

2 PEER SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES

Any child's school journey usually includes easy and hard years, but pursuing inclusive education commonly involves some extra challenges. In the tough times, advocating for inclusion for your child can feel isolating and difficult to navigate.

When families band together to support each other, they find it easier to stay on the inclusive path and to positively influence their child's experience of education.

WHAT IS PEER SUPPORT?

Peer support is simply families supporting each other. A peer support network provides **mutual** family-to-family support; no-one is the "expert" (though people may have different levels of knowledge and experience). It is a safe place for conversation and connection with people who share similar values and aspirations.

Peer support takes many forms: informal conversation between two or more people, formal programs with links to trained "mentors", online groups (e.g. closed or open Facebook groups), email or phone conversations, and small or large group gatherings. Many peer support networks include a mix of face-to-face and online supports.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

Members of peer support networks say the connections with others help them to develop their vision and expectations for school inclusion, become more confident advocates and make the most of the school years as a foundation for an inclusive life. They can learn from advocacy role-models – including adults with disability and other families – who have already travelled the inclusive education path. Many families also enjoy the opportunity to be part of a collective voice for change.

Other benefits include:

- reducing feelings of isolation
- clarifying what you should be asking for
- learning more about inclusive education e.g. what it should look like, legislation and policy
- debriefing after troublesome interactions, dealing with emotional reactions and having a sounding board on what to do next.

HOW TO SET UP A PEER SUPPORT NETWORK

Start small! Ideally try to plan your first meeting with one or two others interested in school inclusion. Decide on a time and place for an initial gathering e.g. a coffee morning or an evening wine and cheese. Publicise the meeting through local community papers, social media, local schools, early intervention playgroups or disability-specific support groups.

After consulting at the initial meeting, decide how frequently you want to meet. Try to source a regular venue which has good disability access and public transport, is low or no cost, and is hopefully child-friendly. It may take a while to build numbers but a group which is too small or too big may be vulnerable – keep an eye on ways to find and welcome new members. You may find other ideas at www.peerconnect.org.au.



HOW SHOULD A PEER SUPPORT NETWORK OPERATE?

Each group decides how to run their own peer support network. Even in informal groups, it helps to have one or two designated convenors or facilitators.

Consider some agreements about things like:

- **who can be a member**
- **confidentiality**
- **respecting boundaries**
- **managing conflicts of interest**
(for example, if a member is a family member and also has a role at a school)
- **how to maintain a positive culture.**

Running a peer support network requires attention to both the content and process of the group. Consider the balance between free discussion and facilitated discussion focused on a topic. Asking people to share a highlight of their child's inclusion can be a good ice-breaker, or you can invite a family member to share a story as a way to kickstart discussion.

The peer network convenor/s may identify useful discussion topics in advance. Some of our fact sheets could be used as a stimulus for discussions.

As the group develops, debrief each session with your co-convenor so you keep building knowledge, trust and capacity for mutual support within the group.

“Being part of a powerful group of like-minded families was absolutely critical to surviving the long haul of school advocacy for my son. I loved the rich conversations and feelings of solidarity and camaraderie, being able to cry and laugh with people who understood. I had to watch my tendency to try to “fight every fight” for everyone, but my son’s life was infinitely better because I learnt alongside other families.”

- Member of a parent advocacy organisation

IMPORTANT PRINCIPLES FOR CONVENORS

- Pay attention to privacy and confidentiality.
- Avoid making assumptions and judgments of others.
- Avoid advice-giving or rescuing by encouraging sharing and reflection rather than problem-solving.
- Encourage everyone to do their own research and make their own decisions.
- Set some personal boundaries - (e.g. times you will respond to phone calls).
- Nurture the spirit of mutuality to avoid dependency on one or two individuals as the "experts" or the givers of support.
- Warmly welcome newcomers who may still be unsure about inclusion.
- Watch for being triggered by hearing others' negative experiences.
- Develop your facilitation skills through training and/or mentoring.
- Stay mindful that peer support is only one form of support. Encourage families who are struggling to seek external advocacy or counselling and build their other support networks.
- Pay attention to the group 'mood' - and avoid too much negativity or doom and gloom.

