MAKING SCHOOL WORK

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO NEURODIVERGENT KIDS AND THE SYSTEM

WRITTEN BY **JANE MCFADDEN**

ADHD Mums

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Hi, I'm Jane McFadden - the Autistic and ADHD Aussie Mum behind the podcast ADHD Mums

Neuroscientist and Autism/ADHD Assessor and Specialist

I believe motherhood is hard - really hard - especially when you're neurodivergent or raising kids who are. I believe in speaking honestly about the mental load, the guilt, the overwhelm, and the absolute chaos that comes with parenting while trying to function in a world that doesn't make space for us. I believe in sharing the struggles without sugarcoating them - but also finding the humour in it all because sometimes you just have to laugh or you'll cry (again).

I create content that:

- Validates the unseen work of mothers - because what we do matters, even when no one acknowledges it.
- Calls out the systems that fail us - whether it's the NDIS, the mental health system, or the unrealistic expectations placed on mothers.
- Gives practical, neurodivergent-friendly strategies - because we don't need more to-do lists, we need real, doable solutions.
- Builds community - so no mum ever feels like she's failing or alone.

I bring both lived experience and professional knowledge to my work. I have three degrees in Psychology and ongoing studies in Neuroscience, and I'm a certified Autism and ADHD Assessor. My expertise, combined with my own reality of parenting as an AuDHD mum, allows me to bridge the gap between theory and what actually works in daily life.

ADHD Mums is a space for the messy, the overwhelmed, the exhausted, and the ones who keep showing up anyway. It's for the mums who love their kids fiercely but also wonder if they're the only ones who feel like they're barely keeping it together. I believe we deserve support, recognition, and a hell of a lot more credit. And if no one else is going to say it, I will.

Welcome - you're in the right place. ♥

Listen to My Podcast Episodes on this Topic!

Season 1, Episode 33: The Neurodiverse Classroom with Millie Carr

Listen on Apple Podcasts

Listen on Spotify

Season 1, Episode 41 High Camouflaging ADHD and Autism

Listen on Apple Podcasts

Listen on Spotify

Please also see the SCHOOL SERIES on the ADHD Mums Podcast.
Season 3 Episodes 3 - 13

Disclaimer (For Use in Book or Article)

I've never met a teacher who wasn't trying their best.

This isn't a critique of individual educators—it's a call to look at the system they've been asked to work within. A system that often rewards compliance over connection. That leaves neurodivergent kids exhausted, masked, and misunderstood. And that leaves teachers under-resourced and under-supported, too.

This isn't about blame. It's about change.

Your Child’s Brilliance Is Not Conditional

Your child doesn’t need to earn belonging.

They don’t need to behave a certain way to be respected.

They don’t need to ‘keep up’ to prove their worth.

They don’t need to mask to deserve safety.

Your child is not a project to fix. They’re a human being to protect.

Their brilliance is real.

It’s in the questions they ask. The way they see the world. The way they hold on, even when it’s hard.

And it exists — even when no one else knows how to measure it.

Never let a system convince you otherwise.

Making School Work: A Parent's Guide to Neurodivergent Kids and the System

Welcome

If you're reading this, chances are you're already doing everything you can — and still wondering if it's enough.

Maybe you're:

- Exhausted from chasing meetings and half-answers
- Holding your child after a shutdown, wishing someone at school really understood them
- Feeling gaslit by reports that say, 'They're doing fine,' while your home life is falling apart
- Questioning whether you're 'overreacting' — or just finally seeing things clearly
- Or maybe you're wondering why other parents just aren't having the same issues?

This guide exists to **cut through the noise** and give you what the system rarely does:

Clarity. Language. Validation. Strategy.
And a reminder that your child isn't the problem — but the system often is.

What This Guide Is
This is a neuro-affirming, trauma-informed, parent-first resource.

It's designed for families navigating the school system with children who are:

- Autistic
- ADHDers
- PDAers
- Learning differently
- Masking to survive
- Melting down the minute they get home
- Refusing school altogether (School can't)

This book is written from lived experience and a lengthy process of advocacy on my part, Jane McFadden who has navigated 3 x schools, heartache and sleepless nights while observing other parents simply not having the same experience. It's written for parents who've been ignored, excluded, and overwhelmed — and yet continue to show up.

I'm not a teacher, or a lawyer.

You won't find generic advice or behaviour charts here.

You'll find:

- Practical tools
- Advocacy scripts
- Burnout checklists
- Templates
- The truth of what you are facing.

What Makes This Guide Different

- Written by and for parents who get it
- Grounded in compassion, not compliance
- Focused on what actually helps, not just what schools say they can offer
- Infused with warmth, clarity, and real-world strategies
- Not here to fix your child — here to support them (and you) as they are

How to Use This Guide

You can read it cover to cover or jump straight to the bits you need.

There are:

- Templates you can print
- Checklists to bring to school
- Scripts to copy and paste
- Pages you might want to highlight, tab, or quietly hand across the table

You are the expert on your child.
This guide just backs you up.

This guide isn’t here to tell you what to do.

It’s here to hold your hand while you figure out what you already know — and help you say it out loud in the rooms where it counts.

A Note From Me to You

Dear ADHD Mum,

If you're holding this guide, it probably means you've already been through it.

The meetings where you left more confused than when you walked in.

The teacher reports that say 'no major concerns' — while you're picking up the emotional wreckage at home every afternoon.

Or your child ends up on a behaviour management plan that feels less like support and more like a performance review at work — the kind that quietly sets your child up to fail.

I wrote this guide because my eldest child's diagnosis shook me to my core. I was completely unprepared, and as I was still reeling from it, she was placed in the worst possible environment — a high-needs classroom with two split teachers: one battling postnatal depression, the other in her final year before retirement. The class was huge, the teachers had no support, and my deeply internalised child started picking her skin, refusing to eat, and screaming in the car every morning. The other parents weren't thrilled either, but their kids seemed to cope. Mine didn't. And I felt utterly alone. My husband supported me, but he wasn't consumed by it like I was. I tried every reasonable approach with the school, but nothing worked.

Eventually, we left — walking away from our dream school, right next to the block of land we were building on, and all our friends we used to walk with every day. I lost so much leaving that school. It was devastating.

I wrote this guide for the parents going through that moment for the first time — the ones wondering if they've failed. It's not you. It's the system.

This is not a polished manual written by people who've never sat in the car crying after school drop-off.

You'll find scripts here. Tools. Checklists. Questions to ask when you're too tired to think straight.

But mostly, you'll find a voice that says: you're not imagining it.

You’re not overreacting.
And you’re definitely not alone.

You don’t have to agree with every part of this guide. Use what lands. Skip what doesn’t. Come back to it when you’re ready.

There’s no one right way to do this — except to keep your child’s nervous system, dignity, and joy at the centre. Always.

You are your child’s safest person. And even when it feels like the system isn’t listening — this guide will. You’ve got this.

With love,
Jane McFadden

(Another mum who got tired of waiting for a guide that didn’t exist — so I made one.)

What Parents of Neurodivergent Kids Often Face in School

Every child is different — but the patterns are painfully familiar.

These are the **most common challenges** parents of neurodivergent children report — and if you're experiencing them, it's not a failure on your part.

1. Being Dismissed or Gaslit

- 'We don't see that behaviour here.'
- 'They just need to focus more.'
- 'You're the only parent raising concerns.'
- 'Have you tried a parenting course?'

You're told your child is 'fine' at school, even while you're dealing with meltdowns, shutdowns, and trauma responses at home. You begin to question your own instincts — and that's exactly how systems avoid accountability.

2. No Real Understanding of Neurodivergence

Too many teachers still don't understand the nervous system impact of ADHD, autism, PDA, sensory processing differences, or trauma.

Instead of support, you may get:

- Compliance charts
- 'Good behaviour' incentives
- Calls home for 'disrespect'
- Recommendations for discipline, not regulation

Your child's distress can be misunderstood as defiance. And your advocacy may be labelled as overprotectiveness or anxiety.

3. Lack of Adjustments — Or Supports That Don't Work

You might get an IEP… but:

- The goals are about compliance, not access
- The supports are vague or inconsistently applied
- Your child is 'supported' on paper, but still dysregulated and unsafe
- The teachers don't read the IEP and it isn't followed.

You're left having to explain — again and again — that **quiet rooms, fidgets, and visual aids aren't privileges. They're tools to support your child.**

4. Funding Confusion

You finally get a diagnosis — but nothing changes. Or you're told 'there's limited funding,' so support is limited.

Truth is:

- Funding doesn't always follow diagnosis
- Even with funding, it's the principal who decides how it's used and it's spread out amongst the whole grade or school.
- Adjustments are a legal right, not something that depends on money

Still, you're made to feel like asking for basics is a burden.

