

Catholic Schools
Child Safe Schools

RESOURCE GUIDE:
**Children with
Disabilities**



**Addressing the Principle of Inclusion:
Child Safety in Catholic Schools in Victoria**

First published June 2018

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Acknowledgement

These resources have been developed by the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria (CECV) in partnership with Professor Chris Forlin who is an international education consultant from Western Australia.



The Catholic Education Commission of Victoria Ltd (CECV) is committed to the ongoing safety of children and young people and to supporting Catholic schools in providing a safe and nurturing school environment for all.

As part of the Victorian Government's drive to build safer futures for children, all Victorian schools are required to meet the Child Safe Standards (the Standards), introduced into Victorian law in late 2015. Ministerial Order No. 870 specifies the actions schools must take to embed a culture of 'zero tolerance' to abuse and comply with their obligations for school registration.

This Guide draws upon research, best practice and Catholic sector advice to provide child safety considerations for children with disabilities in Catholic schools in Victoria. It should be read in conjunction with the *Introduction to the Principle of Inclusion: Overview of Resource Guides*.

Terminology: The term 'children' is applied to mean all children and youth enrolled in Catholic primary and secondary schools in Victoria.

Meeting the Standards

The principles underpinning the Victorian Standards acknowledge that while all children are vulnerable, children and young people with disabilities may be particularly susceptible to being victimised and may face challenges in reporting an incident of abuse (CCYP n.d.(a)).

[C]hildren with a disability have an increased risk of being abused (CCYP n.d.(b)).

The ethos and beliefs of Catholic schools support an inclusive approach to education whereby all children are valued and welcomed. Including learners with disabilities poses an additional duty of care on schools to ensure that their safety and wellbeing is fully addressed. A positive attitude towards learners with disabilities and full acceptance requires commitment to ensuring their safety and wellbeing at all times.

Principle of Inclusion

In relation to education, the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2006) states that persons with disabilities should be guaranteed the right to inclusive education at all levels, regardless of age, without discrimination and based on equal opportunity. Australia's commitment to the inclusion of learners with disabilities is further reflected in the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and in the establishment of the Disability Standards for Education 2005, which elucidate and elaborate on legal obligations for schools associated with inclusive education.

Catholic schools in Victoria support a commitment to inclusive pedagogy that embraces all learners regardless of their diverse abilities.

Inclusive education

With a fully inclusive approach to education, schools must cater for students experiencing more complex and challenging needs increasingly requiring high levels of support. While some schools embrace this new paradigm shift, others struggle with the logistical, pedagogical and philosophical changes required to accommodate the needs of such diverse student populations (Deppeler & Forlin 2017). Including children with disabilities requires commitment to providing access to the Australian curriculum. This must also be accompanied with ensuring that the social, health, safety and wellbeing needs are met of this more vulnerable population of children.

Child-friendly schools provide physical and emotional environments that are safe and inviting. When including children with disabilities, detailed assessments of potential risks or hazards within physical environments are essential first steps to providing modifications. Regular checks are needed to monitor ongoing safety and access to equipment. The emotional needs of children with disabilities must also be addressed. In many instances children with disabilities find it challenging making friends and engaging with their peers. Structured approaches to initiating and maintaining friendships may need to be designed to ensure the safety and welfare of children with a disability.



Creating Safe Environments for Children with Disabilities

Raising awareness

Being aware of and pre-empting potential risk is a key factor in minimising the risk and improving child safety. The risk for children with disabilities, in some instances, may be more pronounced than for other children and consequently requires greater attention to planning for safe participation. This is particularly pertinent during excursions or extra-curricular activities and requires vigilant preparation to confirm the safety of children with disabilities when participating in off-site environments.

A risk management approach for including children with disabilities involves careful and systematic review and analysis of risks that may occur and the identification of strategies that will reduce or remove these. Proactive and preventative measures should be taken to address possible risks associated with staffing, activities and the physical environment considering the age, stage of development and specific support needs of individual children. Practices to support a child safe culture require a process for monitoring, reviewing and communicating risk management approaches to ensure that the whole school community is working together in a cohesive way to embed appropriate child safe practices for children with disabilities.

