



Children's Services
Since 1895



Talking with Families: Sharing Understandings of Development Guidebook

Talking with Families; A Family-Centred Approach

“Educators recognise that families are children’s first and most influential teachers.”

(Australian Government Department of Education (AGDE), 2022, p.15).

Communication and relationships with families are an integral aspect of the role of an early childhood educator. However, educators regularly reflect that talking with families about developmental differences can be challenging. This can come from a tension between wanting to share observations and support options while being unsure how to do this in a respectful and supportive way for families and keeping the interests of the child paramount.

This guidebook presents a range of information and strategies to support you to work in partnership with families with the shared purpose of achieving the best outcomes for their child. We will present an approach for working collaboratively to share our understandings of development as early childhood professionals, and to hear from families as the experts on their child and family. This approach is based upon family-centred practice and the social model of disability.

Family-centred practice “is a set of values, skills, behaviours and knowledge that recognises the central role of families in children’s lives”. When educators adopt a strengths-based, family-centred approach, they work in partnership with families to plan to support children’s learning and growth. Families are recognised as the constant experts on their child, and family life, family choices, and priorities drive decision making.

(*Early Childhood Intervention Australia, 2016, p.8*).



Benefits of A Family-Centred Approach

Partnerships between educators and families that are based on respect and shared knowledge lead to a wide range of benefits for everyone, most importantly for children.

When we acknowledge that families are experts on their own children and family situation, educators can draw on family expertise and combine this with their knowledge and experience of child development to build families' capacity to support their children.

The goal of family-centred practice is to empower families to make short and long-term decisions that support their child's health, development, and wellbeing.

Benefits of a family-centred approach:

- ▶ Trusting, authentic, and growth-oriented relationships, build a positive start to parent/professional partnerships.
- ▶ Consistency of practice, expectations, understandings, and goals.
- ▶ Capacity and knowledge building for parents, families and educators.
- ▶ Focus on strengths-based inclusive practice and program.
- ▶ Increased family engagement in the preschool program.
- ▶ Reduced pressure and anxiety.
- ▶ Celebration of everyday achievements and progress.
- ▶ Increased access to shared resources and understandings.

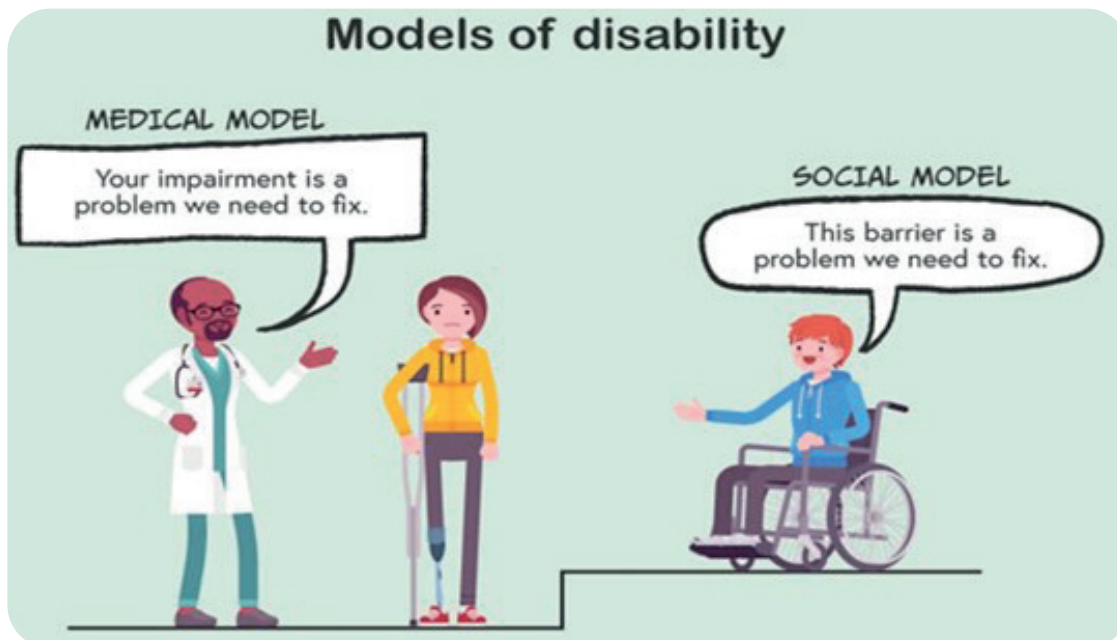


Understanding Models of Disability

The medical and social models of disability describe two different ways of understanding and responding to the difficulties experienced by people who have physical, sensory, communication or cognitive impairments.