5. Behaviour Plans That Punish Instead of Support

Many parents are handed behaviour plans focused on:

- Eye contact
- 'Appropriate language'
- Staying seated
- Responding to authority

These plans often escalate shame and dysregulation — not reduce it.

Your child becomes the problem to fix, not the person to understand.

6. Constant Turnover of Staff

- The one teacher who ‘gets it’ leaves
- Aides change without warning
- Each new term brings another round of starting from scratch

You end up being the only consistent support in your child’s school life — carrying all the history, the strategies, the trauma, and the contex.

7. Isolation From Other Parents

You might see other families:

- Posting merit awards
- Talking about school camps
- Building friendships with teachers
- Going to Birthday Parties and play dates

Meanwhile, you’re:

- Fielding phone calls about behaviour
- Managing sensory shutdowns
- Sitting in car parks after drop-off with a lump in your throat

It’s lonely.

8. Soft Exclusion & School Refusal

- You may be told ‘maybe this school isn’t the right fit?’
- You’re encouraged to consider ‘specialist settings or schools’ — even if your child isn’t eligible due to stringent requirements.
- Or your child begins refusing, shutting down, or physically reacting to school itself

It’s not always that the child can’t cope with school. Sometimes, school never adapted to the child.

9. Exhaustion Without Support

You're doing it all:

- The therapy appointments
- The visual schedules
- The late-night Googling
- The regulating
- The crying
- The rebuilding — again and again

And still, it's not enough.

The Nervous System at School: Fight, Flight, Fawn & Freeze
Why Neurodivergent Kids Don't All 'Act Out' the Same Way

When we think of distress, we often picture big emotions — yelling, hitting, refusal.
But for neurodivergent kids (especially ADHD, autistic, PDA, or trauma-impacted children), distress doesn't always look disruptive.

It can be quiet. Pleasing. Avoidant. Controlling. Chaotic. Shut down.
Different behaviours — same underlying cause: a nervous system that doesn't feel safe.

Let's break down how that looks in real life.

Response Type	What It Looks Like at School	Common Mislabels	What They Actually Need
FIGHT	• Yelling, hitting, throwing • Refusing tasks • Arguing with teachers • Explosive or aggressive behaviour	'Angry' 'Out of control' 'Disrespectful'	• Safe, calm adult presence • Space to de-escalate without shame • Emotional literacy and co-regulation
FIGHT	• Leaving the room or hiding • Running from class or school • Zoning out or disengaging • Restlessness or fidgeting	'Avoidant 'Oppositional' 'Distracted'	• Quiet exit options • Predictable routine • Reduced sensory input
FAWN	• People-pleasing • Overcompliance • Perfectionism • Masking emotions or distress	'Model student' 'No problems' 'Easygoing'	• Safe relationships where 'no' is respected • Space to unmask • Emotional permission to struggle
FREEZE	• Shut down • Blank stare • Non-verbal or mute- Physically frozen or rigid	'Defiant' 'Lazy' 'Unmotivated	• Zero pressure • Gentle presence nearby • Sensory recovery time

Why It's Easy to Miss

- Fawners get praise.
- Freezers look compliant.
- Fighters get labelled as 'bad.'
- Flighters are seen as 'distracted.'

So two children in the same classroom — same diagnosis, same needs — might get completely different responses. One is punished. One is ignored. One is praised for masking. All are dysregulated.

What Schools (and Parents) Could Try to Understand

Instead of asking:

- 'How do we stop this behaviour?'

We should ask:

- 'What is this behaviour protecting them from?'
- 'Where can we give this child more safety and control?'
- 'How do we help them feel safe before they need to fight, flight, fawn, or freeze?'

FIGHT – 'The Angry Kid'

'He punched a kid in line today. No warning, just snapped.'
That's what the teacher told me. No mention of the boy who kept bumping him, no note about the noise in assembly right before. My son is 7. He doesn't have the words for sensory overload — just fists and panic. They suspended him for three days and told me to 'get a behaviour plan in place'.
No one asked what he was trying to protect himself from.

What might have helped:

- A safe adult to co-regulate with
- Movement breaks before high-demand settings
- A plan that saw why he reacted, not just what he did

FLIGHT – 'Always Wandering Off'

'She's always roaming around the classroom. It's like she just wants to avoid work.'
Except she loves learning — at home, her favourite thing in the world is a science book. But when the classroom gets loud and chaotic, she shuts down and walks away. She's not running from the work. She's running from overwhelm.

They put her on a 'non-compliance' monitoring form. That's when she started refusing to go to school at all.

What might have helped:

- A quiet corner or sensory space
- Flexible task formats
- Someone asking her, not tracking her

FAWN – ‘She’s Such a Good Girl’

‘We’ve never had an issue — she’s the perfect student.’
Except she’s not okay. She comes home and screams. She won’t let me brush her hair. She sobs in bed at night because she ‘has to be good tomorrow’.
When I brought up her masking and meltdowns, the school said, ‘*But she seems happy here, maybe you need better boundaries at home?*’
I cried in the car. Again.

What might have helped:

- A school that understood masking isn’t coping
- Emotional check-ins — not just academic praise
- Letting her be messy and still be accepted

FREEZE – ‘He Just Stares at Me’

‘He just shuts down when I ask him to do anything.’
They said he was lazy. That he was ‘oppositional’. That he ‘refused to engage’.
But I know that blank stare. It’s the same one he gives me when he’s overwhelmed — or humiliated. When the words won’t come and he’s trying not to cry.
He’s not defiant. He’s gone. His body is in the room, but he’s already retreated.

What might have helped:

- Wait time without pressure
- Visual or non-verbal prompts
- A classroom where silence doesn’t equal disrespect

Diagnosis, Funding & What It Unlocks

(And What It Doesn't)

What a Diagnosis Is — And Isn't

A diagnosis is a tool. Not a label. Not a life sentence. Not a personality.

It's a name for a pattern of traits, differences, and challenges that impact how your child learns, moves, thinks, regulates, or communicates. It helps open doors — to services, support, and understanding.

But it's not your whole child. It doesn't define their worth, their future, or who they're allowed to be.

> *A diagnosis helps explain why things are hard — so your child doesn't spend their life thinking they're just 'bad' or 'lazy.'*

If you'd like more information about children's diagnosis and development please check out

A Guide to Getting the NDIS Support You Need for Children Under 9
(Free resource)

Concerned About Your Child? When and Where to Seek a Diagnosis
(Paid resource)

How Diagnosis Links to School Support

A formal diagnosis can help access:

- State-based funding (e.g. Disability Inclusion in VIC, EAP in QLD, IFS in NSW)
- Adjustments through the NCCD (Nationally Consistent Collection of Data)
- Creation or update of an IEP / ILP / PLP / One Plan
- Access to aides, therapists, or specialist programs (if eligible)

BUT — and this is key — under the **Disability Standards for Education**, a diagnosis is **not required** to receive adjustments if the child's needs are clear and documented.

> *No diagnosis = harder to get funding*
> *But* **every school still has a legal obligation to support your child.**

What Happens to Funding if We Get a Diagnosis?

It depends.

Federal Funding (NCCD):

- Your child's adjustments are reported once a year.
- The school receives **block funding** — it does not follow your child directly.
- This money goes to the **school**, not the student — and it's up to the school how it's spent.

State Funding (e.g. PSD, EAP, Disability Inclusion):

- Based on **assessed need**, not just diagnosis.
- May unlock extra staffing or aides — but the **principal decides how that support is used.**

Does the Funding Go to My Child?

No.

Even if your child is funded under NCCD or state programs, there is no **guarantee** that support will be:

- One-on-one
- Full-time
- Assigned specifically to your child

Ask the school:

- 'How is funding used for children with similar needs?'
- 'How do you ensure adjustments are applied consistently?'
- 'Will my child have access to the same person or support each day?'

Funding Myths vs. Facts

Myth	Fact
‘Without funding or diagnosis, we can’t make adjustments.’	‘Without funding or diagnosis, the school is required to make reasonable adjustments.’
‘All ADHD kids get an aide.’	Only those meeting specific criteria may receive additional support time — and even then, it’s not always 1:1.
‘The funding goes to your child.’	It doesn’t. It goes to the school — and it’s up to them how it’s used.
‘Once you get a diagnosis, the support will flow.’	Diagnosis helps — but advocacy and documentation are still essential.

What Inclusion *Actually* Means

(It's Not Just 'Letting Them Stay in the Room')

Inclusion vs. Integration vs. Mainstreaming.

