



# A great start? Education for disabled children in early childhood education: A guide for parents and whānau

A quality, inclusive early childhood education is important for all children. It is especially important for children who need support to be fully included, and to learn and play alongside their peers. It helps them have better learning and life outcomes – both today and into their futures.

You are your child's first and most important teacher and have a vital role to play in helping them learn and grow. You know your child better than anyone – what they like and don't like, the way they approach new and different things, and how they learn.

In this guide, we share what we found about how well the New Zealand education system supports children who need more support to be included. We also share some practical guidance for parents and whānau of these children to help you help your child get off to a great start.

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## What you can expect from your child's service

While all children in early childhood education (ECE) need extra help from time to time, some children need more help to be fully included in learning and playing alongside their peers. You might hear the terms children with additional learning needs, children with special needs or disabled children to describe this group of children. We've used the term *disabled children* because it links to the New Zealand Disability Strategy.

Disabled children have the same rights as other children to enrol and receive a quality, inclusive experience in ECE. Your child's teachers/kaiako should work with you to understand how they can best support your child to be fully included.

The Ministry of Education (MoE) helps ECE leaders and kaiako teachers to help these children by providing funding, resources, and advice. Your child's kaiako/teacher might ask you about applying for this support, or you can apply for it yourself.

Each service should also have a policy or procedure for parents if they have concerns and complaints. This should be available from the service.

## What did ERO find out about support for disabled children in ECE?

To find out about what's happening in ECE, ERO spoke with lots of disabled children's parents and whānau, kaiako/teacher, service leaders, specialists and experts. Here are the key things we found out.

## Disabled children enjoy ECE, feel safe, and that they belong.

We found disabled children are participating and enjoying ECE.

- Almost all parents and whānau (91 percent) of disabled children reported their child enjoys attending ECE.
- More than four in five parents and whānau believe their child feels loved, cared for, and comfortable at their ECE.
- Four in five parents and whānau agree their child has a sense of belonging at their service.



“She’s [a] happier child for the early learning.”

(PARENT – ECE)

- You can help your child’s kaiako/teacher by working with them to know your child. You might ask questions like:
  - How do I share the hopes and dreams I have for my child?
  - How do you get to know my child?

## Disabled children are being excluded from enrolling and fully participating.

We found too many parents and whānau are being discouraged from enrolling their disabled child, and are sometimes being asked to keep their child home.

- A quarter of parents and whānau have been discouraged from enrolling their disabled child at one or more services.
- Almost one in five parents and whānau have been asked to keep their disabled child at home at some point.
- Over a third of kaiako/teachers are either not confident or are only somewhat confident about including disabled children in outings.
  - This needs to change. We’re asking the MoE to work with services to develop ways to better identify and track disabled children’s enrolment and participation at a national level.
  - You can help kaiako/teachers by working with them to understand how to support your child. You might start a conversation by asking:
    - How can I help you keep my child safe?

## We don’t know how well disabled children are progressing.

We found many services don’t have information to show how well disabled children are progressing, and don’t talk about children’s next steps in their learning with their parents and whānau.

- Assessment often shows what children do, not what they have learnt.
- Over half of parents and whānau said kaiako/teacher never or only sometimes discuss their child’s next steps in their learning goals with them.
  - This needs to change. We’re asking that leaders and kaiako/teachers receive more guidance about teaching disabled children, and planning for and noticing their learning progression.
  - To start a conversation with your child’s kaiako/teacher about their learning, you could ask:
    - How often will you share what my child is learning? How will you share it?

## Children with complex needs are doing less well.

Children with complex needs experience exclusion more than their disabled peers with less complex needs. Parents and whānau are less likely to report their child feels safe and that they belong.

- Over one third of parents and whānau of children with complex needs have been discouraged from enrolling their child at one or more ECE services.
- Only three-quarters of parents and whānau of children with complex needs agreed their child feels safe at their service.
  - This needs to change. We're asking that leaders and kaiako/teachers receive more support around teaching disabled learners in their initial training and ongoing professional learning.

## Partnerships with whānau need to be more focused on their child's learning.

Discussions with parents and whānau often focus on what has happened during the day rather than how learning is progressing. Too many parents and whānau are not satisfied with how they are included in developing their child's learning plan.

- Only two-thirds of parents and whānau are satisfied with their involvement in developing and reviewing their child's Individual Learning Plan (ILP). This is a critical part of learning support for children who need additional support to be included.
  - This needs to change. We're asking the MoE to put together useful resources for disabled learners, parents and whānau about education rights and entitlements, options for education and pathways, how to raise concerns, and how to access support. We're also recommending they develop a new way of gathering complaints, and report every year about the kinds of complaints they receive, and how they're resolved.
  - To start a learning conversation with your child's kaiako/teacher, you could ask questions like:
    - Does my child have a plan just for them?
    - How will you make sure my child is challenged? What if they get bored?

## Transitions from ECE to schools are not working as well as entry into ECE.

Transitions from ECE into school settings are not working well.

- Nearly a quarter of parents and whānau are not satisfied with how their child is supported to transition to school.
- Communication and information sharing between ECEs, support services, and teachers is a challenge.
- Parents and whānau find it hard to have to repeatedly explain about their child and the support they need. It's also difficult working out differences in how the system works in schools and ECEs.
  - This needs to change. We're asking that information about children is always shared when they move from ECE to school and then from school to school, and for better coordination and collaboration between services, schools, and a range of agencies, to improve support for disabled learners.
  - You can help your child's transition by asking their kaiako/teacher things like:
    - When my child goes to school, what can I share with their new teacher about what they have learnt?

## Useful links

- The Ministry of Education’s guide for parents about early intervention services and how to get support: [Early Intervention Services \(EIS\) – Education in New Zealand](#).
- The Learning Support Action Plan, which sets out how learning support is planned and delivered: [About the Learning Support Action Plan – Conversation space \(education.govt.nz\)](#)
- The website for Whaikaha, Ministry of Disabled People, who are focused on supporting disabled people: [Home | Whaikaha – Ministry of Disabled People](#)
- How to make a complaint about an ECE: [Make a complaint \(education.govt.nz\)](#)
- Details about the rights of people with disabilities:
  - [Human Rights Commission \(hrc.co.nz\)](#)
  - [United Nations Convention of the Rights of People with Disabilities, Right to Inclusive Education \(ohchr.org\)](#)
  - [UNICEF guide to inclusive education \(unicef.org\)](#)

We appreciate the work of all those who supported this evaluation, particularly the parents and whānau of disabled children, teachers, and leaders who shared with us. Their experiences and insights are at the heart of what we have learnt. You can find the full report on how good education is for disabled children on ERO’s website: [www.ero.govt.nz](http://www.ero.govt.nz)



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