusion Professionals who can provide practical and tailored advice and support to early childhood services. [Contact the Inclusion Agency](#) for your state or territory for more information or visit your agency’s website.
- Some state-based education departments provide access to inclusion mentors and consultants who work with leadership teams in preschools, kindergartens, and primary and

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People with disability need to be seen and heard. Having trainers or presenters who have a disability would make an impact on educators learning about inclusion.”

– Educator insight

secondary schools to improve outcomes for all children and young people. Other education departments are rolling out or expanding their own state-based ‘disability inclusion’ packages, some of which include provision for building skills and knowledge in inclusive education for educators in government preschools, kindergartens and schools. Contact the education department in your state or territory to enquire about opportunities.

- The [Association for Children with a Disability](#) provides an extensive list on its website of [professional development and training opportunities and resources](#) offered by a variety of organisations.
- [Emerging Minds](#), a government-funded initiative that leads the National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health, offers online learning to [understand child mental health and disability](#).
- The [Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership](#) (AITSL) provides resources online to inform teaching, including a guide to [teaching students with disability](#).

- The [Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability \(NCCD\)](#) provides dozens of [professional learning resources](#) on its website, about everything from classroom adjustments for specific disabilities and developmental delays to understanding more about disability standards and obligations for teachers and leadership teams.
- [inclusionED](#) supports diverse learners and outlines a range of evidence-based practices on its website.
- The [Australian Council for Educational Leaders](#) presents an annual Disability and Inclusion Conference and facilitates [inclusive classrooms](#) online courses.
- [Children and Young People with Disability Australia \(CYDA\)](#) is the not-for-profit national peak body that represents children and young people with developmental delay or disability. It offers resources such as the [Youth LivedX](#) series, where young people with disability talk about the issues that matter to them, and a [webinar series about inclusion in early childhood](#).

Access available resources and funding

The Inclusion Support Program has an Inclusion Development Fund that provides funding to facilitate inclusion in early learning communities. This includes subsidies for an additional educator, time-limited support, Family Day Care top-up and innovative solutions to overcome barriers to inclusion.

The first step for accessing any funding through the Inclusion Development Fund is developing a [Strategic Inclusion Plan](#). This is a plan which outlines a service's short-term and longer-term strategies for improving and embedding inclusive practices,, and is something that your Inclusion Agency's Inclusion Professional can help you develop.

In addition to the funding provided by the Australian Government to support students with disability in schools, some state-based

education departments offer relevant funding and grants programs, such as the Victorian Government's [Inclusive Schools Fund](#), which supports small innovative building projects that make a big difference to meeting the needs of children and young people with disabilities in schools. Contact the education department in your state or territory to enquire about similar programs and funding opportunities.

If a child or young person in your learning community requires additional support to meet their developmental needs, you may be able to refer the child and family to their local [National Disability Insurance Scheme \(NDIS\)](#) partner for short-term or longer-term supports, or consider helping families get in touch with an [NDIS Local Area Coordinator](#).



Maddy's story

This story shares how an educator, parent and speech pathologist work in partnership to support Maddy's communication.

Three-year-old Maddy has recently enrolled at kindergarten. She is very expressive with non-verbal communication and enjoys outdoor play, doll play and tactile activities. Maddy has moderate hearing loss in her right ear and severe hearing loss in her left ear. She uses hearing aids in both ears and has been learning some sign language to support her communication. Maddy's speech and communication is delayed, but she has responded well to early intervention through oral language training and can verbalise basic wants and needs, such as 'drink' and 'hungry'.

Maddy's mum has concerns about her ability to communicate and be understood by others as people often forget she has a hearing impairment. Maddy's mum would like the early learning service to continue to build on Maddy's communication skills so that she can enjoy relationships and develop friendships. Maddy's mum has supplied a communication book which features visual aids that Maddy uses to communicate with others, and pictures of the signs she's using and learning at home.

Maddy's educators invited Maddy's speech pathologist to visit the service, to support them in teaching some of these same signs to Maddy's peers. Having incorporated signs into story and mat time, they've noticed a few of the children beginning to sign when they're communicating with Maddy and each other. While Maddy's mum has spent some time at the service to support communication between home and Maddy's educators, she is returning to work soon and will be limited in her ability to visit the service face-to-face.



For reflection

- Describe Maddy's strengths. How would you enhance these?
- How could you continue to foster a strong partnership with Maddy's family, particularly given Maddy's mum will soon have less capacity for face-to-face visits?
- In what ways have Maddy's educators collaborated with Maddy's mum to address her concerns and hopes for Maddy? And what more would you do?

Promote the use of evidence-informed strategies

The strategies you choose to facilitate inclusion in your learning community will depend on the age group and the unique strengths of each child or young person. Lay strong foundations by using strategies that are based on research, and which consider the child or young person's goals, aspirations and strengths.

Model the use of inclusive language

As a leader, how you speak about and refer to a child's developmental delay or disability is incredibly important.