Term	What It Means	What It Looks Like
Mainstreaming	Child fits into the existing system with minimal change	'She's in a regular class — she just has to keep up'
Integration	Child is placed into mainstream, with some support	'He's allowed in the classroom but taken out for help'
Inclusion	The system changes to meet the child's needs	'We've adapted the classroom so everyone can learn in their way'

> *Inclusion isn't about letting neurodivergent kids stay.*
> *It's about changing the space so they don't have to leave to survive*

Legal Rights to Inclusion

In Australia, inclusion is backed by:

- **Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA)**
- **Disability Standards for Education 2005**
- **United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)**

These laws say schools must:

- Make **reasonable adjustments**
- Consult with families
- Prevent discrimination
- Ensure access — not just attendance

Inclusion isn't optional. It's a **legal obligation**.

What Reasonable Adjustments Can Include

- Reduced workload
- Visual schedules
- Noise-cancelling headphones
- Regular sensory breaks
- Modified assessment formats
- Permission to leave the room without punishment
- Support from an aide or learning assistant
- Trauma-informed approaches to behaviour

Adjustments should help your child access education — not just 'behave better.'

Red Flags: Some phrases we hear when inclusion may not be working

- 'We don't see that behaviour here.'
- 'They just need to try harder.'
- 'We can't give them special treatment.'
- 'We don't have funding for that.'
- 'Let's see how they go without supports for a few weeks.'

Inclusion should never be:

- A reward for good behaviour
- Delayed until a diagnosis
- Dependent on funding
- Offered, then taken away

Inclusion done poorly can hurt more than exclusion.
Inclusion done right transforms everyone in the room.

Examples from the ADHD Mums Podcast FB Group - join here

How Schools Work

(And What That Means for Your Child's Support)

Understanding how schools are structured can help you figure out who to talk to, what's possible, and what language to use when you advocate. Here's what's shared across Australia — and where state differences come in.

Public vs Private vs Specialist Settings

In Australia, schools fall into three broad categories:

Setting	What It Means	What to Know as a Parent
Public schools	Government-funded, free to attend	Must follow Disability Standards for Education, provide adjustments for all students with disability (diagnosed or not)
Private/Independent schools	Partially government-funded, but run by private boards (e.g. Catholic, Christian, independent)	Also legally required to follow **Disability Standards**, though implementation can vary; may have different access pathways
Specialist schools	Designed for children with diagnosed disability, ID, or high support needs	Also legally required to follow **Disability Standards**, though implementation can vary; may have different access pathways

State Differences:

- Some states (e.g. VIC and QLD) have specific criteria for entering a special school, including IQ testing and formal diagnosis
- In NSW, placement in specialist settings is managed by regional panels through the Department of Education

Key Roles Inside a School (and What They Do)

Every school is different, this is an example only.

Role	What They Do	Tips for Parents
Principal / Assistant Principal	Oversees the school, staffing, and complex decisions	Involve them if communication breaks down or support is denied
Classroom Teacher	Primary point of contact for learning and day-to-day support	Build a strong relationship where possible — and share your insights early
Education Support / Aide / SLSO	Supports students individually or in small groups	May or may not be assigned to your child — depends on funding and planning
Learning Support Coordinator / Inclusion Leader	Manages adjustments, plans, and disability supports	Manages adjustments, plans, and disability supports
School Psychologist / Guidance Officer	Assesses, advises, and supports mental health and learning	Available more consistently in public schools; private schools may outsource
Wellbeing / Student Services	Focus on mental health, regulation, peer support	May include chaplains, counsellors, youth workers, or wellbeing officers

State Differences:

- **Titles vary** — for example:
  - VIC uses **Disability Inclusion Leaders**
  - QLD uses **Guidance Officers** instead of Psychologists
  - WA often refers to **Education Assistants** (EAs) instead of aides
- **Access to specialists** depends on funding and school size — rural schools often share staff across campuses

Curriculum, Adjustments, and the Wellbeing Layer

All schools follow the **Australian Curriculum**, but students with disability may access it:

- At year level with supports
- At a different level using a modified Individual Curriculum Plan (ICP, ISP, etc.)
- Through alternative or adjusted tasks

Adjustments are made under four categories:

1. **Curriculum** – changing content, level, or how it's delivered
2. **Teaching strategies** – visual supports, repetition, breaks, etc.
3. **Environment** – seating, lighting, noise, transitions
4. **Assessment** – giving extra time, oral answers, simplified tasks

State Differences:

- In **QLD**, adjustments are documented through the **Education Adjustment Program (EAP)**
- In **VIC**, Disability Inclusion uses the **Functional Needs Assessment** to allocate support
- **NCCD** applies nationally, but how it's implemented and documented varies

Key Support Systems to Know

System	What It Does	Where It Varies
Classroom Differentiation	Teachers adapt content for different learners	All states require this, but training and quality differ
Learning Support / Tiered Support Models	Extra support provided outside class or in small groups	Known as **Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)** in some systems
Behaviour Management / Response Frameworks	How schools handle regulation, dysregulation, or 'behaviour;	Some schools still use punitive approaches (e.g. detentions); others use **trauma-informed, restorative, or PBIS models**
Wellbeing Teams	Work on emotional regulation, mental health, social skills	In public schools, this may include school psychologists, youth workers, or chaplains. In private schools, it may be more limited depending on where they allocate resources.

Key Takeaway

Your child's right to support doesn't change in different states in Australia, but it does change **how it looks** — and **who delivers it**.

The more you understand the roles and layers inside your school, the more confidently you can navigate it — or challenge it — when your child isn't getting what they need.

Catchments, Behaviour Plans & Expulsion

(Yes, It Happens — and It Works Differently in Public vs Private Schools)

Catchments: Can You Choose Any School?

- **Public schools** are bound by **catchment zones** (also called local enrolment areas). Your child has a right to attend their **zoned public school**.
- You can **apply outside your zone**, but approval depends on space, needs, and school discretion.
- **Private/independent schools** are not bound by catchments. They can accept or reject enrolments as they choose.

What This Means for You:

- If your relationship with your current **public school breaks down**, you can request a transfer to another public school — but there's no guarantee unless it's your zoned school.
- **Specialist schools** have strict eligibility and usually require testing and panel approval.
- **Private and independent schools** sometimes find ways to avoid enrolling children with additional needs — by saying they're 'not the right fit' or that they 'can't meet their needs'. Let's be clear: this is discrimination, even if it's wrapped in polite language. It's also incredibly common, and rarely challenged — because families are too exhausted, or afraid of burning another bridge. But just because it's normalised doesn't make it okay.

These schools also often say 'there's no space in that year level' — but then offer an interview to another family with a same-age child later that day. And for families with neurodivergent kids, that usually means quiet rejection dressed up as policy.

Behaviour Plans: What They Are — and What to Watch For

A **behaviour plan** is a written strategy for how staff will respond to certain behaviours — it should:

- Be strengths-based and proactive
- Include triggers, supports, and regulation strategies
- Avoid punishment language (e.g. must comply or lose privilege)

Behaviour Plans: What They Are — and What to Watch For

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- Avoid punishment language (e.g. must comply or lose privilege)

Red flags include:

- Plans focused only on consequences, not prevention
- Plans written without you or your child's input
- Using behaviour charts as a primary tool for neurodivergent kids

State & Sector Differences:

- **Public schools** must follow department policies (often including behaviour support frameworks and restorative approaches).
- **Private schools** have more freedom — some follow trauma-informed practice; others use punitive or compliance-based models

Can My Child Be Suspended or Expelled?
Public schools:

- Must follow strict department guidelines
- Short suspensions (1–5 days) may occur for physical aggression or repeated incidents
- **Expulsion is rare, but possible** — especially in high school
- You can appeal suspensions or ask for a **risk management plan** that supports the child instead of excluding them

Private/Independent schools:

- Can **terminate enrolment at their discretion**, often outlined in their enrolment contract
  May cite 'duty of care' or 'not able to meet the child's needs'
- No external appeal process — your only option may be to **withdraw or find another school**

Important:

You can still advocate and ask for support adjustments before exclusion becomes an issue.
But in private schools, your leverage is limited if the school decides to end enrolment.

What About Funding in Private Schools?

- **All schools (public and private)** report disability adjustments through **NCCD**, and receive some **federal funding**.
- Private schools also charge **fees**, which you pay on top of federal disability funding.
- This does **not guarantee better support** — some private schools excel, others don't understand neurodivergence at all.

Private = No Legal Advantage:

Private schools are still bound by the Disability Discrimination Act and Disability Standards for Education — but enforcement is weaker, and support quality varies widely.

What You Can Say:

'My child needs a support plan based on regulation and inclusion, not compliance. If this plan isn't preventing distress, then it needs to be revised — not used to justify exclusion.'

'We'd like a team meeting to redesign this behaviour plan with a proactive, trauma-informed approach. I'd also like to bring a support person to ensure this stays collaborative.'

