How do I prepare my child with disabilities for school?

RNZ: Serena Solomon

Beginning school is a major milestone for every child. If that child has a developmental, learning or physical disability, that transition is amplified in its complexity. While support is in place from organisations and the Ministry of Education, the often-exhausting burden of smoothing out that bumpy ride largely falls on parents and guardians to advocate for their child.

Here is what to consider when a child with a disability is gearing up for school.

Choosing a school

Every child in New Zealand has the right to attend a public school, but that doesn't mean all schools are equal in how they handle children who have unique needs, Catherine Trezona from disability support organisation Your Way Kia Roha says.

"That may depend upon the experience they've had with other children, who is on the [school] board and what sort of specialist teachers there are."

Meet with each school's leadership to get a sense of their culture and capabilities. Here is a detailed list of questions you can ask the principal or deputy principal.
"A clued-up principal who knows how to access extra funding is amazing," said Lizi Parlby, a teacher who specialises in students with disabilities.

Parents should consider if the school grounds have what your child needs - fences if they tend to abscond or quiet places in the case of over-stimulation (see further down for mobility challenges).
Tangaroa picked her daughter's school largely because of its inclusive culture. School leadership was eager to listen and learn what her daughter needed, whereas the other schools seemed more interested in the additional government funding her daughter may or may not bring to the school, she says.

"They treated her like she was a normal student, not like there was something wrong with her," she says of her daughter's school.

What about specialist schools and Ongoing Resourcing Scheme (ORS) funding?

There are about 36 specialist day and residential schools for children with disabilities in New Zealand. To get a place at one of those schools, children need to qualify for ORS funding, which is only available to those with "the highest levels of ongoing need," according to the Ministry of Education.
Children with additional needs should have been linked with an early intervention service to help parents navigate support and funding. This is available from birth until six years old. The early intervention service puts together a child's ORS funding application.

School accessibility

For students with mobility challenges, parents should aim to contact their preferred school 18 months before their child's first day. That is the length of time it might take to sort out accessibility issues such as ramps or mobility equipment, Frian Wadia from Parent to Parent, an organisation that supports parents whose children have a disability, says.

"Physical modification and mobility equipment takes a significant amount of time and there are often delays."

The cost of this will be covered by ORS funding if your child qualifies. A school can also apply for property modification funds, which includes occupational therapists accessing the school grounds and what your child needs, Wadia says.

Getting ready for day one

Transitions can be particularly hard for autistic children, Trezona says. Videos of the child going through their new routine can help.

"Get the school's permission - even if it is not during class time - to video the child walking through the gate, walking into the classroom, hanging up their bag, greeting the teacher." Parlby, the special needs teacher, advises parents to get their child acquainted with the school grounds during weekends and holidays before the first day. Get photos printed of the school staff - not just your child's teacher - and create visual timetables of classes and activities so your child understands their new routine.

"Photo books and the visual timetables are things that work really well for children that need that routine."

Parents can also request that their child's existing friends be in their class or that the school connects them with a peer support buddy so their child has an additional familiar face, Parlby says.

How to complain

When you feel a school is not accommodating your child - which they are legally obligated to do - your first step is to follow the school's complaint procedure, Wadia says.
If that does not result in a solution, your next step is to go to the school board. Following this, you can head to New Zealand's Human Rights Commission. Wadia had to do this three different times on behalf of her three sons, who have various disabilities.
If the issue is with an individual teacher, you can go to the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand.

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