

# SCHOOL LIFE IS MORE THAN ACADEMICS: The Power of Extracurricular Participation



FAMILIES FOR  
**INCLUSIVE  
EDUCATION**



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Expanding Ideas; Creating Change

When we look back on our own time at school, the memories that stand out most fondly may not be ones in the classroom, learning about Pythagorus or Shakespeare. Our most positive and influential memories of school often arise from experiences outside of the formal curriculum – the friendships made around the camp bonfire or the fun times rehearsing for the school concert. Joining the high school tennis club, regardless of whether we were good at tennis or not, and learning that physical activity is so much more fun with a friend who wants to have a go and a laugh. The school musical; being part of the planning of costumes and lighting, or discovering confidence in the spotlight; learning there is satisfaction in following your passion; the anticipation and excitement of opening night. And camps or school team trips which helped forge our independence, sense of self, and connections with our school friends that can last a life time.

Inclusive schools support every child to participate fully in school life. A rigorous attention to academic skills rightly deserve our attention, but there also needs to be mindful intention and planning to ensure every Queensland student is welcomed, valued and contributing to every part of school life, including the co-curricular and extra-curricular life of the school.

In this short collection of stories from families, we will explore the different ways that potential involvement in extra-curricular activities were overcome – and the many benefits that flow from “figuring out” how every student can participate fully in school life. While there are no one size fits all solutions, we hope to draw out some starting points for families and schools. Some families have chosen to contribute anonymously and pseudonyms have been used. In others, families have shared their names and photos. We share these examples to acknowledge the great work of Queensland schools in paying attention to social belonging, while aiming to inspire families and schools to keep seeing the possibilities in inclusive school communities.

We hope you will enjoy these stories and encourage you to read the booklet on **Building Belonging in the School Community** which will extend thinking on how students can participate in valued ways within the school community.

**Lisa Bridle**  
Senior Consultant  
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# JOE'S CANBERRA TRIP



In this family story, we hear from Nerida about how her son, Joe, was actively included in his school's year 6 Canberra trip, an achievement which at times seemed unlikely – but produced an amazing legacy of skills he has been able to apply to life outside school.

*“I knew how much Joe wanted to go, and how exciting the opportunity was for him. At the same time, I was acutely aware of how prepared all parties involved would need to be in order to make what would be the trip of a child's lifetime a success!”*

The Grade 6 Canberra Camp took place toward the end of the school year in 2017. I knew how much Joe wanted to go, and how exciting the opportunity was for him. At the same time, I was acutely aware of how prepared all parties involved would need to be in order to make what would be the trip of a child's lifetime a success! The itinerary involved two flights in each direction, 5 nights' away without any phone contact, and a jam packed, sun up to sun down schedule full of new experiences, foods, and faces.

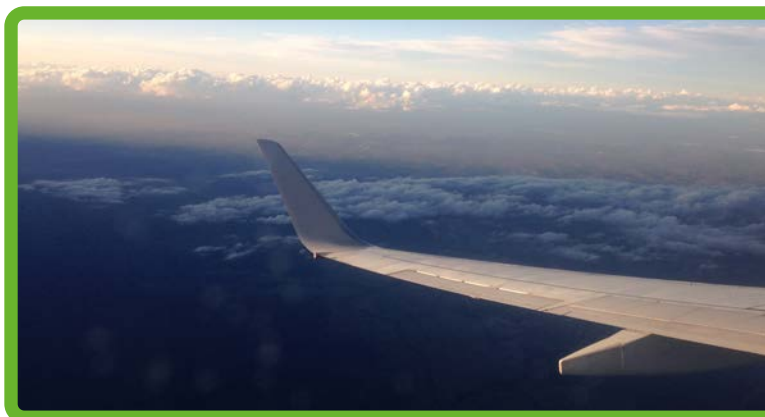
All other primary schools in our area hold two (usually local) camps, which often take place in grade 4 and 6. As Canberra is such an expensive trip, however, and over 1500km from home, it is the only camp for our school, and as a consequence involved many firsts for my then 12-year-old boy.