Schools Might Suggest Moving Your Child to a Specialist School:

- 'We don't have the resources to support your child.'
- 'We think they'd be better off in a specialist setting.'
- 'This environment is too triggering for them.'

These phrases are usually said with concern — but they can feel like soft exclusion.
And if your child doesn't meet specialist school eligibility, they may be stuck in a mainstream system that doesn't feel safe — but with nowhere else to go.

First: What Schools Can't Do

- They cannot force you to move your child.
- They cannot tell you to leave without going through formal processes.
- They must make reasonable adjustments under the Disability Standards for Education, even if the child is not 'funded' or formally diagnosed.

Specialist School Eligibility by State

State	Eligibility Criteria for Specialist School Placement
VIC	Must meet criteria under **Disability Inclusion** or (older model) **PSD**. Usually includes: formal diagnosis + **cognitive assessment (IQ <70)** for ID-specific schools. Some autism-specific schools require **ASD + significant adaptive impairment**.
NSW	Placement managed via regional panels. Eligibility based on: diagnosed disability + need for high level of support. May require reports from psychologist, paediatrician, or specialist team.
QLD	Specialist schools often require **dual criteria**: diagnosed disability + **intellectual impairment (IQ <70)**. Some "special education programs" (SEPs) are located within mainstream schools and have more flexible criteria.
SA	Requires assessment through **Disability Support Services (DSS)**. Entry based on disability type, severity, and whether support needs exceed what a mainstream school can provide. Includes psychological, functional, and academic testing.
WA	Eligibility set by **School of Special Educational Needs (SSEN).** Usually requires diagnosed disability + cognitive assessment showing high support need. Autism-specific programs have additional behavioural criteria.
TAS	Placement in **specialist support schools** is based on a multidisciplinary team review. Often requires intellectual disability + evidence of significant functional limitations.
ACT	Requires disability verification + evidence of complex learning needs. Schools work with **Therapy ACT and education psychologists** to determine placement.
NT	Entry into specialist settings is managed by the Department of Education. Requires diagnosed disability and formal learning/cognitive assessments. May also consider school reports, therapist input, and family input.

What If My Child Doesn't Qualify?

This happens **often**, especially for kids with:

- ADHD without ID
- Autism with average or high IQ
- Trauma or psychosocial disability
- Mental health conditions

In these cases, your child may **struggle in mainstream**, but **not tick the boxes** for specialist education.

What You Can Do

1. **Request a full Functional Needs Assessmen**t (if available in your state)
   → This might open up inclusion funding within mainstream
2. **Ask for a full re-design of the IEP or behaviour support plan**
   → Highlight that exclusion isn't a solution — adaptation is
3. **Bring an advocate** to meetings and request a Student Support Group or review
4. **Apply for flexible learning or supported learning programs** (sometimes within mainstream)
5. **Keep records** of the emotional and behavioural impact — meltdown logs, refusals, home-school diaries

Script You Can Use:

'I understand that the current environment is challenging — but if my child doesn't meet eligibility for a specialist school, then this school has a legal obligation to adapt, not exclude. Let's work together on building a support plan that keeps my child regulated and safe here.'

Choosing a School, Understanding Funding & Knowing Your Rights

(The Questions No One Tells You to Ask)

How Do I Choose the Right School?

There is no perfect school — but there could be a right fit for your child right now.

Here's what to consider:

- Do they talk about inclusion with real understanding — or just tick boxes?
- How do they support emotional regulation, not just academic outcomes?
- Do you feel respected as a parent — or managed?
- Is there flexibility in how learning happens — or strict, rigid rules?
- What's the teacher-to-student ratio?
  Smaller isn't everything, but it can make a huge difference for regulation, relationship, and response time.
- How heavily is the school focused on NAPLAN results?
  Are they teaching to the test — or teaching the child?
- Where does the school spend its funding?
  Ask how they use their inclusion, wellbeing, or NCCD funds. You're not prying — you're protecting.
- What is the principal interested in?
  Is it test scores? Student voice? Behaviour charts? Relationships? Leadership priorities shape everything.
- What do other parents say — especially those with ND kids?
  Search the school name in ADHD, neurodivergent, or local mums' Facebook groups.
  Hint: the quiet messages and comments will often tell you more than the official website.

Public vs Private vs Specialist Schools

- **Public:** Must take your child if you're in-catchment. Bound by Disability Standards. Generally more regulated, but resources vary.
- **Private:** Can refuse enrolment or terminate if they claim 'unable to meet needs.' Still bound by law, but enforcement is harder.
- **Specialist:** Only for kids who meet eligibility — and places are limited.

Questions to Ask When Choosing a School

Ask these during a school tour or first meeting:

- What supports are available for neurodivergent students?'
- 'How do you manage emotional regulation or shutdowns?'
- 'Can my child access quiet spaces or leave the room without punishment?'
- 'What adjustments have you made before for kids with ADHD/autism?'
- 'How do you build relationships with families who are part of the IEP process?'
- 'How does your school support inclusion — not just integration?'
- 'Do you have experience with children who mask or hold it in at school, then crash at home?'

If they are doing those things they should be able to proudly answer.

Note from Jane

Don't expect any school to admit they struggle with inclusion — they won't. Most will confidently say they do it well. What you're really trying to figure out is whether they say that because they genuinely understand inclusion, or because they simply don't know what it really means. Many parents have been reassured that their child will be well supported, only to be let down when basic adjustments are either missing or misunderstood. And by the time you realise the fit isn't right, your child has already started — and exiting them becomes a painful, disruptive process.

Choosing a School: Green Flags vs Red Flags

Question	Green Flag Answer	Red Flag Answer
'What supports are available for neurodivergent students?'	'We adapt supports based on individual needs. We've used sensory tools, adjusted tasks, and built strong staff-student relationships.'	'Listing off children with physical disabilities only as examples.'
'How do you manage emotional regulation or shutdowns?'	'We focus on co-regulation, and staff are trained to recognise when a child is overwhelmed. We don't punish dysregulation.'	'If they're refusing, we send them to the principal.' 'We just ask them to go to buddy class or sit out.'
'Can my child access quiet spaces or leave the room without punishment?'	'Yes, we have a system for that. Some students have pass-outs or safe spaces they can go to when they need a break.'	'No, we expect students to stay in class unless there's an emergency.' 'That would be disruptive to others.'
'What adjustments have you made before for kids with ADHD or autism?'	'We've supported students with sensory breaks, different assessment formats, visual schedules, and reduced workloads.'	'We haven't had many kids like that.' 'We usually just try to keep them busy so they don't act out.'
'How do you build relationships with families who are part of the IEP process?'	'We see it as a partnership. Families bring important knowledge. We invite regular input and revisit plans often.'	'We send the plan home once it's written.' 'We usually manage that internally — parents don't need to worry about the details.'
'How does your school support inclusion — not just integration?'	'Inclusion is built into how we run our classrooms. We don't separate students unless there's a clear, supported need.'	'We have a withdrawal program where those kids go for extra help.' 'We try not to let their needs affect the rest of the class.'
'Do you have experience with children who mask at school and crash at home?'	'Yes, we're aware that many children hold it together here and unravel at home. We take parent reports seriously even if we don't see it in class.'	'If we don't see the behaviour here, there's not much we can do.' 'We need to see it ourselves to respond.'

Script You Can Use:

'We're not just looking for any school — we're looking for a school that sees neurodivergence as a difference, not a disruption. How does your school walk that out in practice, not just policy?'

Can a School Discriminate Against My Child?

No — but some do, subtly.

Under the **Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and the Disability Standards for Education 2005,** it is unlawful for a school to:

- Deny enrolment based on disability
- Refuse to make reasonable adjustments
- Suspend or exclude a child for behaviour linked to their disability (without exploring alternatives)
- Ignore parent input on how the child is supported

If this happens, you can:

- Write a **formal complaint to the school**
- Escalate to the **Department of Education (public)** or **school board (private)**
- File a **complaint with the Human Rights Commission or state equivalent**

Thinking About Changing Schools?

(When to Stay, When to Go, and What to Do First)

First: Ask Yourself These Questions

Before you make any decisions, get brutally honest — not just about the school, but about your own energy and your child's wellbeing:

- Is my child safe — emotionally and physically — every day?
- Are we seeing **ongoing distress, shutdown, refusal, or burnout** linked to school?
- Is the **relationship with the teacher or school leadership repairable** — or are we stuck in a cycle of minimising, blaming, or gaslighting?
- Is **any real change happening**, or is everything just 'noted' and then ignored?
- Is this an issue just in this grade?
- Will next year likely improve?

And most importantly:

Does staying cost my child more than leaving would cost us as a family?

