

Count Me In

A practical guide to supporting your child to participate in local community activities



Belongside
Families

Acknowledgements

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About this Guide

The Count Me In handbook is your comprehensive guide to supporting your child with disability to participate in community activities. Whether you're starting out or looking for extra assistance, this guide has you covered.

Inside You'll Find

- Inspiring stories: Discover the power of inclusion through real-life examples of families and young people who have found success and joy in their communities.
- Practical guidance: A roadmap to assist you in supporting your child's participation based on their unique interests, strengths, and support needs.
- Lived experience: Learn from the insights and tips of experienced families about finding suitable activities, initiating contact, overcoming challenges, and setting your child up for success.
- Valuable resources: Access to a wealth of helpful tools and templates, as well as links to additional support services and organisations.

How to Use the Guide

This resource was initially designed as an interactive PDF. To access the interactive version, go to belongsidefamilies.org.au/resource/count-me-in or scan the QR code on this page.

You can choose to follow the guide from start to finish, working through the steps and using the tools provided, or you can directly navigate to the relevant section that you need.

We've also included several examples, including the story of a young boy called Ferdie, who you will read more about throughout the guide. Ferdie's examples bring to life and demonstrate how you can apply the tools and information you read about to support your child.



Digital Toolkit

The toolkit is designed to sit alongside Count Me In. Every time you see the toolkit icon, it indicates there is a tool, template, or resource related to the content in this guide, within the toolkit.

The toolkit also includes blank templates that you can use to record your ideas, thoughts, and reflections as you work through the guide. You can either print the blank templates and write on them, or download the editable versions and type directly into them. Instructions on how to do this are included in the toolkit.

To access the toolkit, visit: belongsidefamilies.org.au/resource/count-me-in or scan the QR code below.

As the expert on your child, we hope this guide empowers you to use all that you know about them and apply this knowledge to support your child's participation in activities they love and their inclusion within the community.



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Introduction

As parents, we all want our children to feel like they belong and are connected to the communities they are a part of. For children with disability, this sense of belonging is essential, yet it can also be challenging to achieve. That's why we're excited to share this booklet with you, which we've created to help families overcome barriers and find activities where their children thrive in their local community.

We hope that the personal accounts and practical tools give you the knowledge and confidence to embark on this journey and face any challenges you may be presented with along the way. And that you are inspired to share it with other families you may know.

We wish you and your family all the best as you navigate this journey together.

From the team and families at

Belongside
Families



Why Community Inclusion Matters

For children with disability, days are often filled with appointments and therapies. While these are important for development, they shouldn't be the only experiences that shape a childhood. This is where community activities come in, offering the chance to explore interests, make new friends, and develop essential skills within a broader, inclusive community.

Understanding the Types of Activities

Inclusive activities are about creating places and opportunities where everyone, regardless of their abilities, can participate together with the necessary accommodations. This means that children with disability can join in alongside kids from the local community and do fun things together.

When searching for inclusive activities, it's important to know that some organisations may use the term 'inclusive' to mean welcoming people from different cultures and family structures. Others use it to refer to activities for children with disability specifically. So, it's essential to verify the type of inclusivity that an organisation offers before enrolling in their activities.

Disability-specific activities are designed to meet the specific needs of children with disability, providing them with a safe and supported space to learn, grow, and connect with others who share similar experiences. However, when in specialised settings, disability-specific activities may offer fewer opportunities to contribute and be known in the broader community.

This is why it is important to consider what your goals are. For instance, a child may benefit from a disability-specific swimming class if the goal is for them to learn to be safe in the water. A mainstream swimming class may be more suitable when the aim is to be in the community and learn turn-taking. For some families, disability-specific activities can act as pathways to an inclusive activity. For example, disability soccer classes may help children learn foundational skills that support them to join an inclusive soccer club in the future.

Benefits of Inclusion

- **Making friends:** Community activities give children a chance to connect with other kids who have similar interests.
- **Discovering passions:** Maybe your child loves music, art, sports, or anything else under the sun! Community activities offer a range of options to explore different interests and find new things they love.
- **Building confidence:** Stepping outside their comfort zone and trying new things in a supportive environment can do wonders for a child's confidence.
- **Feeling like they belong:** Community activities help children with disability to feel seen, accepted, and welcomed.
- **Developing skills:** Your child is able to learn skills through real-world experiences that couldn't be learned in a therapy session.