The medical model of disability seeks to cure or fix the impairment so that the person is more capable of functioning successfully in existing environments. This may include use of supports such as glasses or hearing aids, as well as treatments such as speech or occupational therapy. Under this model, the focus is on changing the person to better fit into society and thus experience less disability.

The social model of disability views impairment as a part of human diversity and takes the perspective that it is not the impairment that causes disability, but rather the barriers that people with impairments face in their everyday lives. The social model does not dismiss the reality of impairments and how they impact on individuals, however, it seeks to challenge and remove attitudinal, physical, sensory, communication and social barriers. Under this model, the focus is not on 'fixing' the person but rather on changing society so that every person can participate in life, regardless of any impairment they may have.



Models of Disability (Queensland University of Technology, 2020)

The Social Model of Disability for Inclusive Preschools

When educators have concerns about a child's development they may feel that a developmental assessment or therapy are the most important 'first steps' in supporting the child. This may place pressure on educators to try to convince families to take steps in a particular direction. This tension may inadvertently undermine authentic family-centred practice and collaborative partnerships.

While there can be advantages and disadvantages in a child being diagnosed with a disability or developmental difference, educators can support children to participate meaningfully in the preschool program regardless of a diagnosis or therapeutic intervention. Providing an inclusive environment that meets the child's needs aligns with the social model of disability.

Examples of the social model in the preschool setting:

- ▶ Installing ramps and changing facilities.
- ▶ Embedding visual communication supports.
- ▶ Providing choice and flexibility in routines.
- ▶ Using Key Word Sign across the whole preschool program.
- ▶ Providing opportunities for children to seek or avoid sensory input.
- ▶ Using resources that represent and celebrate human diversity.
- ▶ Intentional teaching of social and emotional regulation skills.
- ▶ 'Rules' and expectations that are fair to everyone, rather than the same for everyone.



A note on the notion of families being ‘in denial’

A common assumption amongst educators is that when families don't take action in the ways educators might suggest, that the family are ‘in denial’. It is important to consider that what may look like ‘denial’ to educators, may in fact be something quite different for the family. Such assumptions are generally based on the Kubler-Ross (1969) model of grief which stems from the medical deficit-based model of disability. When we use the term ‘in denial’, we are inadvertently making a judgement that suggests the educator knows best about what is right for the child and their family.

Educators should consider and reflect on the potential reasons behind a family's response to information shared about their child.

Some of those reasons might include:

- ▶ Educators and families may have different expectations about the benefits of taking action in relation to developmental differences. While educators may think that exploring a concern will provide direction in their work with the child, families may not share the same view, particularly where diagnosis is emphasised as the main priority.
- ▶ The family may be prioritising hope for their child's future; accepting a diagnosis or labelling of disability may feel as if it is removing some of that hope.
- ▶ The child's family may be concerned about stigma related to disability and difference and perhaps feel the need to conceal this from others. This may be related to personal or cultural attitudes and beliefs of the family's wider community.

- ▶ The family may appear to be ‘putting off’ thinking about or acting on concerns, perhaps due to competing priorities for the family at the time.

What can we do to support families?

- ▶ Accept and respect that families will manage concerns about their child in different ways and at different times.
- ▶ Understand that families sometimes need to slow things down, to process the information and understand the situation before taking further action.
- ▶ Support the family's hopes and desires for their child.
- ▶ Listen to the family's perspective, acknowledge their concerns and worries with sensitivity.
- ▶ Be an advocate for developing a positive vision for children with developmental differences.
- ▶ Connect the family with professionals and services that are affirming, supportive and respectful of their needs and priorities as a whole family.

“But when we choose to live with hope, we live from a place of potential and possibility. It gently stops us from setting limits or deciding too early on what the future could look like, and instead it reminds us to plan and embrace joy right now.”

(Kindred, 2021)

Early Conversations

Preschool environments can provide a safe space to begin conversations about developmental differences in the context of trusting relationships between families and educators. Early conversations around developmental differences can have a long-lasting impact on families, so it can be helpful to think of these conversations as ‘sowing an initial seed’ for future discussions. These early conversations may happen incidentally through routine interactions.