The preparation started well over a year in advance for him, but the worry began years before that for me! Joe has disabilities which include Autism Spectrum

Disorder and Tourette Syndrome, however it was the phobias (heights and flying), as well as anxiety and panic attacks (separation, noise, new experiences, flexible/unpredictable routines, and fear of the unknown, and more!) that he had to face head on. At each step of the process – camp meeting, submission of permission slips, payment of deposit, final payment, and at every single moment in between, I'd anticipated the quiet chat where I would be told that it was in his “best interest” that he stay home. That talk didn't happen though, and the school and I went full steam ahead with preparation!

The support staff member that was attending camp, began forming a relationship with my son 12 months out from departure. She mentored him through a particular program called BRAVE, which is an evidence based Cognitive Behavioural Therapy program developed by the University of Queensland for children and teenagers with anxiety disorders and social or other phobias. BRAVE stands for Body Signs, Relaxation, Active Helpful Thoughts, Victory Over Your Fears, and Enjoy! Reward Yourself.

The school mentoring through the BRAVE program used the school camp as the particular focus and goal





throughout the course. My son enjoyed and engaged with the various animations, quizzes, puzzles and interactive games that the program involves, and we saw results in a variety of contexts. In addition, the same support staff teacher also initiated many informal conversations with him over the months. This was to both build on their relationship, and familiarise him with flying, changing planes, rooming, meals, the day to day schedule of camp, and all of the associated expectations. It was a sustained and intentional effort over time, and with it our confidence built.

*“One of the aspects I valued most from the camp, was that the children with disabilities weren’t ever separated into ‘special’ groups. They instead remained with their peers, and only when an issue arose would the support staff intervene.”*

When we arrived at the airport, bright and early on departure day, Joe was extremely reluctant to get out of the car. By the time we had set foot in the terminal, he was in a high state of distress. With close to 200 children, parents, and staff, the atmosphere was noisy and chaotic. Joe declared that he was not able to go, and he was sorry for letting everybody down. The support teacher, whom by now Joe was comfortable with and had built excellent rapport, had anticipated his reaction and approached us to assist. We stepped aside whilst she took the reins. They left the chaos of the terminal to a quiet place outside where she helped him gather his thoughts. Not long after, they re-entered the terminal. This time however, he had a cautious but cheery disposition.

I am told that the trip went wonderfully for him, and his fears were overcome in not all, but most situations. One of the aspects I valued most from the camp, was that the children with disabilities weren’t ever separated into ‘special’ groups.

They instead remained with their peers, and only when an issue arose would the support staff intervene. Joe is highly sensitive to ‘othering’, and separation and segregation would have hindered, not helped his preparation and participation. In the end, he exclaimed that he did have that trip of a lifetime. He was so proud of himself for going, and said many times over that he was grateful he didn’t get his way and stay behind! As a parent I applaud the school for their part in ensuring his attendance. I had heard so many stories of other families being discouraged from sending their kids on similar challenging camps – but what an adventure and learning and social opportunity he would have missed out on!

Our story has a postscript. The skills gained from attending camp extended across contexts and time. We observed immediate and lasting improvements in confidence, growth in self-esteem, and development in his ability to perform tasks and make decisions with tenacity and independence. Only weeks after returning from camp, we received a call informing my husband that he needed to urgently fly to London. We woke Joe to ask if he would like to go with his dad. He immediately began to panic, shake, and wail; said he needed a few weeks to think about it, he was too scared to fly, needed more notice about the change in plans, and more. We explained that there was no time, the next flight was in less than 3 hours, but to trust himself, he’d done it all on camp. When I informed the school later that morning of the situation, the Principal, his camp support teacher, and his classroom teacher all commented on how well camp had prepared him for the spontaneity, the separation, his phobias around flying, and the great unknown of this last minute family urgency. With this I very much agree. Many years later, Joe still talks about how the 3 weeks in England, with just him and his dad, spending time with his grandfather and meeting his cousins, was the best decision he has ever made... and how he almost didn’t make it!