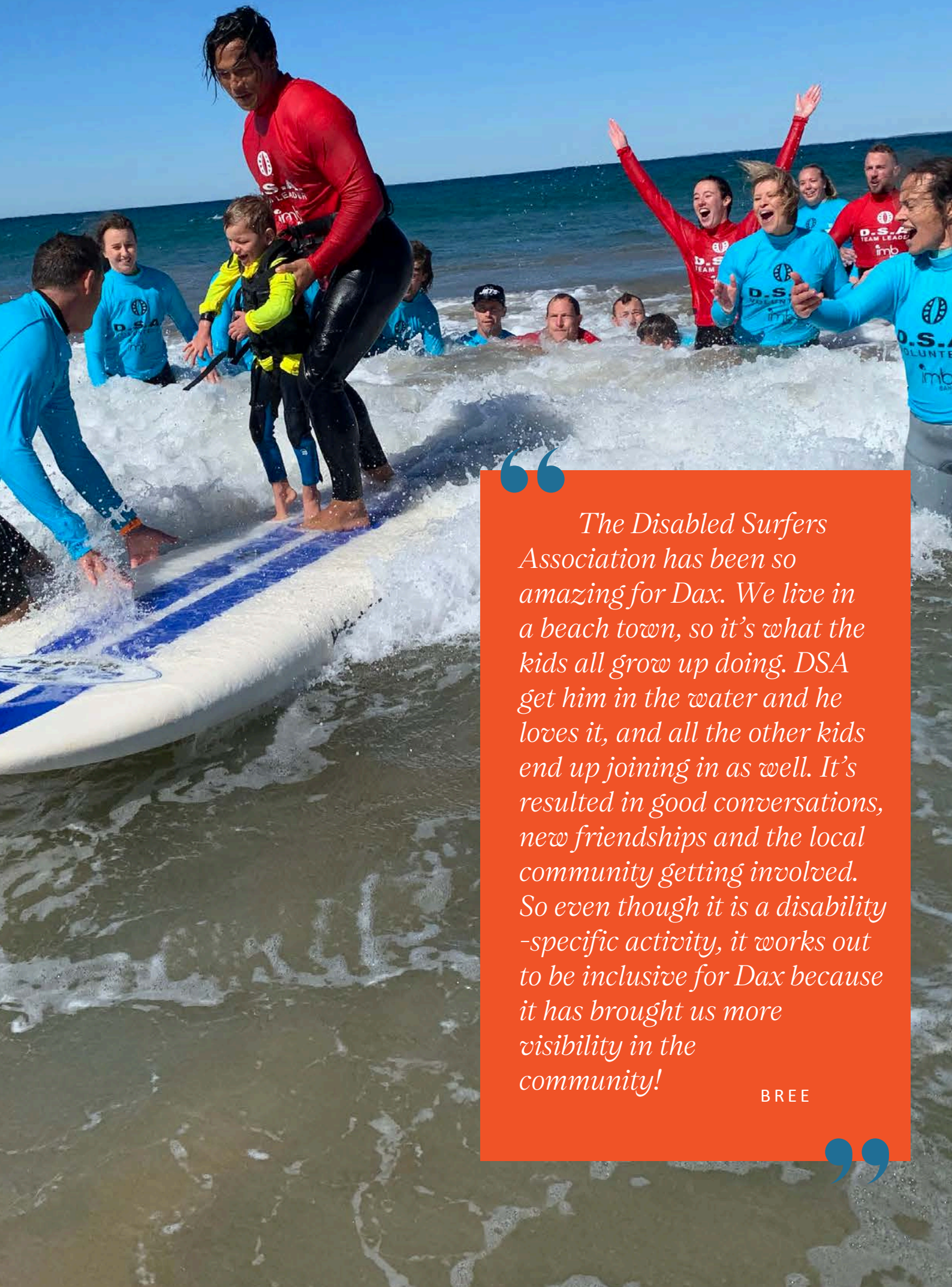
What the Evidence Says

Research shows that children with disability thrive when they are included in their local communities. Emerging evidence indicates that mainstream inclusion leads to higher social skills, likelihood of employment and independence, and more community inclusion later in life.¹

Finding Your Way to Inclusion

Every family's journey towards community inclusion for their child with disability is unique. Some families prefer to start by joining disability-specific groups, using them as a stepping stone to inclusive activities. While others choose to dive headfirst into a mainstream activity, advocating for necessary accommodations. Regardless of the starting point, we all want the same thing: for our children to have the chance to experience the joy of community activities, from making new friends to discovering hidden talents, in a way that works for them.