When It Might Be Time to Leave

- Your child is **refusing school long-term (or in school can't)**, melting down daily, or regressing
- The school repeatedly **refuses reasonable adjustments** or dismisses your concerns
- You're being told your child is 'too much' — but not being offered support
- You're **doing all the regulation work** at home while the school keeps triggering the same cycle
- Your child is starting to **internalise the idea that they are 'bad' or 'broken'**
- Other parents tell you that their children are also struggling and the leadership team don't seem to understand.

What If It's Just One Person Who Doesn't get it?

Sometimes it's one person — not the whole school.
Here's how to decide if it's salvageable:

- Does leadership **acknowledge your concerns** and offer support or intervention?
- Is there someone else on staff who can advocate for your child (e.g. a learning support or inclusion leader)?
- Can you request a **classroom change**, team teaching, or increased aide time?
- Is your child **thriving socially or emotionally** in other parts of school?
- How does your child feel about it?

What To Do Before You Leave

1. **Request a formal meeting**
   → Bring a support person. Document everything.
   → Ask: 'What has been done to reduce dysregulation?' 'Why haven't adjustments worked?'
2. **Get a copy of the IEP or behaviour plan**
   → If they won't give it to you, email to request it formally.
3. **Start a paper trail**
   → If you haven't already, now's the time. Emails > verbal chats.
4. **Tour other schools quietly**
   → Ask your questions. Get a feel for the vibe. No pressure to enrol yet.
5. **Talk to your child (if appropriate)**
   → Some kids just know: 'I feel bad there.' Trust that.

Script: You Can Use When Exploring New Schools:

'We're considering a school move because our child's needs aren't currently being met — emotionally or academically. What experience do you have supporting students with ADHD or neurodivergent needs? How do you approach regulation, inclusion, and student wellbeing?'

If You Do Change Schools

- Ask the old school to transfer all records
- Bring your IEP, reports, and parent summary to the new school
- Have a transition plan — slowly if needed
- Expect a **honeymoon period** — but watch for red flags

A Parent Decision Checklist

Tick off the signs that apply:

Signs It Might Be Time to Leave

- ❖ My child regularly melts down, shuts down, or refuses school
- ❖ I've raised concerns multiple times — but nothing changes
- ❖ The school won't implement or review the IEP/adjustments
- ❖ I feel like the teacher or leadership doesn't listen or take me seriously
- ❖ The school blames my parenting or the child, not the environment
- ❖ My child is being disciplined for behaviour linked to their disability
- ❖ My child is starting to believe they're 'bad,' 'naughty,' or not smart
- ❖ My gut says staying is hurting more than leaving would

If you've ticked 3 or more — it may be time to plan a change.

Before You Move: Key Actions

- Hold one final meeting and document the outcome
- Ask for all relevant documents (IEP, reports, meeting notes)
- Email your concerns if the school won't listen in person
- Start quiet research into other schools
- Keep a diary of incidents, refusals, and regulation signs
- Build a 'Student Snapshot' to take to the next school

Scripts for Questions to Ask a New School

Use these during a tour, phone call, or intake meeting:

Inclusion & Support

- ‘What supports are available for ADHD/autistic/neurodivergent students?’
- ‘Can my child take breaks, use fidgets, or access quiet spaces?’
- ‘How do you write and review IEPs or personalised plans?’

Questions to Ask a New School

- ‘How does your school define inclusion?’
- ‘How do you respond when a child is dysregulated — not just ‘misbehaving’?’
- ‘Do you use behaviour charts or reward systems — and are they optional?’

Communication

- ‘How do you involve families in problem-solving or decision-making?’
- ‘What happens if there’s a conflict between staff and a parent — how is it resolved?’
- ‘Who would be my main contact person if I had concerns?’

Practical

- ‘Do you accept mid-year enrolments?’
- ‘Can my child visit for a transition period before enrolling?’
- ‘What’s the class size and teacher support ratio?

Burnout, Masking & Trauma in School

Why ‘Good Behaviour’ Isn’t Always Good News

If a teacher says, ‘They’re no trouble at all,’ but your child comes home and **melts into the floor** every afternoon, something’s off.

In neurodivergent kids — especially those with ADHD, autism, trauma, or PDA — being ‘good’ often means masking.
Not regulated.
Not okay.
Just holding it together because they’re terrified not to.

Sometimes the ‘quiet achiever’ or ‘model student’ is the one you should worry about most.

Masking, Fawning & Perfectionism

Masking is the mental and emotional effort it takes to act like you’re coping.

- Holding in stims or vocal tics
- Suppressing frustration or confusion
- Pretending to understand or care when you don’t
- Mimicking peers to avoid social rejection
- Smiling when you’re actually panicking

Fawning is a survival strategy — appeasing adults to avoid conflict.

- ‘Yes.’ ‘I’ll try harder.’ ‘I just want to do it right.’
- Kids with ADHD and trauma histories are experts at it

Perfectionism develops when a child learns that mistakes = disapproval = danger.
And it doesn't mean they want to be the best. It means they're afraid of being in trouble — or being seen as broken.

- 'They're not disruptive.'
- That's not always a win. It's often a warning sign.

Chronic Invalidation & School Trauma

When a child consistently hears:

- 'Just try harder.'
- 'You're fine at school — Mum must be exaggerating.'
- 'It's not that big of a deal.'
- 'Other kids cope with it.'

They don't just lose trust in school. They lose trust in **themselves**.

School trauma happens when a child's nervous system is activated every day in an environment that won't adapt.

It's not one big event. It's death by a thousand paper cuts:

- Sensory overload
- Social exclusion
- Unfair punishments
- Unreachable expectations
- No one believing how hard they're trying

And when their meltdown or shutdown finally comes, **they're often blamed for it.**

Burnout in Neurodivergent Kids

This is not the same as being tired or having a rough week.
Burnout is nervous system collapse. It's what happens when the energy it takes to survive school finally runs out.

Burnout might look like:

- School refusal or hiding under the covers
- Loss of speech or regression in skills
- Angry outbursts or emotional numbness
- Loss of interest in passions
- Repeated illness or fatigue

Burnout is often **invisible until it explodes** — and most of it happens after school hours.

What to Do When A Child Can't Attend School

First: This is **not defiance**. It's communication.
It's your child's body saying, 'This place is hurting me.'

Category	School Refusal	School Can't
What it assumes	The child is choosing not to go to school	The child is unable to attend due to distress or dysregulation
How it's framed	Behavioural issue or defiance	Nervous system overload and burnout
Language impact	Blames the child — 'won't' go	Validates the child — 'can't' go
Typical school response	• Attendance contracts • Threats of fines • 'Push through' plans • Rewards/punishments	• Reducing demands • Regulation-focused supports • Flexible attendance • Trauma-informed planning
What the child needs	Not pressure or compliance	Safety, co-regulation, and trust rebuilding
What helps	Understanding the why, not just focusing on attendance	Addressing burnout, sensory load, emotional safety
Preferred by	Traditional behaviour-based models	Trauma-informed, neurodiversity-affirming models

What you can do:

1. **Stop punishing attendance struggles.** It will not work.
2. **Track patterns:** Which days are worse? What happened the day before?
3. **Ask the school for immediate adjustments** — not after diagnosis, not 'next term.'
4. **Create a regulation-first plan at home** (visual schedules, low-demand mornings, co-regulation).
5. **Start documenting everything** — notes from your child, emails, voice memos, refusal logs.
6. **Get external support** — GP, psychologist, OT, or advocacy organisation.

If a child starts avoiding school, the system should ask:

- 'What's going on for this child?'
- Not: 'How do we get them to comply?'

What Teachers and Schools Should Try to Understand

- **Behaviour is communication**. Always.
- **Regulation comes before education**.
- **Burnout is preventable**. If they listen.
- **Connection is the best intervention**. Kids will try when they feel safe.

What Families Need to Hear

You're not imagining it.
If school feels like a trauma site for your child — it probably is.

This doesn't make you dramatic.

You're not failing if you have to pull back, pause, or rethink school altogether.
You're protecting a nervous system that no one else seems to notice is already on fire.

TOOL: Signs of Burnout in Neurodivergent Kids

(A Parent Observation Tracker)

Use this checklist to track changes in your child's behaviour, energy, and emotional state. You can also use this when speaking with the school, therapist, or GP to explain what's going on.