# THE END OF YEAR CONCERT, AND PRIMARY SCHOOL GRADUATION

Casey loves music and belongs on the stage! When preparations for the End of Year Concert commenced and Casey's teacher mentioned that they were finding it difficult to engage her in the practice sessions, we knew it wasn't because she didn't want to perform! We met in person to discuss current approach and how it could be amended to better suit Casey. The result was that Casey needed more time to learn and process the dance moves. Different strategies were tried to increase her engagement levels and the teacher came up with the idea of cheerleading pom poms that she could shake around during practice. The practice session was filmed and placed on Casey's assistive tech so she could watch dance moves to bring more familiarity with the choreography. On the night of the concert Casey was distracted by the excitement of the night and enthusiastically brought her own dance moves front of stage (reluctant to move), her peers seamlessly moved around her, guiding her at times. The choice of theme and music piece was a very smart and strategic choice by the teacher which created a dynamic which worked really well with Casey's strengths.

It would have been easy to see Casey's early disengagement as a sign she wasn't interested in performing, or to have her there but on the sidelines supported by a teaching assistant.

*“On the night of the concert Casey was distracted by the excitement of the night and enthusiastically brought her own dance moves front of stage (reluctant to move) her peers seamlessly moved around her, guiding her at times.”*

But no, there was an expectation she would participate and that the school would work with us to figure out the HOW.

Another highlight was graduation! As a valued member of the Grade 6 cohort, Casey was included in singing the song at the Grade 6 graduation performance. Her enthusiastic movements were embraced rather than subdued (which we know doesn't always happen!).







*“They didn’t “just happen” – they took thoughtful collaboration between her family and the school and forward planning to draw out Casey’s strengths, address her vulnerabilities or challenges, and plan for her valued participation so she could “shine” and take her place as “one of the gang”.*”

At her Graduation ceremony, Casey was encouraged to be as independent as possible, treated the same as every other child stepping up on stage to graduate primary school, and when she found it difficult to step off the stage the teacher seamlessly and unobtrusively stepped in to assist her down. At the celebration afterwards her food was cut up inconspicuously (for ease of eating) and adjustments were made to allow maximum independence.

Our family have wonderful memories of Casey’s graduation night. Casey looked beautiful in her dress, she danced the night away with her friends and loves the photos she had taken with them, having fun and looking glamorous.

I feel sure that when Casey looks back on her school years, it will be these moments shared with friends which will be the most treasured memories. They didn’t “just happen” – they took thoughtful collaboration between her family and the school and forward planning to draw out Casey’s strengths, address her vulnerabilities or challenges, and plan for her valued participation so she could “shine” and take her place as “one of the gang”.

# THE SWIMMING CARNIVAL



I'd just like to give a recent example of inclusion that made my heart sing and illustrates the lasting effect it can have. I think it also highlights that it doesn't have to be an arduous or prolonged task/activity for it to have a big impact! It would have been so easy to just keep Taylor at home or stay back at school on the swimming carnival day (it was so hot!), but no - the expectation and facilitation was there from staff for him to join in. He was encouraged, supported and the presumption was that he would participate, even if it took time and effort to get there.

I sent this email after the senior swimming carnival which tells the story.