¹ (R. Jackson, 2012, *Following the Natural Paths of Childhood*)



The Disabled Surfers Association has been so amazing for Dax. We live in a beach town, so it's what the kids all grow up doing. DSA get him in the water and he loves it, and all the other kids end up joining in as well. It's resulted in good conversations, new friendships and the local community getting involved. So even though it is a disability-specific activity, it works out to be inclusive for Dax because it has brought us more visibility in the community!

BREE

Working out the Right Activity for Your Child

We all want our children to have passions and activities they truly enjoy. But sometimes, figuring out what those are, or how they can lead to opportunities to participate in the local community, can be tricky. By the end of this section, you will have identified your child's interests and preferred environments, along with a few community activities that might be a good fit.

To help you brainstorm, we've included questions to get you thinking and tools that offer a structured process with examples. As well as an optional section on alternative ways that your child can participate in activities in a non-typical way.



Activity Identification Tool

This tool is designed to be filled in with your ideas as you work through this guide. You can find templates and completed examples by going to pages 4 - 6 of the toolkit.

Identifying Your Child's Interests

When considering community activities for your child, it's essential to start by thinking about what your child's interests are. This will help you to identify activities they could participate in and meaningful contributions they could make.

[The following questions and examples can guide you. Record your ideas under the Interests heading on the Activity Identification Tool on page 6 of the toolkit.](#)

- What activities do they gravitate towards? For example, building Lego, reading books, running around like superheroes, baking or sensory play? Or do they like outdoor activities such as gardening, rock climbing or nature play? Or creative activities such as painting, drama or storytelling?
- What kind of videos do they choose? Educational channels about animals, dance routines, cartoon adventures, or maybe coding tutorials?
- If your child doesn't speak, watch for non-verbal signs of excitement. Do they clap at the animals in the zoo, point eagerly at the bright colours in a painting, or giggle at silly cartoons?

“Our son is non-speaking, but we can tell how much he loves the water. He gets excited as soon as we take his rashie out. You can see how happy he is to be at his swimming lessons because he actively participates in all the activities they do.”

RONNY



Determining the Best Environment

Understanding your child's unique preferences and needs can help you choose the activities and environments that meet their needs.

As you read the questions below, consider your child's preferences. Record your thoughts under the Environment heading on page 6 of the toolkit.

Sensory

- Do they love the gentle sound of chirping birds in the park or the energetic beats of a dance class?
- Do they prefer stimulating environments such as a busy playground or festival or more contained environments such as the library or board games at home?
- Do they gravitate towards bright colours and sunshine or find comfort in dim, cosy spaces?

Consider indoor vs outdoor activities. Weigh up exposure to unpredictable natural elements against the sensory factors in indoor spaces, such as lighting and noise levels. Perhaps it's worth exploring whether an online or virtual class is available.

Social

- Do they love playing with other children, or is solo play more enjoyable for them?
- Do they thrive in smaller settings with a handful of friends or prefer being in the thick of the action with larger groups?
- Do they thrive in structure following a group plan, or do they prefer to set their own agenda?

Consider whether an activity such as athletics which is done alongside peers, but which doesn't require teamwork, would suit your child. Or perhaps a creative exploration such as art which offers freedom and choice is preferred. Even if your child thrives in cooperative team play, think about the size of the groups they feel most comfortable in and keep this in mind when weighing up your options.

Movement

- Do they love high energy activities like trampolining and dancing or sitting down to draw or play games?
- Do they love rock climbing, bike riding or kicking the soccer ball, or is yoga more their thing?

Consider the physical demands of the activity against your child's energy levels as well as how important movement may be to support their regulation.

Physical

- Will there need to be a flat surface for your child to move their wheelchair or walker? Or perhaps they aren't yet confident in navigating walking on bumpy surfaces?
- Will your child need a table at an appropriate height? Sufficient space to move around freely, including turning corners and navigating obstacles?

By thinking about the physical environment, you can help your child access and participate more easily, setting them up for success.



Matching the Interest and Environment to Activity

You've identified your child's interests and discovered their preferred environments. Now, it's time to think about potential activities.

As you read the prompt questions, consider potential activity ideas. Record your ideas under the Ideas for Community Activities heading on page 6 of the toolkit.

- Does your child thrive in lively environments? Check out local music classes or drama clubs.
- Do they prefer a quieter activity? Look for story time sessions in libraries, nature walking groups, or yoga classes for kids.
- Does your child thrive in nature? Seek out community gardening clubs where they can dig in soil, plant seeds and see their plants grow.
- Does your child love tactile play? Look for pottery classes or art workshops where they can get hands-on with different materials.
- Is building their passion? Seek out Lego clubs or robotics programs where they can create and invent.
- Do they love reading? Explore storytelling clubs or book clubs.
- Does your child like to move? Find dance classes or explore parkour or trampolining groups.