Responses from families to early conversations will vary. It is essential to remain non-judgmental and respect the family’s decision about the next steps; as it is their decision to make.

Sometimes parents and carers will be unaware of possible developmental differences, and when educators share information about observations of a child’s development, they may experience a sense of shock. Families may need time to process information before they are ready to think about what they would like to do next. Alternatively, some families may experience a sense of relief when observations are shared. These conversations can provide opportunities for families to share knowledge of their child and to ask questions about their child’s development in the social context of preschool.

Children learn in everyday contexts and through their relationships with those around them. Before, during and after having conversations with families, educators can support children’s development by implementing intentional and individualised strategies and making their environments more inclusive.

‘Windows of opportunity’ vs long term thinking; *Finding the balance*

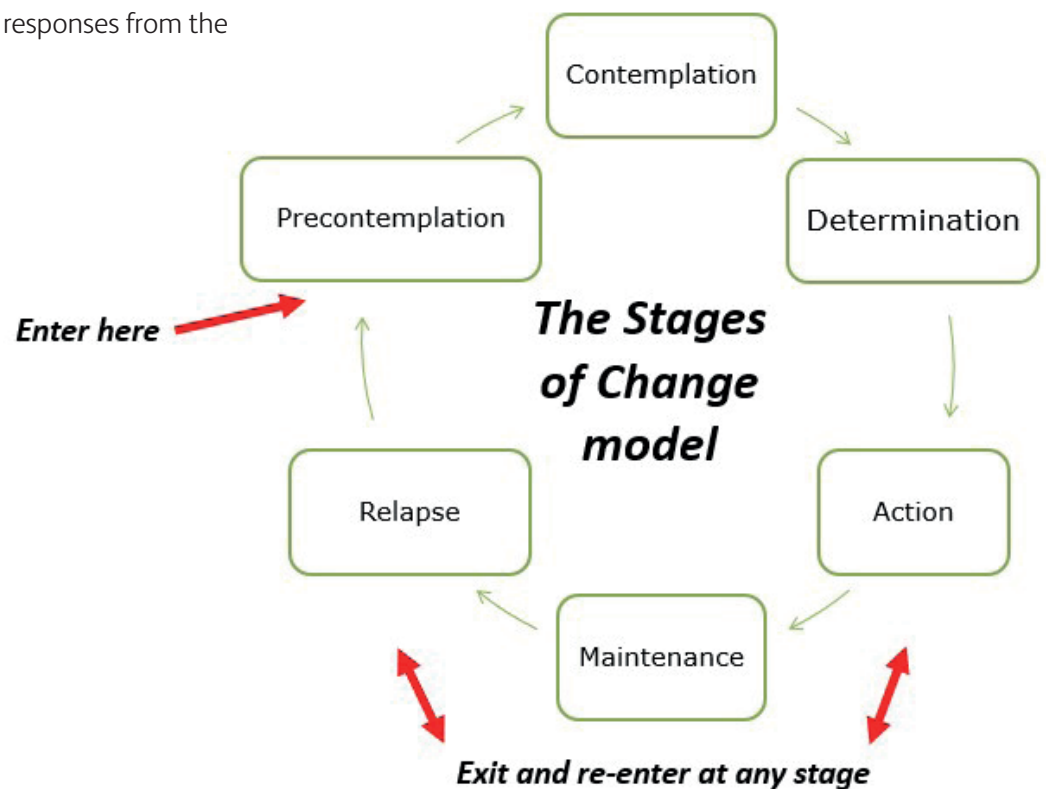
It is possible for educators to recognise their professional responsibility to support children and families during this significant time of a child’s development, while also acknowledging that there is a lifetime ahead for young children and families. Finding this balance can reduce pressure and anxiety for everyone, and lead to positive outcomes for children and families.

Families of older children with a disability tell us that fears about missing ‘windows of opportunity’ for learning caused significant stress, placed limits on their capacity to make decisions, and impacted on the joy of their child’s time at preschool.

Understanding Families' Perspectives

It is important to understand that when sharing information about developmental differences, educators may be introducing information that may lead to change for the family. This may include actual or perceived changes to family dynamics, the family's view of their child, their long-term expectations for their child, and practical considerations such as finances and school options.

The following Stages of Change Model can support educator understanding of the potential experiences and responses from the family's perspective.



Adapted from – The transtheoretical model (Boston University School of Public Health, 2022)

It is important that educators try to match their communication to the family's responses, or where they feel they may be positioned on this cycle at any given time. The Stages of Change model is a cycle, not a linear model. People will often move between stages and may revisit an earlier stage at any time.