*Hi Cath and team,*

*I just wanted to touch base about the swimming carnival yesterday and give you some feedback.*

*It may not seem a big deal for him to have that 1-2 minutes in the actual pool but the flow-on effects are amazing! I heard many kids come up to him afterwards and say, "we saw you in the pool Taylor!", "did you like going in the pool Taylor?", "was the water cold Taylor?" And I had a few adults as well, commenting on seeing Taylor in there. It may also flow on to today, when the kids are talking in class about the swimming carnival, they can include him in the conversation – about the cold water, sitting/sleeping on the hill, the cold shaved ice things, and about how hot it was!*

*It didn't matter at all to me that that first race was the one and only time Taylor was in the pool, as far as I was concerned the objective had been achieved! He was there, he participated, he had been seen by his peers and the wider school community. It's the interactions that come afterwards that are so valuable to Taylor and our family.*

*So thanks again for everyone's efforts yesterday, it was much appreciated!*

*Cheers,*

*Hazel*

Two weeks later I then also sent this follow up email:

*Hello again,*

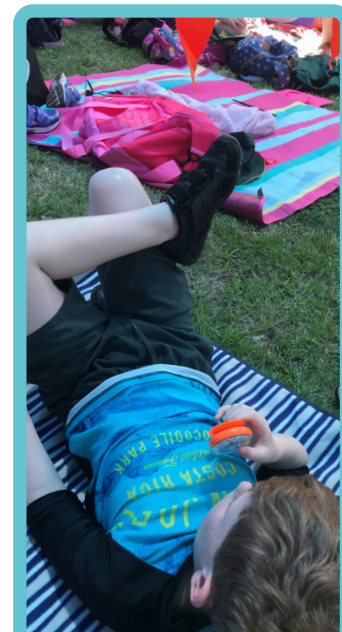
*I just wanted to add that Taylor continued to talk about his swimming carnival the week after School finished. He had a few medical appointments and at each one the staff asked him how his last week of school went, his first answer was always - I went to my swimming carnival. He also told relatives about it and talked about it again just a few days ago.*

*He also cannot wait to go back to school! Thanks again!*

*Cheers,*

*Hazel*

*"He was encouraged, supported and the presumption was that he would participate, even if it took time and effort to get there."*





# THE CLASS PHOTO



*“Navigating subsequent photos has meant we have needed to be proactive in suggesting how this might be managed – communication, timing and physical management. This is the small efforts behind the scenes that families who don’t have a student with disability may never have to think about.”*

Getting a good photo is more than having a good memento. A good class photo is an easy way to show Eliza and her peers she is included.

Unfortunately, Eliza’s first kindy photo was cried over and shoved in a dusty drawer.

Lesson learnt, 14 more years to crack the code.

In that kindy photo, Eliza appeared to the far left of the class, on the outside of the whole class, not in her wheelchair, not sitting on the steps with the rest of the class but held on the hip of the teacher aide. She was 4 years old. Eliza was 4 years old like the rest of her class, she was not the youngest, she was not the littlest, she could sit independently on a set of steps. Her individual photo had her perched on a bike like all the other children had been. But her class photo showed her held on the hip of an adult.

Navigating subsequent photos has meant we have needed to be proactive in suggesting how this might be managed – communication, timing and physical management. This is the small efforts behind the scenes that families who don’t have a student with disability may never have to think about. But Eliza’s standing in her class – actual and figuratively is important. Prep photo – nailed it!

Thoughtful schools, like ours, also do their bit to make the most of these small but important school moments.







## THE HIGH SCHOOL VOLLEYBALL TEAM

*“Dear Principal*

*I just wanted to acknowledge the wonderful work Julia and Scott have done including Alice in volleyball this term.*

*Bill and I were pleasantly surprised when Alice signed herself up for GBC volleyball during sign up last term. We knew nothing about it until we got the email from Julia. From that time, it has been nothing but an extremely welcoming and rewarding experience for Alice.*

*Scott has been endlessly encouraging, his energy and positivity is catching, and I am so very grateful for the time he has given and the enthusiasm with which he has approached coaching all the team, including Alice. Alice and all her friends have loved going to the Volleyball team’s training sessions every week. They have had great fun and learnt a lot. Scott and Julia have spent the term working towards the expectation that Alice would play in a competitive game.*

*Alice got her opportunity on the court last Saturday, where she spent 3 minutes experiencing what it was like to be in that zone, under pressure. She came off when she wanted to. I loved that Scott even tried to encourage her back on later in the game, but she decided herself that she’d had enough of the experience for that day.*