Consider your child's age and developmental stage. While preschoolers might thrive in music classes with puppets, older children might enjoy music lessons or band.

Stepping Stone Activities

To help your child feel confident and prepared for the community activity you've decided to explore, here are some strategies and fun activities you can do together at home, with family, or with friends:

- Break down the activity into its core skills and practice them in a familiar environment. For example, if it's a soccer club, practice dribbling, passing, and kicking a ball. For a coding club, explore beginner coding apps or websites.
- Get familiar with key terms and concepts related to the activity by reading books, watching videos, or playing games.
- Simulate the activity at home on a smaller scale. For example, set up a mini soccer field in the backyard or organise a friendly coding competition with siblings.
- Practice introductions, asking questions, and interacting with others in a role-playing scenario related to the activity.
- Acknowledge and celebrate your child's efforts and achievements, no matter how small.
- Find friends who share your child's interests and organise playdates where they can practice the activity together.
- Attend local events related to the activity, like watching a hockey game or attending author book events at the library.

Think about strategies and activities that could prepare your child, and record them under the Stepping Stones heading on page 6 of the toolkit.



Exploring Alternative Ways of Contributing

If you have a child who is happier exploring an interest in their own way, on their own terms, then this section is for you. Whilst not every family may need to go down this path, it is important to remember that if your child does not enjoy participating in an activity in the same way their peers do, then there is always the option to think creatively about a way that they can participate, that works for them, whilst making a meaningful contribution to a class, team or community.

Meaningful ways that your child can contribute

- Soccer: Instead of kicking the ball, they could be the 'Assistant Coach', keeping time and organising and setting up activities.
- Drama class: They could be the tech whiz, helping with lights and sound effects, or take on a narrator role reading from a script.

These are just a few ideas, and the possibilities are endless. The key is to find an activity that your child enjoys and something that uses their strengths and interests.

Why are meaningful contributions so important?

- Boosts confidence: When your child contributes in a way that matters, they feel proud and capable.
- Belonging: Being part of a team and contributing to something bigger than themselves helps your child feel like they truly belong.

- Friendship: When other kids see your child's unique skills and how they contribute, it breaks down barriers and opens doors for friendship.
- Making a difference: Your child's contributions can benefit the whole community, making activities more inclusive and enjoyable for everyone.



Zoom In & Out Tool

This tool helps you come up with creative solutions for how your child can participate in activities in non-traditional ways and identify meaningful contributions they can make in the community. Find editable templates and completed examples by going to pages 7 - 9 of the toolkit.

How to Use the Zoom In & Out Tool

- 1 Define the context: Think about the specific people, place, and activity where you're seeking inclusion for your child.
- 2 Zoom In: Consider a contribution that would be meaningful to one person within the activity. For example, your child could help a friend with a task or share their interest.
- 3 Zoom out: Consider a contribution that would be meaningful to the whole group. Maybe your child could lead a game.
- 4 Zoom out further: Consider a contribution that would be meaningful to the entire community. This could involve advocating for accessibility changes or organising an inclusive event.

“I've seen examples where children's involvement just appears tokenistic. Like, the child is just stuck with an adult or even physically put to the side. That's not giving them a chance to make a meaningful contribution to the activity or to the community, is it? Let them do something important!”

NATASHA



See how Ferdie's Dad used the Zoom In & Out Tool

Context

Ferdie would love to be involved with the same soccer team as his school friends. But he's not sure whether he actually wants to play soccer.

Zoom In: Contribute to One Individual

MORALE BOOSTING: Maybe Ferdie and I could make cards, posters or letters to uplift the kids in the team. Could have a chat with the coach about making a 'kid to kid' award where Ferdie singles someone out for good sportsmanship and effort?

Zoom Out: Contribute to the Group

COORDINATING EVENTS: Ferdie and I could plan some team-building events like pizza nights, host some board games, video games or movie nights. I'll talk to the other kids' parents about this and find out what's coming up, dates to celebrate etc. Ferdie would love this and I think the team would too...

CREATE A CLUB HISTORY: I could look into the soccer club's history with Ferdie. We could make a poster or a booklet with a bit of a timeline to be displayed with the trophies etc.

TEAM PHOTOGRAPHER: Ferdie could take photos and videos of the team during the game.