Understanding and Supporting Families in Relation to Stages of Change

Stage	Indication	Support
Pre-Contemplation <i>("I don't see this as an issue or I don't feel ready to change yet.")</i>	The family are not showing any indication of having concerns about their child's development.	Offer general information that helps to raise awareness about typical development. E.g. Fact sheets about language milestones shared with families. Plan and implement consistent strategies at preschool.
Contemplation <i>("Maybe something needs to change.")</i>	The family are expressing concerns about their child's learning or behaviour.	Listen to their concerns and share what you know about their child's strengths and needs.
Determination Planning for Change <i>("What do I need to do now?")</i>	The family are wanting more information about how to support their child's development. This may include asking about options for specialised support or assessment	Collect observations of the child and plan to meet with the family to discuss their child's development. Provide information about how you support their child at preschool, and external support or assessment services.
Action <i>(I'm ready to take action.)</i>	The family begin the process of seeking specialised support and/or assessment for their child.	Positively reinforce the families' choices and continue to provide support. If needed, help families with making referrals and/or providing reports about the child's participation at preschool. Liaise with other professionals with parent consent.
Maintenance <i>("I can see these changes are an improvement.")</i>	The family continue to work with allied health professionals in collaboration with the preschool to support their child.	Involve the family and any other professionals in developing and evaluating an ILP for the child.
Relapse <i>("I can't see that the pros of this change outweigh the cons right now.")</i>	Families choose not to continue with intervention. There are many reasons that this may occur including: time, financial limitations, family stress, a negative experience or a lack of desired progress.	Respectfully support the family in their decisions. Continue to involve the family in planning, evaluating and decision making regarding their child's ILP. Employ best-practice inclusive strategies to support the child's development and participation at preschool.

"We only have the child for 2 years."

Educators often feel a sense of time pressure to support children's development before a child starts school. Taking an approach based on the social model of disability, consider how the preschool can work collaboratively with the family and school to help the school be ready for the child. It is also valuable to recognise that important learning and development continues beyond early childhood.

Preparing for Conversations about Development

Following on from early informal conversations, it may be useful to plan a meeting with the family to share information about a child's participation at preschool and home.

Reflective questions to consider before planning a conversation about child development with a family:

- ▶ How well does your team and the family know each other?
- ▶ How well does your team know the child?
- ▶ Is there trust and respect between your team and the family?
- ▶ Has your team engaged with the family in general positive conversations?
- ▶ Is it the right time to organise a more specific meeting?

To support positive communication with families it is important to be prepared before you meet more formally.

When preparing for a meeting with a family ask yourself the following questions:

- ▶ What tells you this conversation is needed?
- ▶ What specific factors might make this a challenging conversation?
- ▶ How and when will you open the conversation about the need for a meeting?
- ▶ What is the purpose of the meeting? Ensure that the purpose of the meeting is communicated with the family before the meeting occurs.

Note: In certain situations, educators may feel that the family may not be able to manage the conversation. However, it may be more challenging for the family to find out that educators had information about their child's development but didn't share it, even with the best of intentions. It is important to offer families options and respect their decisions.

Thinking points

Before you talk with families, have you and your team reflected on...

- Your attitudes, beliefs, and feelings about inclusion?
- Your own assumptions about a child and their family.
- How beliefs and biases influence your approach to the conversation?

Gathering Information

- ▶ Gather a variety of data that has been taken by several team members in a range of contexts, to help paint a clear picture of the child's participation at preschool.
- ▶ Have observations and other information ready to discuss.
- ▶ Ensure that you are collecting information about the child's interests and strengths, as well as challenges.
- ▶ Present information professionally and clearly and avoid the use of any jargon.
- ▶ Keep the focus on the child and use your knowledge of early childhood development to inform your understanding about the child.
- ▶ Consider how you can include the child's voice in information you share.
- ▶ Share information about strategies you may be using such as how the preschool environment is being adapted to promote inclusion.

Data collection may include:

- ▶ Information provided by families
- ▶ A range of observations of the child that may include:
 - Running records
 - Anecdotal records
 - ABC charts
 - Scatter plots
 - Time samples
 - Language samples
 - Frequency tallies

NB. Observations should be recorded by several educators at different times of the day. Ensure that you are intentionally noting the child's perspective e.g. language, gestures or behaviour.