*I don’t know if Alice will decide to sign herself up for other sports, or volleyball again, in the future. But before this term leaves us, I want you to know what Julia and Scott have provided for Alice is the opportunity to experience competitive sport, to turn up for training every week, to cheer on her team, to feel the pressure on the court, and to see herself in the College magazine in the team photo. Oh, and she got to experience going out for hot chocolate after the last game, with the rest of the team, a bonus :) Awesome high school memories.*

*Regards  
Jane”*

*“Alice got her opportunity on the court last Saturday, where she spent 3 minutes experiencing what it was like to be in that zone, under pressure. She came off when she wanted to.”*

# THE DUKE OF EDINBURGH'S AWARD

If students are being offered extra-curricular programs and it offers Lauren an opportunity to try something that interests her or extends her natural skills, then 'count us in'. In most cases, at least initially, there is an element of fear or low expectations from the staff. However, I have found that proactive engagement from me can usually address any concerns.

During her primary school years 4-6, Lauren was offered a place in the Duke of Edinburgh (DOE) program's Deadly Dukes (primary school) program.

*"The Duke of Edinburgh's Award (Duke of Ed) is a prestigious international Award for young people. It provides a pathway for young people to develop leadership skills and an opportunity to contribute to their community."*

The Duke of Edinburgh's Award (Duke of Ed) is a prestigious international Award for young people. It provides a pathway for young people to develop leadership skills and an opportunity to contribute to their community. Lauren was required to participate in four sections of Deadly Dukes:

Volunteering, Skills, Physical Recreation and Adventurous Journey.

Together with the facilitator, we identified appropriate goals that were both meaningful and achievable. Lauren would be expected to complete all tasks and goals. Where adjustments needed to be made they were agreed to. Where support was required it was negotiated and implemented.

Volunteering was by far the most enjoyable for Lauren. The opportunity identified her love for 'Acts of Service'.





# THE DUKE OF EDINBURGH'S AWARD

She prepared breakfast on School weekday mornings for disadvantaged students. The hours and nature of volunteering were recorded in her Deadly Dukes log book. Lauren was supported by me or another volunteer.

Lauren attended 'Circus classes' weekly where she worked on skills such as trapeze, juggling, tight rope, tumbling and acro-balance. Together with the Circus class teacher we identified skills that could be incorporated in the Deadly Dukes' program goals. These were measured and reported on in her Deadly Dukes' log book.

*"These all culminated in Lauren 'qualifying' for an adventurous journey day where the Deadly Dukes' participants enjoyed a day in the community learning about its history and cultural aspects. It was a fun day that rewarded Lauren for all her hard work."*

Lauren's physical endurance was a goal identified for physical recreation. Specifically walking greater distances without assistance. This was achieved by using our local Strand to extend her walking distance whilst getting the opportunity to participate in all that The Strand has to offer by way of parks, playgrounds, exercise equipment, waterpark and beaches. The activities were recorded in her Deadly Dukes' log book. This was supported as a family activity.

These all culminated in Lauren 'qualifying' for an adventurous journey day where the Deadly Dukes' participants enjoyed a day in the community learning about its history and cultural aspects. It was a fun day that rewarded Lauren for all her hard work. Lauren needed support to participate, and this was achieved using some external funding but resourced from within the DOE community to give the opportunity to a young woman to gain experience in this role.

At the end of the program year, participants were presented certificates of achievement in front of the School assembly and published in the School newsletter. In summary, Lauren's participation showed that she can participate, contribute and celebrate in achievements with her peers. The opportunity built her confidence, independence, resilience and social skills.

The 'money can't buy' stuff that came from Lauren's inclusion in the Duke of Ed program was friendship, being known in her community and her personal sense of achievement.