Zoom Out Further: Contribute to the Community

OUTREACH & INCLUSION: Ferdie could research the needs of the members of the crowd. Providing suggestions to the club about supports for all the different people who attend. Ear plugs for whoever needs them, blankets for the elderly, water for the crowd on hot days... I think this would be really appreciated.

[You can find more examples on page 8 of the toolkit, along with a template to use for your child on page 9.](#)

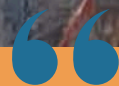


Searching for Local Activities

Now you've compiled a list of activities you think your child will love. It's time to find suitable local options. Below are some ideas to help you in your search.

[We recommend shortlisting 2-3 activities to contact, leaving options open if your first choice isn't ideal or your child wants to try something different. Record your ideas on page 10 of the toolkit.](#)

- Ask friends and family, other families at school and your neighbours. They might know about hidden gems, inclusive groups or activities.
- Look on community websites for listings of activities, events, and clubs. Join social media parent groups or groups specific to your child's interests for insider recommendations.
- Follow local councils, libraries, and community centres on social media and check out their websites. Many offer programs for children, and some of these include specific inclusion plans for children with disability and low-cost or no-cost options.
- Ask your child's therapist. They are working with many children and will likely have heard about the good programs in your local community.
- Your child's teacher may also know of activities that your child's classmates are participating in.



Be BRAVE! One of the biggest barriers has actually been myself. I sometimes feel afraid that my daughter will be rejected, that I'll be rejected ... There is sort of an internal battle and it can take some element of bravery I think, as the parent of a child who's different, to turn up and say 'You know, my daughter deserves a space here'.

HEATHER





Tracey & Aubrey's Story

Tracey is a Mum to five children aged between 7 and 27 years old. She shares how she supported her youngest daughter Aubrey, who has Down Syndrome, to explore activities, including dancing, horse riding, swimming, Little Athletics and Scouts. Which lead to friendships and connections in the community.

Our view has always been that Aubrey should have the same opportunities as her siblings, who have all been very engaged in the local community through just about every activity that you can think of. So Aubrey has had lots of amazing role models to show her what she's capable of in life.

First Steps

We originally started Aubrey in Kindergym, thinking that it would be good for her physio. But we soon realised that Aubrey wasn't really that interested in gymnastics. She was actually more interested in just dancing in front of the speakers at the front of the room. So we had a think and a look around our local community, and we came across a local dance studio that ran a play-based dance program for preschoolers called Ready Set Dance. We gave that a go, and from the first session, Aubrey absolutely loved it!

We've worked closely with the dance school to make sure that Aubrey has the right support. We were fortunate that the owner had the view that all children should have the opportunity to participate in whatever capacity they're able to. The school put in place a program to train senior dancers to teach them the skills to become teachers. As part of this, one of the student teacher's roles was to support Aubrey. And she has just been phenomenal. She's been there with Aubrey every week over the last three years, and she also steps in to supports with her toileting when she needs to.

Building on Success

From dancing, we decided to try Little Athletics. This journey was a little bit bumpier. I tried to get Aubrey into a club very close to home, but when I reached out, I wasn't actually able to talk to anyone about the program or how they could support Aubrey's needs. I'd learnt that having open lines of

communication was really important, so I decided to cut our losses. I went onto Facebook and found another local club and within 10 minutes, I was speaking to the President, who said that there was absolutely no reason why Aubrey shouldn't come down and give it a go.

At Little Athletics, Aubrey is just one of the kids. Everybody down there gives her the encouragement she needs. Aubrey does her best, and the focus is on beating her personal best. Each week she has another go, and she gets a little bit faster or she jumps a little bit further. She's learning amazing skills, and it's great physio. Plus, she's out there with her friends, being engaged in the community.

Following in Family Footsteps

By this stage, we had a pretty full schedule, however, we are a scouting family, with Aubrey's three older siblings all having taken part. So we had a look around our local area to see what Scout groups we could make work with Aubrey's timetable and would also be a good fit for her. We found a Joey's group about 25 minutes away. Which she loves and she is accepted as 'just Aubrey'.

We are still on a toileting journey with Aubrey, so I decided to sign up as a parent helper. That way, I

can help out the group, and if needed, support Aubrey. There are times when we've used support workers to work with Aubrey in some environments, so we can just be parents on the sidelines. But I'm also really happy to get involved, in the same way I've done for my other kids, whose teams I've managed or coached in the past. And honestly, I get just as much out of going to Joey's as Aubrey does. We went on a camp together recently, and it was a great weekend. We went canoeing and other fun stuff. And it's just so great to see her thriving.

Aubrey gets invited to all the birthday parties, along with all the other little girls. And it's not just the connection that has been important for Aubrey, it's also broadened our circle as a family. We've built quite a few friendships with other families as well.