- ▶ Current support strategies - Information about strategies that are being used at preschool e.g. notes about how the child has responded to use of visual supports.
- ▶ A developmental milestones questionnaire might be completed with the family to gather their knowledge about their child and combine that information with what you are seeing at preschool, for example the Ages and Stages Questionnaires.

Planning the meeting - points to consider:

- ▶ Privacy and confidentiality - Ensure the meeting is held in a private space, free from interruptions. Also be mindful of the need for privacy and confidentiality for other children and families.
- ▶ Ask the parent if they would like to bring someone with them to the meeting, e.g. partner or grandparent.
- ▶ Consider whether an interpreter may be needed.
- ▶ Preschool staff- It is good idea to have 2 team members present – one to lead the conversation, the other to take minutes.
- ▶ Care for the child - suggest care is arranged for their child or arrange care at the preschool. Where possible avoid holding the meeting in front of the child.
- ▶ Determine a timeframe - state this at the commencement of the meeting e.g. 30 mins. This will help you maintain focus and support a smooth close to this meeting.



During the meeting

Using the following communication strategies during the meeting can support your ongoing relationship with the family, and lead to positive outcomes for their child.

- ▶ Be welcoming, empathetic, open-minded and flexible.
- ▶ Approach the conversation without judgement; be aware of your own and the family's potential emotional responses.
- ▶ Ensure the family know that the conversation in the meeting is aimed at learning more about and supporting their child and is confidential.
- ▶ Provide general information first - talk about the child's strengths and interests observed at preschool.
- ▶ Respond to and acknowledge family concerns as they arise; be sensitive and respectful.
- ▶ Listen to the family. Provide opportunities and time for them to comment, ask questions, and contribute throughout the conversation.
- ▶ Use open-ended questions that invite families to share relevant information for example: *"How do you find that Yen lets you know what she wants at home?"*
- ▶ Consider how the parent/carer might be feeling. They are likely to be advocating for what they believe is best for their child at this time.

Positive communication strategies

- Active listening
- Open-ended questions
- Stay on topic
- Be objective
- Clarify messages
- Be aware of body language
- Take time - pause, allow for reflection

Questions for the family during the meeting

- Are there any other professionals or therapists working with the child and family and what is their focus? Note that the preschool would like to work collaboratively with those involved in the child's team.
- Is what we've shared from preschool similar to your experiences at home or in other places?
- What would you like to happen next? Offer to share some resources relevant to your conversation.

- ▶ Be mindful that the word 'concern' may be alarming for the family. For example, instead you could try saying: "We've noticed that Jahir isn't using many words to communicate at preschool. Have you noticed him talking at home?"
- ▶ Communicate your high expectations for the child, and your commitment to the child's rights, especially in relation to inclusion and education. Be clear that this conversation doesn't affect the child's enrolment. Refer to preschool policies and philosophy (if needed).
- ▶ Reinforce that you will continue work in partnership with the family.
- ▶ Outline agreed next steps and plan to check in by a particular date.

Understanding Emotions

Some conversations with families about developmental differences in children may be highly emotional. As well as the many positive outcomes from these discussions, there is also the potential for families and educators to feel confronted, overwhelmed, sad, frustrated or even angry. At all times it is important that everyone feels safe and supported at all times during the meeting.

Educators can support families by:

- ▶ Recognising what the family may be feeling and why.
- ▶ Paying attention to verbal and non-verbal cues (tone of voice, facial expressions, body language and words).
- ▶ Paraphrasing and reflecting back emotions, to show you are listening and trying to understand.
- ▶ Managing your own emotions (pause, take deep breaths) to avoid impulsive responses.
- ▶ Being respectful, supportive and constructive.
- ▶ Noticing a shift in energy levels or a change in progress (e.g. increased tension; reduced participation). If needed suggest an early finish to the meeting or a pause or break to reset and revisit discussions.

Educators can be supported by:

- ▶ Supportive leadership.
- ▶ Having clear policies and procedures around communicating with families and ensuring team members are familiar with these prior to the meeting.
- ▶ Having a procedure to manage any escalation/ conflict during the conversation or meeting or that occurs afterwards.
- ▶ Creating a 'help-seeking environment' at the service where it is safe and encouraged to ask for help (BeYou, 2023, p.13).