A whole school approach

Effective school leaders are pivotal to providing an inclusive environment that welcomes and supports children with disabilities. Organisational culture within a school is driven by leadership but involves participation and engagement of all staff to ensure that child safe environments will be maintained and sustained over time. Inclusive leaders are well-prepared to use research-driven practices that develop learning environments that engage all members of the school community in improving the wellbeing of all learners. Research in Australia identified that where harm or abuse of students was responded to well by schools, this was in a climate created by strong leadership with issues being dealt with effectively and promptly (Wayland & Hindmarsh 2017). In these schools, there was a culture of inclusion where harm was not accepted and the achievements of all students were celebrated.

The focus of a one school for all approach ... requires schools to create effective learning environments that are conducive to learning and growth for all children within the same classrooms (Forlin 2010, p. 2).

Supporting children with challenging behavior has led to some alternative means of accommodating their needs. A Senate Inquiry into violence, abuse and neglect against people with disabilities (Community Affairs References Committee 2015) recommended the elimination of restrictive practices against children as a national priority. The Report proposed a zero-tolerance approach to the use of restrictive practice in schools (Recommendation 19), suggesting that alternative approaches should be used to ensure child safety.

To ensure that the safeguarding and wellbeing of children with disabilities are fully addressed, a whole school approach is critical. Supporting diversity and inclusion and developing a culture of child safety for children with disabilities within a school is more than writing policies and procedures. It requires a commitment to improving child safety in all daily routines and including children with disabilities and their families in dialogue and planning to enable them to be fully involved in all aspects of school life. Deliberate steps need to be taken to remove potential barriers for students with disabilities and caution initiated when planning alternative interventions.

Research shows that providing safe environments for vulnerable children has positive, lifelong impacts that cannot be underestimated (CCYP n.d.(a)).

Policy and planning

Catholic schools enact inclusive policies and practices to accurately identify the diverse learning needs of individuals. These inclusive approaches should also address the safety and wellbeing of all students. Practices must reflect Australian Acts and target the seven Standards. In addition, they must be contextually appropriate for the individual school situation. Regular reviews of policy and practices with a focus on continued improvement should underpin the philosophy. Due attention must be paid to how



the school will cater for the needs of students with disabilities and outline what additional support will be provided to protect their wellbeing and safety.

Catholic schools are required to develop a staff 'Child Safety Code of Conduct' specifying appropriate and inappropriate behaviours with students (Standard 3). Each school's Code of Conduct for selection of staff and volunteers to support the needs of children with a disability should clearly outline boundaries about interactions and personal care assistance (CCYP n.d.(b)).

Listening to children's voices

Research suggests that enabling children and young people to identify and raise their safety concerns is a vital feature of child safe organisations. By understanding how children think about feeling and being safe, adults can open up opportunities to better respond to safety concerns and create and implement strategies that are more effective (Moore et al. 2016).

All children have a right to be heard. It is very important that students with disabilities are empowered to voice any suggestions or concerns they may have regarding their own or others' wellbeing and safety. Procedures should be clearly visible within a school outlining how students can provide suggestions or raise their concerns with designated staff available to help them. Considering a child's developmental level and communication requirements, ensure that children with a disability are aware of who they can go to if they feel unsafe, have a concern or want to lodge a complaint. This may require alternative strategies for listening and communicating with children with disabilities. Augmentative communication options should be made available for students requiring them. Telephone numbers for support help lines should be made accessible in different modes and, if possible, children should have access to a telephone with support if they need to call. When children with disabilities are regularly provided with opportunities to voice their opinions and believe they are valued, they are more likely to speak up if they feel unsafe.

Empower children with a disability by assisting them to build their self-esteem and confidence (CCYP n.d.(b)).

Engaging Families and Communities

All children with disabilities and their families should be made to feel welcome and accommodations made to ensure safe and equitable environments for all. It is critical to recognise and address issues that challenge student learning sufficiently early to reduce the likelihood of longer term learning and behavioural tensions between the school and families (Deppeler & Forlin 2017).

School policies should be in plain language, child and family friendly, and be readily accessible to all staff, families and community members including those requiring alternative communications.

Involving all staff and working closely with families will help establish a culture of child safety for children with disabilities and aid in identifying and addressing issues before they arise.

Addressing Potential Risks

Identifying and responding to risks to child safety and wellbeing for learners with disabilities

Health needs

Many children with disabilities will also have a range of medical issues. Failure to meet the health and/or attendant care needs of children with disabilities may constitute 'neglect' under the DDA. Schools may need to consider specialised training of staff to ensure they can address the specific medical needs of individual students. Consideration will also need to be given to having appropriate facilities for allowing privacy if changing, showering or undertaking medical procedures. Diocesan Education Offices can provide access to training advice regarding supporting the health of children with disabilities.