Tracey's Advice

1. Give things a go.
2. Work from your child's interests.
3. Try things, and if they don't work, try something else.
4. Expect that you'll be included, but work with the organisation so that you can solve problems together.
5. Have fun!



Contacting Activity Providers

Now you've identified some activities for your child in the community, it's time to reach out and find out which one might be the best fit. We'll take you through the steps and what you need to prepare to have you feeling confident.

Preparing to Make Contact

Preparation is the key to success! In this section, we will cover questions to ask and ideas on how to overcome any objections that you may face.

Working Out What Questions to Ask

Consider ahead of time what questions you could ask to determine whether the activity will be the right fit. For example:

- What is the age range for the program?
- What is the length and general routine for the session?
- What are the skills learned in the program?
- Are there any particular skills that are usually assumed beforehand?
- Do you offer a trial class?
- Will a support person be welcome in the trial? Perhaps a sibling or parent?



Extended Questions

Find an extended list of potential questions, and space to record your own questions by going to page 11 of the toolkit.

Planning to Overcome Objections

Sometimes when you want to sign your child up for a new activity, the activity provider might have questions or concerns about how to include your child. This is normal, especially if they don't have much experience with disability. To help make things easier, try these tips from parents:

- Talk about the good things your child can bring to the activity, like their unique perspective or special talents.
- Use positive language when talking about your child's abilities and strengths.
- Be prepared and do research ahead of time. Think about concerns the providers might have and come up with potential solutions. These could relate to safety, staff training, accessibility or managing transitions. Getting advice from other parents of children with disability or your child's therapy team can be helpful.
- Ask open-ended questions to understand the provider's perspective, allowing you to tailor your approach and address them directly.
- Work with the activity providers instead of making demands, seek solutions and work out adjustments together. You can learn more about reasonable accommodations on page 26 of this guide.
- Share resources that can help the provider understand more about your child's disability.
- Rehearse your elevator pitch beforehand (you can learn more about this on the next page).

Remember, the most important thing is to work together and find a way for everyone to feel supported and comfortable.





Creating a Positive First Impression

It's important to represent your children well, focusing on their strengths and highlighting what makes them unique. This will help to reduce any hesitancy from the activity provider, especially if they are inexperienced with disability and feel uncertain about how to provide the right support.

A great introduction can generate enthusiasm for the opportunity to include your child. The information and tools in this section will help you represent your child in the best way possible, showing that there are many things they can do.

An Elevator Pitch

Imagine you're in an elevator with someone important who can help your child's life. You only have a few seconds to make a good impression and showcase your child's strengths. This is where an elevator pitch comes in handy. It's a quick introduction that highlights your child's capabilities and why they would be a good fit for an activity.

When it comes to your child, the elevator pitch should focus on their best qualities, what they love to do, and what makes them unique. You want to tell a little story that makes them shine and prompts others to engage with them. Don't worry about discussing their challenges or disabilities at this stage. The goal is to communicate who they really are and what they enjoy.

Below is a list of tips for crafting an elevator pitch:

- Briefly describe your child's strengths and interests.

- Tailor your pitch to the person you're talking to.
- Give examples of your child's developing passion for an activity.
- Highlight any strategies or tools that work for your child.

Example of an Elevator Pitch for Ferdie

When Ferdie was first identified as Autistic, his parents were worried about people's attitudes. They tried to protect Ferdie from being seen as 'naughty' by giving plenty of information about his challenges upfront. But it didn't feel good to introduce Ferdie this way, and they realised that he wasn't being seen for the person he is. See how, by using the Elevator Pitch, the way they introduce Ferdie changed over time.

Before

This is Ferdie. Say hello Ferdie! Ferdie, you have to wave! Sorry, he won't look at you when you speak and he doesn't say much. He's just quite shy.

Actually, I should probably warn you, Ferdie's a little bit on the spectrum. It makes doing anything new so tricky. He can get all worked up over things he's not expecting. He's a bit clumsy but loves sport.

We were told to bring fruit, but he won't eat anything 'wet', so he's just got his usual morning tea. If it's a problem we can just leave after the game finishes.

After

Hi, this is Ferdie, and I'm his very lucky Mum, Ellen. We've made a platter of his favourite snacks to share after the session. He's a brilliant help in the kitchen.

Ferdie loves soccer. He amazes me with all his facts. Ferdie's Autistic and when he gets passionate about an interest he just soaks it up!