While words used well can be empowering and enabling, certain terms and phrases can limit expectations and reinforce unhelpful perspectives. Avoid using negative terms like 'suffers from', 'victim of' or 'afflicted by' when you're referring to or describing a child with developmental delay or disability.

There are two main approaches to the language used to talk about a child or young person's developmental delay or disability: the person-first approach and the identity-first approach.

According to [AllPlay Learn's Language Guide](#), the person-first approach focuses on the child rather than their disability. For example, 'a child on the autism spectrum' rather than 'an autistic child'. The identity-first approach is the reverse, so 'I am a Deaf person'. This approach can allow children and young people to embrace their disability or developmental delay with pride.

Ask each child and talk to their family about what they'd prefer, so you and your team can use the right language for them. You can learn more about inclusive language and how to use it in the [Quick guide to inclusive language](#).

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Find what other schools or services in your local area are doing and adapt to suit your context. Working within a network also helps.”

– Educator insight

Foster a whole learning community approach

To focus on a whole learning community approach to inclusion, it's important to:

- support meaningful participation by the child or young person, their family, educators and staff, and the wider community
- encourage and support educators to share knowledge, learnings and experiences of inclusion
- promote the importance of working with relevant health professionals outside of your learning community, particularly where a child or young person, or their family, already has a relationship with them.

According to the NSW/ACT Inclusion Agency: "Inclusion happens when educators are supported in their practice by strong leadership; work together as a team to think about how inclusive their practices are; and work collaboratively with families and support them to understand inclusion".

Build partnerships with families

Professor Rinehart notes that "when a family and their learning community are on the same page, it promotes a feeling of continuity and support, free of any conflict or confusion for the child or young person".

A partnership with the family of a child or young person with developmental delay or disability taps into the expertise and

perspectives of different individuals to solve problems, and to address new challenges or changes in an ongoing way.

As a leader, make it a priority for educators and staff in your learning community to understand the hopes, goals and expectations that families have for a child or young person with developmental delay or disability, and work closely with them to achieve these goals and outcomes.

Some suggestions for this are:

Valuing the family's knowledge. A child or young person's family is well placed to identify their strengths and abilities. The family is also able to share strategies and approaches they use in the home environment, in previous learning communities or with their health professionals.

Understanding a family's perspective.

Just as important as developing a strong understanding of what a family hopes for their child or young person in the learning community is listening to their concerns or anxieties. This may include concerns about their child being treated differently or their reflections on being the parent of a child with developmental delay or disability. Being respectful of a family's understanding and beliefs about developmental delay or disability is helpful, too.

Understanding that every family is unique.

Families will have different needs and preferences for how you work together, and how they would like to communicate or collaborate. Be respectful of the family's background, beliefs, values, customs and language, and encourage open, constructive discussions so you can provide culturally appropriate support.



Jimmy's story

This story demonstrates a strengths-based approach to supporting Jimmy, a child with Down syndrome.

Jimmy is a 10-year-old boy who has Down syndrome. Jimmy attends his School Age Care service four afternoons a week. He demonstrates many strengths, including empathy towards his peers, a willingness to help, emerging music skills and a playful disposition. He also has a great sense of humour. Jimmy experiences some challenges expressing his needs verbally and sometimes has difficulty understanding what's being asked of him.

Jimmy's primary school has a core shared value: All children, irrespective of disability or developmental delay, are wonderful and each child has strengths. It's the educator's core responsibility to identify these strengths, celebrate them and share them in the learning environment. This has framed the way educators see and build relationships with all children, including Jimmy.

Recently, Jimmy has displayed behaviours such as head banging, dismantling other children's creations and raising his voice. Rather than attribute this to his disability, the educators have adopted a strengths-based approach, considering Jimmy's behaviour a form of communication and exploring what message he's trying to communicate. Jimmy's educators support him by naming his emotions (for example, saying "I can see you're frustrated, Jimmy") to help make sense of his experience. They've identified that Jimmy enjoys tactile stimulation and have provided a range of sensory items that Jimmy can explore with his hands. The School Age Care staff validates this approach, while the room teachers share information and notes to support continuity of care between the school and School Age Care service.



For reflection

- Using one of Jimmy's strengths as an example, consider how you'd celebrate and share this with your learning community.
- Consider how celebrating the strengths of children (as well as families and educators) is a protective factor for mental health and wellbeing.
- What do you think of Jimmy's school's belief that all children have strengths, irrespective of disability and developmental delay?
- Jimmy's educators are committed to working with Jimmy. What are some examples of this in the story? What do you think are the benefits?

Learn more

See AllPlay Learn's [Inclusive Educator Strategies](#) webpage.

Read AllPlay Learn's guides to communication between parents and educators for [early learning services](#), [primary schools](#) and [secondary schools](#).

Check out the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority's [Building Partnerships with Families](#) resource.

For school age care settings, check out the [My Time Our Place V2.0](#) framework.

You can also review this [inclusive education framework](#) for schools.

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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.

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