Physical & Emotional Signs

- [ ] Frequent illness or 'mystery' symptoms (headaches, tummy aches)
- [ ] Loss of appetite or changes in eating habits
- [ ] Increased fatigue or needing naps after school
- [ ] Sleep disruption or nightmares
- [ ] Emotional shutdown or numbness
- [ ] Frequent tears, outbursts, or dysregulation after school

Cognitive & Behavioural Changes

- [ ] Loss of interest in hobbies or passions
- [ ] Refusing to talk about school at all
- [ ] Memory lapses or forgetfulness
- [ ] Increased anxiety, fear of failure, or perfectionism
- [ ] Refusal to complete tasks they used to manage
- [ ] Saying things like 'I hate myself' or 'I'm dumb'

School-Specific Red Flags

- [ ] School refusal or school can't (complete or partial)
- [ ] Complaining of boredom, overwhelm, or 'no point'
- [ ] Repeated comments about being picked on or left out
- [ ] Reports from school that they're 'fine' while home is chaos
- [ ] Clinging, hiding, or physically resisting school mornings

Using phrases like:

- 'Can I just stay home today?'
- 'My brain's too tired.'
- 'I don't want to do this anymore.'

TOOL: School Can’t Response Plan

(Steps to Protect, Connect & Rebuild Access)

This is **not about forcing compliance** — it’s about listening to what this is telling you and supporting nervous system recovery.

🔹 STEP 1: Regulate First, Not Last

- Lower the emotional temperature at home
- Validate their feelings: ‘This feels really hard right now’
- Create a safe, low-demand morning routine
- Use co-regulation: sit with them, breathe together, no lectures

🔹 STEP 2: Document Everything

- Start a log: refusal dates, triggers, physical signs
- Save all school emails and meeting notes
- Record verbal updates as voice memos if needed
- Note phrases your child says (e.g., ‘It’s too loud,’ ‘They hate me,’ ‘I feel invisible’)

🔹 STEP 3: Notify the School (In Writing)

Send a short email like this:

> *‘We’re seeing consistent distress linked to school. [Child’s name] is currently unable to attend due to what we believe is emotional and sensory overload..*
>
> *We are requesting an urgent review of their learning environment and adjustments, and will be seeking professional support to better understand their needs.*
>
> *We are prioritising regulation and wellbeing while we work with [therapist/GP/psychologist]. We appreciate your partnership in supporting our child through this.’*

🔹 STEP 4: Ask for Immediate Adjustments

Examples:

- Shortened days or reduced timetable
- Access to quiet/low-sensory spaces
- Alternative learning tasks at home
- Remove punishments linked to attendance
- Daily check-in with a safe adult at school

🔹 STEP 5: Create a Transition Bridge

If/when returning is possible:

- Start with **partial attendance** or preferred activities
- Have a **clear re-entry plan**: no pressure, consistent supports
- Let them take ownership — but don't rush recovery

Reminder:

*School can't is **not the end of education**.*
It's a message. A circuit breaker. A line in the sand.
Listen to it — and act from compassion, not panic.

School Can’t Tracker

Use this to identify patterns, triggers, and recovery points.

Date	Could Attend? (Y/N)	Signs Before	What Happened at Drop-Off	Notes from the Day / Evening
	◯ Yes ◯ No	*e.g. ‘Quiet, avoided eye contact’*	*e.g. ‘Clung to parent, froze’*	*e.g. ‘Said they felt sick, needed quiet all night’*

Track 1–2 weeks of data to show patterns to the school.

(What You Can Do to Help Your Child Recover — and Stay Regulated)

Burnout doesn't start at home — **but recovery has to**.
School is often non-negotiable. Home isn't. That's where your child needs to drop the mask, decompress, and be met with **support, not stress**.

Here's how to protect your child from spiralling into burnout — or help them recover if they already have.

1. Lower the Demands at Home

If school is draining their nervous system, **home can't ask more of them**.

That means:

- No extra chores when they're dysregulated
- No homework battles
- No forced conversations when they're shut down
- No 'just toughen up' lectures

Instead:

- Offer co-regulation (sit next to them, no words needed)
- Provide downtime without guilt or tasks
- Focus on nervous system safety: quiet, comfort, predictability

2. Create Safe Routines — But Make Them Flexible

Neurodivergent kids thrive on **structure with softness**.

Try:

- Morning routines that don't rush or shame
- Visual charts (low-pressure) to show what's next
- Wind-down rituals that signal safety (same music, lights, blankets)

Let go of strict timelines.
Regulation > punctuality. Always.

3. Respect Their Coping Tools (Even If They Look Like 'Doing Nothing')

- Minecraft isn't a waste of time if it's how they reset.
- Fidgets aren't a distraction if they calm the body.
- Lining up LEGO or rewatching the same video? It's a stimming loop — a reset, not a problem.

Don't rush them out of their safe zones.
That's where they recharge.

4. Build In Micro-Regulation All Day

Help them tune in to their body and brain before they crash.

Teach them:

- 'What does your body feel like when it needs a break?'
- 'What can we do before your brain gets tired?'
- 'Let's build in rest before meltdown, not after.'

Use timers, visuals, safe words, movement snacks.

5. Name the Feelings Without Judging Them

Burnout brings shame. Kids feel like they're failing. Falling apart. Being 'bad.'

Give them language:

- 'Your brain is telling us it needs a break.'
- 'That's not rude — that's your body screaming for rest.'
- 'It's okay to feel too tired to talk. We'll sit here with that.'

Your words become their internal voice.

6. Create a Burnout Recovery Space

- A blanket fort.
- A special corner with pillows and books.
- A calming playlist and chewy snacks.

Give them **a space that isn't performance-based**. A place to just be.

What to Say When They're Burning Out:
'I don't need you to hold it together here. I just need you to feel safe.'
'Let's stop everything and help your body feel okay again.'
'You're not in trouble. You're just running on empty — and we can fill you back up.'

How Inclusion Meetings Actually Work

(And How to Walk In Prepared, Not Powerless)

If you're reading this, you've may have been told your child needs an inclusion plan. They are most often called IEP's but they can be called different names in different states. Maybe you've already had one — and left feeling frustrated, confused, or like your concerns weren't taken seriously.

This section is here to give you clarity. Not the polished version schools hand out — the real structure, your rights, and how to protect your child's wellbeing when systems are stretched or uninformed.

What Is an IEP?

An Individual Education Plan (IEP) is a formal document that outlines:

- Your child's strengths and needs
- Their learning and wellbeing goals
- The adjustments or supports the school will put in place
- Who is responsible for implementing and reviewing them

It's meant to be collaborative. Everyone at the table — including you — is supposed to contribute. But too often, families are made to feel like spectators rather than equal partners.

You are not a guest. You are a decision-maker.

Who's In the Room?

An IEP meeting can include:

- Your child's classroom teacher
- A learning support or inclusion coordinator
- A principal or assistant principal
- Any specialists involved (psychologist, OT, speech therapist)
- You (and your partner or support person)
- Sometimes your child (especially in high school, or if appropriate)

You are allowed to bring someone with you — an advocate, friend, or family member — and you're allowed to ask for breaks or clarification at any point.

What Happens at the Meeting?

The meeting usually follows a set structure:

What you can do:

1. **Present Levels –** A review of how your child is functioning academically, socially, and emotionally.

   If you're hearing 'they're doing fine' while seeing daily meltdowns or school can't, this is your moment to bring data: meltdown trackers, teacher emails, therapy notes.

2. **Strengths** – These should be meaningful and useful. Not just 'is polite' or 'likes Minecraft.' Think: visual strengths, empathy, problem-solving, memory for detail, creativity.

3. **Needs & Adjustments** – Specific support strategies that must be implemented to help your child access learning.

   Examples:

   - ○ Movement breaks
   - ○ Visual schedules
   - ○ Reduced tasks
   - ○ Safe retreat spaces
   - ○ Assistive technology

4. **Goals** – These must be achievable, relevant, and affirming.
   A good goal supports confidence, autonomy, or regulation.
   Avoid goals that focus on compliance, eye contact, or 'fitting in better.'
   Aim for goals that allow the child to participate in their way, on their terms.

5. **Implementation & Review** – This is where accountability matters.
   Who will track progress? How will you be kept in the loop? When is the next review? Make sure these are recorded.

Phrases to listen out for:

- **‘We don’t see these issues here.’**
  → Masking is real. School may not see the crash, but you do. Home reports matter.
- **‘We don’t have funding for that.’**
  → Adjustments are not dependent on funding. They’re a legal obligation.
- **‘They just need more resilience/discipline/focus.’**
  → These are red flag phrases. They signal a misunderstanding of neurodivergence.
- **‘We’ve added a sticker chart.’**
  → Ask whether this was the child’s choice. Many neurodivergent kids find rewards systems patronising or anxiety-inducing.

What to Bring

- A brief written profile of your child — who they are, what works, what doesn’t
- Diagnostic reports or letters from specialists
- A summary of your concerns and non-negotiables
- A support person (if needed)
- A notebook or device to take notes

You can also ask to record the meeting. You do not need permission to take your own notes or pause the meeting if you feel overwhelmed.