Today, we thought we'd follow Ferdie's lead and see how he feels on the field or if there's another role he'd like. He has headphones, they're great if you're going to use a whistle or megaphone. If you put your thumb to your ear like this, it's the sign for 'loud', so that's a good warning! I'll be right here, so if Ferdie needs a break or a walk for a little reset, that's no problem at all.



All About Me

An All About Me is a one-page document that you can make to tell others about your child. It talks about their strengths, interests, and abilities, and gives tips on how to support and communicate with them. You can send it to people who need to know more about your child, like the activity provider.

If you need help crafting your elevator pitch, you can use An All About Me as your starting point. We'll talk more about how you can use the All About Me page later in the booklet when we discuss what to send to the activity provider.



Positive Introduction Tools

We've created resources to help you [make an Elevator Pitch and All About Me](#). These include [tips, templates, and examples from Ferdie and other families](#). Go to [pages 12 - 15 of the toolkit to find these resources](#).

Making Contact

When it comes to making contact, it's important to choose a communication style that suits you best. Phone calls are great for getting immediate answers and having a conversation. On the other hand, emails are best for concise communication, record-keeping, and giving you the time to carefully craft your message.

Phone Call Tips

- Avoid calling during peak hours like after school or class times. Choose a quieter time when the provider is more likely to be available for a focused conversation.
- Before you call, prepare your questions and your child's information. Think about your environment, for example, are there any distractions.
- If you need to speak for an extended period, ask if there is a better time to call back or schedule a meeting instead.
- Start by briefly introducing yourself and the purpose of your call, then ask who you should speak with.
- Be polite and courteous, as this will go a long way towards building a positive relationship.
- If something is unclear, ask a follow-up question to clarify.
- While speaking, jot down important information or answers to your questions.

Email Tips

- Ensure you have the correct email address and any other relevant contact information before sending your message.
- Use a clear and descriptive subject line so the provider knows exactly what your email is about. Especially for a larger provider, it will help make sure it is forwarded to the correct person who can answer your query.
- Keep your email concise and to the point. Avoid including too much information in your first communication. For example, introduce

yourself and your child, state the purpose of the email, and ask your questions.

- Proofread the email, or ask someone else to read over it for you. Check to make sure that your request is clear and that the email conveys your message clearly.
- If you haven't heard back within a reasonable timeframe (3-5 business days), send a polite follow-up email or make a brief phone call.

Deciding What Activities to Try

You've contacted potential activity providers, asked your questions, and now have a promising list. Here are some ideas to help you narrow down your choices and find the ideal fit:

- Where possible, involve your child in the decision-making process. This could involve asking why they like each one, what excites them and any potential concerns they might have. Or using visual tools to gather their input, such as looking at photos of different activities and they can point to what excites them.
- Remember their needs. Think about any physical, sensory, or social needs your child might have. Does the activity cater to these needs or offer necessary accommodations?
- Think about your family's schedule and budget. Can you realistically fit the activity into your routine and afford the costs?
- Many activity providers offer trial classes or sessions. This is a fantastic opportunity for your child to experience the activity firsthand and see if they enjoy it.
- Make a list of the pros and cons of each activity. Weigh the benefits (fun, learning, social interaction) against any potential drawbacks (cost, location, schedule conflicts). This can help you objectively compare options and make a well-informed decision.
- Trust your gut. Ultimately, the best decision is the one that feels right for you and your child. If an activity sparks joy, and the provider is willing to give it a go, that's a great indicator!



Ainsley & Will's Story

Ainsley is Mother to Will, an Autistic teenager. She shares Will's journey with Scouts, from overcoming early fears to discovering friendships and finding a place of belonging in the group and the community.

Our son Will was 11 when our family decided that it was time to get brave and take some bold steps. A large part of that was Will joining Scouts.

We'd waited until then because of our fears around Will's safety, given that he's minimally speaking. But if I'm honest, the main thing holding us back was really our fear that Will wouldn't be accepted.

Preparing to Take the First Step

That first night, heading to Scouts, I was shaking in my boots. I'd prepared an All About Me, which was important as Will was still new to using his AAC device to communicate. I was also ready to suggest accommodations, such as arranging for paid supports.

I was relieved to find the Scout Leader was welcoming. When it came time to discuss adjustments she said, "Look, our leaders and peers are actually really good. Let's just give it a go before we talk about the need for additional support." And sure enough, everyone just rose to the occasion, including and supporting Will. And since then, we haven't looked back.

Forging Friendships

One of the main things that Scouts has brought to Will's life is his friends. He's got two really close mates as well as many other good friends in the group. And they just seem to have their own natural language. When we pull up on a Friday night, he jumps out of the car and heads off with them and they have their own little signs and jokes and carry on.