Physical environment

There are many potential risks to children with disabilities within the physical environment of a school. A risk analysis should be undertaken to identify potentially unsafe aspects of buildings, pathways, toilets, topography (e.g. slopes) and vegetation



hazards. In particular, playgrounds may require adjustments and modifications to allow all children to participate together. The building of safety fences may also be necessary to minimise risk of a child leaving the school grounds. Access to toilets and public transport during excursions would need further investigating.

The use of safety equipment may require attention for children with disabilities. For example, for a child who is deaf the school may need to install smoke alarms that signal with a light and vibrator. The addition of safety rails or bars may also help a child who has difficulty walking or who is at risk of falling. A range of practical ways to help protect children with disabilities during common daily risk situations is provided by Safe Kids Worldwide (see the Resources section below).

Communication

Some children with disabilities may not be able to communicate verbally. Students should be enabled to communicate their needs through a range of methods and alternative devices. All staff should be aware of the individual challenges of children with communication disabilities and know how to respond. Teaching a child to be able to use a whistle or alarm to gain attention may assist them to alert danger.

Protective behaviours

While all schools should include protective behavior training in their curriculum, this may not be sufficient for keeping children with disabilities safe. Sometimes a more direct instruction approach utilising visual and/or auditory mediums of instruction with increased opportunities for practice in role play situations may be needed to ensure sustainability and generalisability of safe practices. Collaboration with families to promote a consistent use of language and approach to child safe procedures is very important. See for example, the 'Feeling Safe. Stay Safe' activity package produced by Protective Behaviors WA for the teaching of protective behaviors to students with special needs at <https://www.protectivebehaviourswa.org.au/products/feeling-safe-stay-safe>.

Digital environment

Digital communication has empowered children with disabilities to express themselves by facilitating communication with friends, allowing them to make their own choices and participate in decisions that affect them (UNICEF 2017). Computers, internet and ICT resources are widely used to support learning in Catholic schools in Victoria. Nevertheless, access to the internet may pose additional safety risks, specifically for children with learning disabilities or developmental delays. Research reports that children with additional learning needs are more likely to experience risk online, with girls three times more likely to encounter online sexual solicitation (UNICEF 2017). The teaching of digital literacy to protect children with disabilities from potential online harm may require more specific direct approaches with greater diligence to providing continual monitoring and support.

[I]t is critical to understand the context of children's digital experiences and provide adequate guidance and support, especially for children ... with disabilities (UNICEF 2017, p. 34).

For Further Information – Diocesan Contacts

For Catholic Education Office advice, please contact the Learning Diversity Education Officer at each Diocesan Office:

Catholic Education Melbourne (03) 9267 0228

Catholic Education Office Ballarat (03) 5337 7135

Catholic Education Office Sale (03) 5622 6600

Catholic Education Office Sandhurst (03) 5443 2377

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Catholic Education Melbourne 2017, *Foundation statement: Learning diversity in a Catholic school*, Horizons of Hope, Catholic Education Melbourne, East Melbourne. Available at <https://www.cem.edu.au/CatholicEducationMelbourne/media/Documentation/Documents/HoH-Learning-Diversity.pdf>.

Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) n.d.(a), 'Child safe principles'. Available at <https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/child-safety/being-a-child-safe-organisation/the-child-safe-standards/child-safe-principles/>.

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Wayland, S & Hindmarsh, G 2017, *Understanding safeguarding practices for children with disability when engaging with organisations*, Child Family Community Australia, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne. Available at <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/understanding-safeguarding-practices-children-disability-when-engaging>.

Resources

Association for Children with a Disability (ACD). Available at <https://acd.org.au/>.

PEP Talks: Keeping children safe (ACD), 'Supporting and strengthening your child's development, health, well being and safety'. Available at <http://PEP-talk.org.au/>.

Raising Children Network, 'Child and parent disability services'. Available at http://raisingchildren.net.au/services_support/disability_services.html.

Safe Kids Worldwide's safety tips for children with special needs. Available at https://www.safekids.org/safetytips/field_age/special-needs.

Victoria State Government, 'Supporting students with additional learning needs'. Available at <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/default.aspx>.

This is one of three Guides designed to assist Catholic schools to integrate the Principle of Inclusion as part of school strategies and practice for the safety and wellbeing of children in their care.