Tips for Protecting Your Energy

- Ask to go last when discussing each topic — it lets you respond with more clarity
- It’s okay to cry. This is your child, not just a document
- Confirm what was said in writing after the meeting
- Ask for a draft IEP to review before signing anything

What This Meeting Is Really For

An IEP is not about fixing your child.
It’s about helping school adapt so your child doesn’t have to break themselves to fit.

This isn’t a special treatment. It’s access.

How IEPs Work in Each State & Territory (Australia)

(What They're Called, What to Expect, and How They Connect to Funding)

State/Territory	What It's Called	Who Gets One	Funding Link	Review Frequency	Key Notes for Parents
VIC (Victoria)	IEP or ILP	Students with disability, trauma, or high learning needs	Disability Inclusion funding (replacing PSD)	At least once per term	Collaborative; can include students without formal diagnosis
NSW (New South Wales)	IEP or PLSP	Students receiving adjustments under NCCD	Integration Funding Support (IFS) for high needs	At least twice per year	Can be used for disability, giftedness, or learning needs
QLD (Queensland)	ICP, PLP, or ISP	Students with disability or significant learning needs	EAP (Education Adjustment Program)	Usually once per semester	ADHD may not be funded unless comorbidities exist
SA (South Australia)	One Plan	Students with disability, trauma, in care, Aboriginal students	Students with Disability funding	Annually (minimum)	One Plan replaces multiple documents; collaborative process required
WA (Western Australia)	Documented Plan or IEP	Students with disability, learning or behaviour support needs	SWD resourcing (eligibility-based)	Typically annually or biannually	May use internal school resourcing for non-funded students
TAS (Tasmania)	ILP	Students with disability or diverse learning needs	Reasonable Adjustment Resourcing, NCCD	At least annu-ally	Focuses on inclusive practices; NCCD drives reporting
ACT (Australian Capital Territory)	ILP	Students with verified disability or complex learning needs	School-based funding model	Usually twice per year	Emphasis on student voice and family collaboration
NT (Northern Territory)	ILP or PLP	Students with disability, learning needs, or disengagement risk	Targeted or school-based funding	Reviewed annually or as needed	Supports may be available without formal diagnosis

What If You Don’t Agree

Sometimes you walk into an IEP meeting hopeful.
Sometimes you walk out feeling like you weren’t heard — or like your child was reduced to ‘behaviour problems’ and charts.

Let’s talk about what to do when that happens.

If You Don’t Agree With the IEP

You are not required to sign anything on the spot.

You can:

- **Ask for more time** to review the draft
- **Request changes** to wording, goals, or supports
- **Attach a parent statement** to the IEP outlining what you disagree with
- **Call another meeting** before finalising anything

Your child doesn’t have to go unsupported in the meantime — existing supports can stay in place while things are sorted.

If You Don’t Feel Heard

- Email a **summary of your concerns** after the meeting — paper trail matters.
- Request a follow-up with a **principal or school leader** present.
- You are allowed to **bring a support person or advocate** next time. You don’t have to do it alone.

How Many IEP Meetings Per Year?

There is **no universal legal number**, but common practice is: Parents can request a meeting **at any time** if they believe goals are outdated, supports aren't working, or a major change has occurred.

State/ Territory	IEP Meeting Frequency	Is It Mandatory?	Notes
VIC	At least once per term (recommended)	Yes (for funded students)	Under Disability Inclusion, Student Support Groups (SSGs) meet 4x/year.
NSW	At least once per year, ideally more	Not strictly mandatory	Frequency depends on student needs. Parents can request more frequent reviews.
QLD	Typically 1–2 times per year	Yes (for students with an ISP or ICP)	Annual review expected, with additional if needed. Frequency varies by school.
SA	At least once per year	Yes (for students with a One Plan)	Additional meetings can occur based on changes in need.
WA	Typically 1–2 times per year	Not mandatory but recommended	Schools decide frequency. Reviews expected for NCCD students.
TAS	Typically 1–2 times per year	Not formally mandatory	Parents can request meetings. Often tied to major transitions or needs.
ACT	At least once per year	Yes (for students on ILPs)	Regular review required. More frequent if requested by parents or team.
NT	At least once per year	Yes (for students on ILPs)	Frequency depends on level of support. May be termly for high-needs students.

Do You Need a Diagnosis to Get an IEP?

No.

A diagnosis can help — especially when accessing funding — but it's not required for a school to create an Individual Education Plan (IEP, PLP, ILP, or One Plan, depending on your state).

What matters is whether your child needs adjustments to access learning.

Under the **Disability Standards for Education 2005** and the **Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD)**, schools are required to provide support for:

- Students with **diagnosed** disabilities
- Students with **imputed** (suspected but not formally diagnosed) disabilities
- Students with **temporary or fluctuating** conditions
- Students with **social, emotional, sensory, or learning needs** that significantly impact access

Your child can have an IEP if:

- They are undiagnosed but showing clear signs of ADHD, autism, trauma, or dysregulation
- They mask at school but meltdown at home
- Their learning or behaviour is being affected by **sensory issues, anxiety, executive function,** or **processing challenges**

Important:

- You can request an IEP even without a formal diagnosis.
- Schools are allowed — and encouraged — to create one based on **observed need**.
- If your child is being counted in the **NCCD data**, they should already have a plan in place.

Mandatory for:

- Students with a diagnosed disability receiving **adjustments under NCCD**
- Students who are part of state-based disability funding programs (e.g., **Disability Inclusion (VIC), EAP (QLD), IFS (NSW)**)
- Children in out-of-home care, Aboriginal learners (in some states), or those under child protection in certain systems

So if your child is receiving **formal support**, the school is usually **required** to have an IEP (or One Plan, ILP, PLP, etc.), and to involve you in the process.

What If Your Child's Teacher Just Doesn't Get It?
Your child still has to be safe, respected, and supported.

You can:

- Document your concerns **in writing** (email, not just verbal)
- Focus your communication on **specific behaviour or decisions**, not personality
- If things escalate, **request a meeting with the principal** or inclusion coordinator
- In rare cases, you can request a **change of class or teacher** — though this depends on school capacity

Always keep your child's wellbeing front and centre. You're not being 'difficult' for speaking up. You're protecting your child's nervous system — and that matters more than anyone's comfort.

PARENT ADVOCACY SCRIPTS

When You Don’t Agree — or the School Won’t Act

1. ‘We don’t see those behaviours here.’

PARENT SCRIPT:

‘That’s actually part of what’s concerning. What you’re seeing may be masking — my child is working incredibly hard to hold it together at school, and then falling apart at home. That’s not sucess — it’s survival. We need to work together to reduce the pressure so they don’t burn out.’

Why This Works (Millie Carr):

Millie talks about kids fawning and masking to stay safe at school — and how schools often mistake this for coping, when it’s actually early-stage trauma. This script flips the narrative without blaming.

2. ‘We don’t think adjustments are necessary right now.’

PARENT SCRIPT:

‘The Disability Standards require schools to make reasonable adjustments based on need, not diagnosis or funding. You’re seeing a child who is trying to meet expectations — but we’re seeing emotional and physical fallout every day. We need to support regulation now, not wait for things to escalate.’

Why This Works:

This gently but firmly reminds the school of their legal obligation while grounding it in observed, current needs — not ‘eventual diagnosis’ or waiting for crisis.

3. When You Don’t Agree With the IEP Goals

PARENT SCRIPT:

‘I’d like this goal reworded. Right now, it’s focused on behaviour — not capacity or access. My child shouldn’t have to earn support by being compliant. Let’s refocus this on regulation, safety, and access to learning in ways that work for them.’

Millie Carr:

Millie speaks to how goals around ‘good behaviour’ and ‘attention’ punish kids for having different neurology. This script reflects that — and puts the conversation back on equity.

> See podcast episode Season 3, E7: SCHOOL SERIES -IEP Meetings Are Broken — Here’s What to Say Instead

4. After a Dismissive Meeting or Vague Promises

PARENT EMAIL FOLLOW-UP SCRIPT:

‘Thank you for meeting today. I want to confirm that I don’t yet feel my child’s needs have been adequately understood or supported. I’d like to request:

- A written summary of the adjustments being made
- A follow-up meeting with [principal, inclusion coordinator, etc.]
- A plan for how home feedback will be incorporated moving forward.

Please consider this a formal request under the Disability Standards for Education.’

Why This Works:

It documents your concerns while asserting your rights — and keeps the school accountable by asing for clarity and follow-up in writing.

