

# 4 DEALING WITH TRANSITIONS

## STARTING SCHOOL AND STARTING HIGH SCHOOL

When children are starting school or moving to high school these can be challenging transitions and families need to be equipped with the facts. Remember inclusion is for everyone– not just those deemed “good enough.” Students with significant impairments have been successfully included in regular classrooms for several decades here and overseas.

*“Liam’s inclusion has never been about his development, academic abilities, speech, behaviour or “readiness”. The only criterion that any child should have to meet is being of school age.”*

*– Mother of Liam (age seven)*

### STARTING SCHOOL:

#### Allow yourself to be excited.

- Take up the ordinary opportunities open to all families – visit the school; attend the orientation days; meet other students and parents.
- Be warm and approachable – these families could be lifelong friends and allies.
- Enjoy shopping for uniforms, lunchboxes and booklists!
- Think creatively about solutions or practise things which may be challenging – e.g. shoe laces, opening lunchboxes, sitting for long periods.
- Use books and photos to talk about school, and any language and expectations that your child may not pick up easily.
- Document strengths and interests, what your child will love about school, and what helps your child be at their best. This could be shared through pictures or a brief document.
- Don’t overwhelm the classroom teacher with lots of medical or disability terminology or worst case scenarios.
- Provide straightforward explanations, linked with simple, easy to implement strategies.
- Transfer information over time, not in one conversation or a thick file.

Professionals, like kindy teachers and therapists, can provide helpful suggestions for the classroom teacher. This contact will only be helpful if you are totally confident they will suggest inclusive strategies i.e. whole class supports rather than one-on-one strategies.

Don’t expect that the school will know how to include. Let them find their feet but also share your vision, knowledge and ideas e.g. how your son or daughter can participate in the cross country in their wheelchair or in show and tell even if he or she doesn’t speak.

*“To prepare the school, we captured my daughter’s capacities visually – a page of photos of Elizabeth at home and kindy – it was the best way to show Elizabeth’s fine motor, gross motor skills and how she could participate.”*

*– Mother of Elizabeth (age six)*





## MOVING TO HIGH SCHOOL:

High schools can seem like big, scary places for all parents. You may also encounter renewed suggestions to consider a special education placement, based on myths that inclusion only works in early childhood. This is a time for you to renew your vision, trust in your child's capacity for continued growth, and remember the long-term future you are working towards!

### Ask:

- Are classes streamed or mixed ability? If streaming occurs, ask for your child to be in the most able group to provide for peer learning and academic role models.
- Will there be the same subject choices, regular classes and timetable? Seek justification if the focus is on life-skills, community access or alternative subjects/classes rather than inclusion.
- What is the model of support? Encourage creative approaches, as over reliance on teacher aide support can create stigma and isolation from peers. Consider other supports or minimise the impact.
- What planning will make the transition successful? What will help the student feel confident? Address possible challenges e.g. reading a timetable, moving between classes quickly.

High schools are busy places; there are more people to interact with and less direct involvement by families. It will be especially important to think about how you will communicate with the school, and how you can learn about any changes and about your child's school day (if they can't share this with you). Just as in primary school, other families will be potential allies and a great source of information.

*“High school seemed scary at first but has brought all the same amazing benefits and highlights for my daughter as it did for her older sister. Different teachers for different subjects, being surrounded by teenagers talking about teenage ‘stuff’, have all brought on great growth and independence in our girl. Going into high school, I was a better advocate and more practised at those ‘tricky’ conversations. And we are really seeing wonderful opportunities opening up because of the work we’ve put into including her in a regular school community.”*

*– Mother of Georgia (Age 13)*