

I'M ONE OF A KIND

2.6

WORKING WITH CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

"An inclusive nation is one that celebrates and embraces diversity, and disability is core to diversity. An inclusive nation ensures that every citizen has the opportunity to fully participate in the social, cultural, civic and economic life of that country. And that includes people with a disability and their families."

(Dr Rhonda Galbally in 'Shut Out')

When you are working with a child or parent with a disability, as with any other person, always look past the disability and see the person first. Assume children can participate in age-appropriate activities with their peers with and without disabilities – this is known as inclusion - and find ways of supporting them to do that by making adjustments and giving extra help.

When assessing the needs and wishes of a child or family member with a disability, always involve the child. Make accommodations, rephrase questions, demonstrate and use concrete aids and examples. Use simple words, gestures and body language to communicate. When there is no language, or there is only limited language, see all behaviour as communication.

As with all other children, find out what a child's interests are, their likes and dislikes and their wishes. Focus on the assets and strengths of the child and use those to help the child learn, rather than just focusing on needs. Ask simple questions about where the child goes to school, what kind of support they are getting and who is involved, and then work together with other informal and formal supports.

Parents may not always be aware of all the connections children have made (for example in school), so always ask the child about their friendships. Build on these networks and try to find ways to support them, strengthen and resource them. Also ask what community they are linked in to? What kinds of relationships exist, what are they involved in? If a child has a specific diagnosis or

Gone are the days of a one-size-fits-all approach to working with kids – what they feel they want and need can be vastly different and the only way we can gauge this is to ask.

disability, look for that association (eg the Autism association, Down's syndrome Association). Don't assume people are linked in to services. They may be new to the area or unaware of services.

CONTACTS:

- **Schools:** it's a good idea to always check in with the school principal, and the school counsellor, with the permission of the parent/ carer and child
- **Advocacy for Inclusion** – an ACT-based community organisation: **62869422** or **www.advocacyforinclusion.org/**
- **Family Advocacy** – a NSW-based service building the capacity of parents to advocate on behalf of children and for children to advocate for themselves: **(02) 98690866** or **www.family-advocacy.com/**

Inclusion means that a child is participating in all aspects of life with their typical peers, for example attending their local school, in the same class as children of the same age and participating in their local community events regardless of their support needs.