

Physical needs

Supporting students' diverse needs

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The support teachers provide is crucial to ensure that all students have the opportunity to engage in learning in safe, supportive and well-managed learning environments. Students may require varying supports depending on their strengths and needs. This practice guide is part of a suite of resources developed in partnership with MultiLit and the Institute of Special Educators to help teachers refine or refresh their understanding and practice of supporting students with diverse needs.

Not all students who require additional support will have a diagnosis of disability or a health condition, and some students may have a combination of needs. Teachers and school leaders must reasonably support all students to access and participate in education. This may require making reasonable adjustments to the learning environment, teaching or the curriculum in collaboration with students and parents/primary caregivers, specialist and support staff, and medical and allied health professionals.¹

This practice guide will help you refine your approach to supporting students' physical needs so they can engage in their learning and experience success at school. The guide has been designed to complement, not replace, existing school and system policies, procedures and guidance.

Understanding physical needs

Some students may have genetic, acquired or degenerative conditions impacting their physical abilities. Some may experience temporary or permanent loss of mobility, vision or hearing, loss of sensation in parts of their bodies or involuntary movements. This can affect students in various ways, including their coordination, balance, handwriting and ability to use equipment. Some students may use a wheelchair or other aids for mobility, experience pain or fatigue, or have absences due to rehabilitation, appointments or hospitalisation.²

¹ Alice Springs [Mparntwe] Education Declaration, 2020; Disability Discrimination Act 1992, 2015; 2020 Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005, 2021.

² Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training, n.d.

Teachers play an important role in creating safe and supportive learning environments where students feel valued and included. By providing suitable support for students' physical needs, teachers can ensure students access and participate in learning effectively and achieve success at school. Teachers can organise their classrooms to be accessible and allow for unimpeded movement with assistive equipment available and ready for use. They can ensure that students are ready to learn by pre-planning adjustments to lessons and by monitoring student fatigue and pain.

Students must be supported to engage in all learning areas and school activities, including those that are more physically demanding, such as physical education, performing arts, practical subjects, sports events, school assemblies, excursions and camps. As far as possible, reasonable adjustments should be made to support students to participate in all aspects of school life.

Practices to support physical needs

This guide outlines the following practices to support students' physical needs:

- Identify students' preferences, strengths and needs.
- Ensure safe access to and mobility within the school and classroom.
- Support the use of adaptive equipment and assistive technology.
- Make reasonable adjustments to learning and assessment tasks.

It is also important to consider how you [collaborate with students' support networks](#) and [plan to support students' diverse needs](#), including students' [communication needs](#), [emotional regulation](#), [sensory differences](#) and [social interactions](#).

Support for students' physical needs is strengthened when:

- positive, collaborative [connections](#) and relationships with students and their [support networks](#) are established and maintained
- [culturally safe](#) and inclusive learning environments are created
- all students are taught and encouraged to understand and support each other's strengths and differences.

Always display calm, consistent and well-managed emotions and behaviour. This models safe emotional expression and behaviours and helps to create a supportive learning environment.

Identify students' preferences, strengths and needs

Students with physical needs should be actively supported through reasonable adjustments to engage in all learning areas and school activities. You should engage with students, parents/primary caregivers and any professionals (such as the student's occupational therapist or physiotherapist) to ensure support is suitable for the individual. Seek advice about the safety of planned activities.

To identify students' preferences, strengths and needs:

- Discuss with students, their families and other professionals the students' preferred activities, capabilities and interests. Participation in excursions, camps and physical activities may require careful, considered and collaborative identification of needs and planning (e.g., you should check the accessibility of locations and facilities, transport to and from an excursion, or any varying supports required when accessing the community).
- Identify supports and adjustments required for students to engage in all activities, including practical tasks such as creating art, completing science investigations, and participating in physical education and other sporting events at a suitable level for their skills and interests. Consider different equipment (e.g., plastic science beakers with handles instead of standard science beakers), modified rules (e.g., distance from a target when throwing or kicking) or assistive equipment (e.g., easy grip art tools).
- Identify group or individual objectives relating to the learning area or activity. An individual objective for a student could be to accurately roll a ball towards a target in an activity such as boccia using a ball-sending ramp.