# TIPS

## HOW FAMILIES CAN PROMOTE THEIR FAMILY MEMBER'S INCLUSION IN CO-CURRICULAR ASPECTS OF SCHOOL LIFE:

- Pay attention to your child's interests and strengths.
- Expect your child will fully participate! Build your vision, belief and courage.
- Know that your child doesn't need to be "ready" for inclusion in extra and co-curricular activities, any more than they need to be "ready" for school inclusion – it is their right to be included.
- Don't wait until your child has developed all the skills – starting early when everyone is learning is usually best – but it is never too early or too late to be included.
- Think about potential barriers to your child's inclusion in school activities, and offer suggestions to the school to reduce these barriers. Families, and students themselves, can have a wealth of knowledge gained from including their family member in family events, and sometimes families can forget these ideas were once new to them too. Try to capture those ideas succinctly so you can share that with the school.
- When you know your child's strengths and interests, start scoping out co-curricular activities that are naturally engaging to your child's unique interests, skills or other attributes.
- It may work to find a staff member/s in the school with interests similar to your child's – perhaps there are new untapped activities that could be fostered, that would appeal to many children in the school.
- If your child has friends who are engaged in a particular co-curricular activity, that might also be a good match for your child, start a conversation with the school about how your child can become involved.
- Approach with a positive mindset – and go in with confidence. You don't want to "beg", instead try to communicate a commitment to figuring out how your child can participate.
- If you have identified an activity of interest but it is too complex, think of whether partial participation (shorter time or taking a small role in the activity) could be possible, e.g. if your child can't (yet!) play a full game of soccer, they may be able to help with scoring, or play for a shorter time.
- Remain open to possibilities, and remember it's part of childhood to try out things to find what one's interests are, many of which may not play to an individual's strengths, but lessons are learned from the experience anyway.
- Think ahead – families find it helpful to be aware of the activities coming up – the excursions, camps, sports carnivals, concerts, bookweek activities etc – and start thinking about what will make those events successful. It is often best to start discussions early, particularly if you aren't sure the school will be on the front foot.



## WHAT SCHOOLS CAN DO TO INCLUDE ALL CHILDREN IN CO-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES:

- Embrace a culture where every student is welcomed to participate fully in school life
- Consult with students, and their families, to look at their unique interests and strengths, and promote the relevant co-curricular opportunities that already exist within your school to them (don't presume an interest or strength based on a particular diagnosis)
- Use families as a resource of ideas: schools don't need to have all the answers of how to include, just be willing to try, and learn from families about how they include their child (lessons learned often through years of trial and error)
- look at valued ways a child can be included in a meaningful contributing way with their peers (not as a mascot, or as a favour) and avoid supports which exceptionalise the student (eg. Instead of the teacher aide as puppet master to follow the school concert moves, explore ways pre-rehearsal, peer support, and even providing cues off stage might work.
- School leaders can make sure there is an expectation that every student participates in all school activities – and should make resources available to support these. Often this might be staff time to consult/plan and to coach the student's peers rather than provision of one on one support.
- School leaders can also monitor the culture of the school and the variety of co-curricular activities on offer – if they are narrow (e.g. only sport, only the arts, only for academic high achievers) or don't cater for students at different levels - expanding the range of options available will usually benefit students with disability but also the whole school. It is an effective proactive way to build a more inclusive, cohesive school community where everyone has the chance to shine and belong.
- Inclusion is everybody's business: the role of including all children is part of everyone's job in a school environment; it may just take some time to learn and gain confidence but if the student and family are involved throughout the planning, then the outcomes are sure to be positive for everyone.

### TERMINOLOGY:

There are no hard and fast definitions of co-curricular and extra-curricular.

Co-curricular commonly refers to activities, programs, and learning experiences that complement, in some way, what students are learning in school—i.e., experiences that are connected to or mirror the academic curriculum. An example might be the science fair because it still contributes to academic learning.

Extra-curricular activities are less closely associated with academic structures and can include activities outside school, for example, sports and athletic activities or a school club which is primarily recreational or not aligned to any academic subject area.



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