5. When You Want to Push Back Without Escalating Too Fast

SCRIPT:

‘I’m hearing that the school’s view of my child doesn’t align with what we’re seeing at home — and that’s often a sign of masking. I want to work with you, not against you, but I also need us to centre my child’s nervous system and long-term wellbeing over short-term performance.’

Millie Carr:

In Season 3, E7, she describes burnout as a nervous system collapse — not laziness or refusal. This script helps reposition you as collaborative but firm.

What to Attach in Writing

- Your **own parent statement**: 1–2 pages on what your child needs, what works, what doesn’t
- Meltdown tracker or home-school diary
- Excerpts from relevant expert reports (psych, OT, speech)
- Email threads summarising earlier concerns

1. Inclusion Meeting Preparation

Use before a meeting to get clear on what you want and need.

Section	Notes
Strengths – What's going well right now?	
Struggles – What's not working / causing stress?	
What has helped in the past	
Strengths – What's going well right now?	
What I want to ask for in this meeting	
Questions I want to ask the school	

Advocacy

Advocating isn't just about asking for help.
It's about making sure your child's **reality is seen, respected**, and responded to.

But advocacy can be exhausting — especially when you feel like a broken record in every meeting.

Write a 'Student Profile'

This is one of your best advocacy tools — especially for new schools, teachers, or support staff.

Your student profile should include:

- Name, age, preferred pronouns
- Strengths and interests
- Sensory needs
- Executive function profile (what they struggle with and why)
- Communication style
- Triggers and signs of dysregulation
- What works / what doesn't
- Things you'd love staff to say, do, or avoid

Tip: Keep it to 1–2 pages. Use dot points. Add photos or visuals if it helps

Advocacy Language That Works

You can advocate without sounding aggressive — and still be crystal clear.

- **When you're being dismissed:**

  'I'm not here to debate whether my child needs support — I'm here to talk about how we'll deliver it.'

- **When they say 'We don't see that here':**

  'That's exactly the issue — they're masking at school and falling apart at home. That's a red flag, not a sign things are fine.'

- **When goals don't feel right:**

  'I'd like us to reword that goal. It focuses on compliance instead of regulation, and that's not going to support long-term wellbeing.'

- **When you're struggling to maintain focus or you are feeling too emotional to continue:**

  'I need a pause to process this. Can we pick this up again in a follow-up meeting?'

What to Document and How

Keep records of:

- IEPs and meeting notes
- Emails with dates/times
- Reports and assessments
- Your own notes from phone calls
- Incident logs (especially for meltdowns, shutdowns, suspensions)

Create a '**School Folder**' or digital drive just for advocacy. Label everything. Paper trail = protection.

When to Push — and When to Pause

You don't have to fight every single battle.

Push when:

- Safety is at risk
- The school isn't following through on agreed supports
- Burnout or school can't is escalating

Pause when:

- You're hitting compassion fatigue
- Your child is in crisis and needs you, not a war
- You've said what you needed — and repeating it will cost you too much (note it down and wait for more energy).

Jane's Note

Not everything needs a response — you can say to yourself, 'This one, I'll let pass. Some battles just aren't worth the energy.'

What an Advocate Can Do For You

An advocate isn't just a backup — they're a buffer between you and a system that often forgets you're human.

They can:

- Come to meetings
- Help write letters or complaints
- Explain your rights
- Support you emotionally when things feel like too much

You don't need to be 'in crisis' to get help.

Who Can Help:

Professionals That May Be on Your Team

Professional	What They Can Do
Psychologist	Diagnose, support regulation, assess learning/trauma
Paediatrician	Medical diagnosis, ADHD/Autism scripts, school letters
OT (Occupational Therapist)	Sensory and motor support, school strategies
Speech Therapist	Communication support (verbal, non-verbal, social)
Social Worker	Emotional and family support, advocacy, referrals

Ask them to write 'school letters' supporting regulation breaks, adjustments, or reduced workload.

Parent Allies & Advocacy Organisations

Support	What They Offer
Parent advocacy groups	Practical advice, emotional support, scripts, resources
Facebook groups (carefully chosen)	Medical diagnosis, ADHD/Autism scripts, school letters
Peer mentors	Lived experience guidance, informal advocacy
Disability advocates	Formal representation in school meetings
Legal aid / education ombudsman	For when things escalate or rights are denied

Ask your local advocate: ‘Do you offer support in school meetings?’

NDIS & External Services

If you’re in Australia and your child is NDIS funded:

- Ask your **LAC or Support Coordinator** to connect you with providers who can do **school liaison** or help with transitions
- OT, psych, and support workers can sometimes **attend school meetings** or write reports
- You can use **therapy hours** to build capacity in advocacy, regulation, and planning

Build Your Circle (You Don’t Need 10 People — Just the Right Ones)

- One professional who gets your child
- One support person who gets you
- One advocate who knows the system
- One place to fall apart without being judged

TOOL: Student Snapshot Template

Use before a meeting to get clear on what you want and need.

Student Name:

Preferred Name/Nickname:

Age/Year Level:

Pronouns:

Strengths:

- Loves:
- Really good at:
- Things that light them up:

How They Learn Best

- Prefers: (circle) visual / verbal / hands-on / other:
- Needs time to:
- Responds well to:

Regulation & Sensory

- Triggers / stressors:
- Signs they're dysregulated:
- What helps them feel safe:

Communication Style

- Verbal: Yes ◯ No ◯ Intermittent ◯
- Uses AAC ◯ Gestures ◯ visual cues ◯
- Struggles with:

What We Ask From You

- Be patient with:
- Please avoid:
- Most important thing for you to know:

Contact Info:

Parent/Carer:

Best contact method:

TOOL: Sample Advocacy Letter

(Use this when asking for an IEP, meeting, or adjustment)

Dear [Teacher/Principal/Inclusion Leader],

I'm writing to request a formal meeting to discuss adjustments for my child, [Name], who is currently experiencing [brief issue — e.g., burnout, dysregulation, refusal, etc.].

While we are still in the process of [diagnosis / accessing support], [Child's name] is clearly demonstrating a need for proactive planning. We'd like to explore what adjustments can be made under the Disability Standards for Education to reduce distress and support access to learning.

We are requesting:

- An IEP or personalised plan to be created or reviewed
- Adjustments related to [sensory needs / executive function / emotional regulation / etc.]
- A plan for consistent communication between home and school

Please let us know your availability for a Student Support Group or similar planning meeting.

Thank you for your time and support,

Sincerely,
[Your Name]
[Your Contact Info]

TOOL: Support Team Map

Support Role	Name / Contact	Has Been Helpful?	Could Do More?
GP / Paediatrician		◯ Yes ◯ No	◯ Yes ◯ No
Psychologist		◯ Yes ◯ No	◯ Yes ◯ No
OT		◯ Yes ◯ No	◯ Yes ◯ No
Speech / Allied Health		◯ Yes ◯ No	◯ Yes ◯ No
School Staff (supportive person)		◯ Yes ◯ No	◯ Yes ◯ No
Advocate / Peer Support		◯ Yes ◯ No	◯ Yes ◯ No
Parent Group / Online Community		◯ Yes ◯ No	◯ Yes ◯ No
Support Person Just For You		◯ Yes ◯ No	◯ Yes ◯ No

A Letter of Encouragement

Dear ADHD Mum,

I know how much of your day is spent holding things together for your child — and how little time anyone gives you to fall apart.

I know how hard it is to sit in a school meeting and speak gently while your heart is screaming, you're not seeing my child.

I know the rage, the grief, the guilt, the fear — and the unshakeable love underneath it all.

So here's what I want you to remember:

- Your instincts are valid, even if professionals question them.
- Your exhaustion is not a flaw — it's a sign of how much you've carried.
- Your advocacy is not too much. It's exactly what your child needs.
- You are not alone. Not broken. Not failing.

And even on the days when nothing changes — you are the person who sees your child fully, fights for them without question, and loves them without condition.

That's what matters.

You're doing enough. And if no one has told you lately:

You are extraordinary.

Warmly,

Jane McFadden

This guide is based on personal experience, lived insight, and strategies that have worked for many mums (including me!) - but it's not a substitute for professional medical, psychological, or therapeutic advice.

Every child is different. Every mum is too. What's shared here is designed to support, not diagnose - and to offer practical, relatable tools you can adapt to suit your own family.

If you or your child are experiencing ongoing distress, please reach out to a trusted health professional who understands neurodivergent needs. You deserve proper care, personalised support, and a team that really gets it.

Above all - trust yourself. You're the expert on your child. And you matter, too. 

***Disclaimer**: This resource is based on lived experience and general knowledge, not formal legal or educational training. While every effort has been made to ensure the information is accurate and supportive, it may not be 100% precise or applicable to every situation. Please seek advice from a qualified professional (like a teacher or lawyer) if you need specific guidance.*