Identify supports and adjustments to ensure students are able to sustain attention to instruction and learning activities. For example:

- Monitor fatigue and discomfort levels by:
 - Regularly observing students for signs of fatigue or discomfort (e.g., yawning, rubbing eyes, decreased attention, fidgeting, slumping in their seats or a noticeable drop in participation).
 - Encouraging open communication and letting students know they can tell the teacher when they are feeling tired or uncomfortable or need a break.
 - Conducting regular check-ins with students. Ask them how they are feeling and if they need any adjustments to their schedule, workload or physical position.
- Implement scheduled breaks throughout the day and provide breaks from more demanding activities. This schedule may be displayed visually on a timetable for students, teachers and support staff to see.
- Allow for flexible scheduling, such as shorter work periods with more frequent breaks or a modified school day with reduced hours at school. If these arrangements reduce learning time, consider how to prioritise learning goals and activities.
- Be flexible with content delivery. Students may have breaks from school for treatment, appointments or rehabilitation. Ask parents/primary caregivers to provide advance notice of planned absences so that you can send schoolwork home for completion during the absence or consider ways for students to catch up on return (e.g., with supplemental instruction that prioritises what content is to be learned).
- Ensure necessary adaptive equipment and assistive technology are available and students know how to use these to develop autonomy and reduce physical strain. For example, speech-to-text software can help with writing tasks, and audio books can provide an alternative to reading.

Ensure safe access to and mobility within the school and classroom

Students may have physical needs that mean moving within the school and classroom is difficult, slow or tiring. Consider the arrangement of equipment and resources in the classroom to ensure accessibility for all students. You also need to consider how students will access all areas of the school and the arrangements necessary for students to move from one location to another.

To support students to safely access and move through the school and classroom:

- Arrange classroom furniture to allow sufficient space for students to move comfortably and safely.
- Regularly assess and adjust the environment to meet the changing physical needs of students. This will include the seating arrangements for students to ensure they are comfortable and included. For students who regularly learn in different classrooms (e.g., in a secondary school), seek support from school leaders to ensure classrooms are regularly assessed and adjusted.
- Consider the classes and areas of the school that students need to access and ensure ramp or lift access is available. Move classes to rooms with suitable access if needed. When needed, ensure ramps or lifts are safely used.
- Allow students to leave classes early so they can move at a comfortable pace, avoid crowded areas and arrive on time for their next class. Allow students to move with a responsible friend to maintain their social connection.
- Ensure clear pathways for movement within the school and classroom. Keep these areas unobstructed to facilitate easy movement (e.g., by providing designated areas for storage of school bags). Consider adjustments and supports for manoeuvring stairs, narrow openings, doors, rough surfaces, kerbs and steep ramps (e.g., by using support staff to assist or planning alternative routes).
- Establish and maintain consistent routines for accessing equipment, including when other students are involved.
- Teach students to be considerate of one another when moving around the school and classroom, and to help each other to safely access and move through these areas.
- Teach students self-advocacy skills to ensure they get the specific support they need. This can include learning how to request assistance or equipment and reject unneeded assistance.

Support the use of adaptive equipment and assistive technology

Students with physical needs may use some form of adaptive equipment or assistive technology to access the school, classrooms and activities, and facilitate independence and participation.

Consult students, their parents/primary caregivers and other professionals to learn what adaptive equipment or assistive technology is needed, its purpose and how it is used. Consider the health and safety of staff or peers if they are assisting with heavy wheelchairs or other equipment. If staff or peers are pushing wheelchairs, they should be trained in safe use (e.g., knowing how to set the brakes when the wheelchair is stopped). Staff and peers should ask students' permission before touching their equipment or technology to assist.

Examples of adaptive equipment and assistive technology that enhance mobility, improve communication and facilitate daily activities to support students' physical needs include:

- wheelchairs, walkers, crutches and scooters
- speech-generating devices and communication boards
- adapted keyboards, specialised writing tools and other equipment (e.g., pencil grips or slope boards, adapted scissors and arts and crafts tools)
- adjustable desks that are higher or lower than standard desks to ensure students can work comfortably while still being able to join a table to work with other students
- typing instead of handwriting, and using a computer or tablet for learning tasks to reduce fatigue; key guards (moulded plastic overlays with holes that isolate each key to support typing accuracy) may facilitate typing on a computer
- accessing a computer using a mouth or forehead stick, adapted switches, a mouse or joystick
- software and apps for word processing, word prediction, text-to-speech and speech-to-text, drawing and virtual manipulation of materials and objects
- accessible playground equipment to support play with peers
- playground seating and eating areas that are accessible for all students (e.g., tables at an accessible height for wheelchair users to share with peers)
- provision of activities in accessible areas of the playground that can support leisure activities and socialisation of all students (e.g., table games, chess, alternative balls for games).