Possible Emotional Responses

- Shock
- Fear
- Sadness
- Disbelief
- Relief
- Worry
- Anger

Ending the Meeting

How you end the meeting plays a part in determining its success. It is important to keep note of the time and take steps to end the meeting within the stated timeframe and aim to end on a positive note.

This can be done by:

- ▶ Inviting any final questions or comments to ensure everyone has had a chance to speak and seek clarification.
- ▶ Recapping the main points of the discussion and any decisions that were made to ensure everyone's understanding.
- ▶ Confirming options for next steps for the family and educators.
- ▶ Asking the family their preferred method of contact and provide your own contact details.
- ▶ Arranging a mutually agreed time to meet again and follow up.
- ▶ Thanking the parents for their time and contribution to the meeting.

After the Meeting:

- ▶ Keep the lines of communication open and be reliable – follow through.
- ▶ Allow the family time to process information shared.
- ▶ Ensure minutes are accurate and complete before emailing to the family. Include any agreed actions or potential next steps.
- ▶ Communicate and collaborate with the family as you work through each step.
- ▶ Send a reminder for the next meeting date.
- ▶ Continue to gather information about their child's participation and engagement at preschool to share with the family.
- ▶ Make sure to debrief, reflect and evaluate with a colleague after the meeting.

Additional Information for Families:

It can be helpful to have some information ready to share with the family following the meeting, as appropriate to the discussion:

- ▶ Strategies that can be used at preschool and at home immediately, regardless of a diagnosis or external support.
- ▶ Specific resources to support their child's development.

If families would like to seek further support for their child, be prepared to share information and contact details relevant to your local area. Contact your Preschool Inclusion Consultant if you would like further information or contact details.

This may include:

- ▶ Community Health.
- ▶ Paediatricians.
- ▶ NDIS Early Childhood Approach partner in the community.
- ▶ Early childhood intervention services e.g. supported play groups, allied health professionals, such as speech pathologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, psychologists.
- ▶ Parent support options e.g. online networks or face to face support groups.
- ▶ Parent education courses such as Triple P for supporting positive behaviour or Hanen® programs for supporting language and communication development.

Wrapping up a challenging conversation

Below is an example of one way to conclude a meeting which may not be progressing in a positive direction:

“We’ve talked about a lot today, and I wonder if it might be good to wrap up here and arrange another time to talk about the next steps.

In the meantime, I will send you the information about milestones/therapists (dependent on what is relevant and has been discussed) and a meeting summary.

Let’s meet again in around 2 weeks, after you have had some time to think about what we’ve talked about today. I’ll be in touch to arrange a time that suits you”.

In Summary

When we are well prepared and approach conversations with families with respect, compassion and kindness, there are benefits for all – children, families, educators and community.

- ▶ Actively listen to families with the goal of understanding their perspective.
- ▶ Meet families where they are at by considering the 'Stages of Change' model.
- ▶ Know the child – spend time with the child and take detailed observations.
- ▶ Keep the focus on the importance of what educators and families can do to support the child's learning and development.
- ▶ Reduce the emphasis on diagnosis being the goal.
- ▶ Know yourself, your own emotional triggers and professional boundaries.
- ▶ View the conversation as ongoing. You may sow some of the initial 'seeds' around understandings of differences in development, the 'flower' that grows in terms of the family's awareness and understanding of their child may occur gradually over time.
- ▶ Trust yourselves as educators – what you do at preschool each day matters to the child and their development.



Advocating for Every Child's Right to Inclusion

Preschools can play an important role in communicating with your community about every child's right to be included in an early childhood setting. This may include sharing information about your philosophy on inclusion, neurodiversity, and difference more generally. Your enrolment and orientation procedures, newsletters, or online platforms and the choice of teaching resources used such as books and toys that depict differences in appearance, abilities and culture are all examples of ways this can be demonstrated. When preschools talk about the benefits for all children of participating in an inclusive early childhood setting, diversity is valued and celebrated and a sense of belonging for all children and families can result.

Educators need to work in partnership with families to determine positive and informative ways to communicate about developmental differences with children. There is evidence that when children have information and understanding about differences, they are more inclusive towards their peers. When talking with children, there is a need to respect confidentiality for individual children, as well as child and family preferences.

ACECQA have developed a range of resources that can support educators to advocate for children's rights to inclusion here:

<https://www.acecqa.gov.au/resources/disability-discrimination-act-1992-dda-resources>

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For more information and to contact the KU Sector Capacity Building Team visit: www.kudisabilityinclusion.com.au

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