To support students to use adaptive equipment and assistive technology:

- Collaborate with parents/primary caregivers, students and allied health professionals (e.g., occupational therapists and physiotherapists) to identify required equipment and technology and its use, and ensure consistency between home and school.
- Learn how to use the adaptive equipment and assistive technology. Seek training and support from allied health professionals and participate in training sessions to stay up-to-date.
- Ensure that students are correctly positioned for maximum participation, as advised by allied health professionals, to minimise fatigue and pain. Some students may need their position changed regularly (e.g., from sitting in a wheelchair to other seating arrangements, to a standing frame or to lying on a wedge).
- Arrange the classroom and set up equipment to ensure it is easily accessible. Ensure easy access to power outlets for equipment requiring power.
- Encourage and praise students for using their equipment effectively (e.g., by using a piece of writing generated by speech-to-text software as an exemplar for others).
- Teach peers about the equipment and technology, and how they can support their peers (e.g., by ensuring peers distributing materials give adapted scissors or paintbrushes to those who need them in art lessons).
- Use adaptive equipment and materials in activities and games during physical education or in the playground, such as lighter sports equipment (e.g., balloons or beanbags instead of balls), smaller playing areas, larger targets, lower nets, modified rules, scoops for catching and velcro balls and mitts.

- Pair students with peers who can assist and encourage them during activities. A peer could, for example, carry out a science activity by selecting and using equipment as directed.
- Provide demonstrations and step-by-step guidance that cater to varying physical abilities. Students using an app for virtual manipulation of objects may need instruction on how to use the app.
- Develop personalised plans that include specific accommodations and modifications, including specific adaptive equipment or changes to rules for physical games and activities.
- Provide additional supervision, for instance from a teaching assistant, when necessary.

Make reasonable adjustments to learning and assessment tasks

Students with physical needs may have difficulty with handwriting, prolonged sitting, fatigue and discomfort. If learning and assessment tasks require manipulation of materials, consider what assistance or adjustments could be provided. Adjustments to learning and assessment tasks should reflect the regular adjustments provided for learning and focus on ensuring accessibility and equity in learning and assessment.

To make adjustments to learning and assessment tasks:

- Discuss adjustments with students, where appropriate.
- Consider what is being assessed and what is not, referring to the curriculum, and identify reasonable adjustments that will allow students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. For example, students can communicate their knowledge and understanding of a learning area verbally rather than in writing if the writing itself is not being assessed.
- Discuss adjustments and supports with students, parents/primary caregivers and support staff, including the equipment and support that will be available and what provisions have been made for timing, breaks and the location of the assessment.
- Consider that if manipulation of materials is required, support staff or, where appropriate, a peer may assist or carry out the task under the direction of the student.
- Plan rest breaks as required so students can change position and move around. This will require additional time. It may mean providing students with a separate room so they can move around without distracting others.
- Ensure that content is compatible with screen readers and other assistive technologies.
- Plan for the students to use speech-to-text software or have a scribe for written responses. This may mean providing a separate room so students can comfortably use the software or speak to the scribe.
- Offer choice in the assessment type, when possible, to allow students to use in-person, recorded or filmed responses or presentations instead of written responses or reports or, if physical needs affect students' speech, written responses instead of presentations. For written assessments, consider reducing the amount of writing required by using multiple-choice, yes/no or cloze tasks.
- Provide additional time for learning and assessment tasks, if needed.
- Offer alternative dates for assessments if physical needs affect participation on a given day.

Reflection questions

- How have you collaborated with students, their parents/primary caregivers, support staff and allied health professionals to identify, plan for and support the students' needs and celebrate their learning progress?
- How have you ensured safe access and mobility within your classroom, taking into account student mobility and safety considerations?
- How can you be confident in supporting the use of adaptive equipment and assistive technology?
- How have you made reasonable adjustments to the learning environment and teaching and learning tasks, including assessment tasks?

Further reading

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