If Will can't attend Scouts, I get all these texts from their parents checking in and telling us that he was missed. I can really see the potential for lifelong friendships with these mates.

Going From Strength to Strength

Scouts has presented lots of new challenges for Will, from abseiling to adventures into the city at night. At first, I was really fearful, but what Scouts has shown me is just how capable my son is.

Will is so much more willing to try new things, because of his peers. He sees them doing something,

and he has the confidence to do it, too. If he was just with us, his family, I doubt he'd be taking these huge steps and facing these bold feats.

However, the day we arrived for the treetop climb, Will was uncertain. But one of his mates came up and said, "I'll stick with you". When it came time for the changeovers, which were quite technical and tricky for Will because of his fine motor skills, his mate was there and helped Will through.

It's amazing what Will brings to the group. Everyone is learning and growing together - Will is learning new skills and his peers are learning about inclusion.

Belonging in the Community

Giving back is a core part of Scouts, so that's something that Will gets to experience too. Whether it's river clean-ups or fundraisers, Will just beams with pride. And it's so valuable for him to feel not only part of the community, but a valued contributor.

And that sense of belonging has so many benefits. Will used to get overwhelmed in crowds. So, to see him walking as part of the ANZAC Day Parade, with thousands of people and so much going on, shows me how safe he feels among his peers. It has also improved his mental health immensely.



Opening up New Doors

Will's Scout Leader asked me what Will might like to do for his special interest badge. We spoke about Will's communication device, and she suggested that he give a presentation on AAC. This led to us discovering how incredible Will is at presenting!

I mentioned the experience to some colleagues from University, and one of the lecturers asked if Will would like to give a presentation to the pre-service High School teachers. He ended up presenting to over 100 people in a huge auditorium while being recorded, and he just rocked it!

Three or four years ago, this is something that I never fathomed Will could be capable of. Scouts has opened up so many new doors for us. If I knew back then, what I know now, we'd have done it so much sooner.

Ainsley's Advice

1. Say yes! Take the leap of faith.
2. Don't be afraid of rejection, people are more accepting than you probably think.
3. If you're worried about safety, we've discovered that being known in the community makes your child safer.
4. Start early, don't leave it as late as we did.
5. But, It's never TOO late to give it a go.

Setting Your Child Up for Success

Now you've decided on an activity to try, it's time to prepare you and your child for an amazing experience. We'll cover how to get ready for the first session, define the unique goals you and your child have for the activity, as well as share some insights from experienced parents of children with disability.

What You Can Do to Prepare

There are many things you can do in the lead-up to make the transition to a new activity as smooth as possible. We asked parents to share their top tips and advice.

- Do a drive-by: Check out the location, parking situation, and how crowded it might be during your child's class time.
- Tour the space: Arrange a tour without your child to assess the environment for safety, accessibility, and any sensory considerations. Observing a session in action can be even more helpful.
- Talk to the instructor: Discuss any specific concerns you have about your child's needs or comfort level with the instructor.
- Gather information online: Look at the activity's website, social media pages, or online reviews to learn more about the environment, rules, and expectations.
- Prepare essentials: Pack everything your child might need, including comfortable clothes, snacks, water, and any necessary equipment.
- Plan their routine: Develop a clear pre-activity routine with ample time for getting ready, eating, and using the bathroom. Ensure your child is well-rested and has eaten beforehand.
- Be their support system: Stay close during the class to offer encouragement and assistance if needed. Remember, this is about discovery and enjoyment!
- Boost their confidence: There is a lot you can do at home in your everyday routines to increase your child's confidence to try a new activity. View our tips in the 'Boosting confidence' section on page 24 of this guide.
- All About Me page: Send the instructor your child's 'All About Me' beforehand and print a copy for them to take along.
- Pack familiar items: Let your child bring a favourite toy, stuffed animal, or blanket to provide comfort and a sense of security.

[Go to page 16 of the toolkit to record ideas on what you can do to prepare.](#)



Preparing Your Child

Preparing your child for their first session can be an exciting and nerve-wracking experience, both for you and your child. However, with a little bit of preparation, you can help make the experience more comfortable and enjoyable.

Preparing for the First Session

- **Get familiar:** Take your child for a tour pointing things out and letting them test equipment. If possible, watch a class in action to give them a sneak peek.
- **Show pictures and videos:** Share pictures of the space, activities, and instructors. This can help your child familiarise themselves with the environment and feel more comfortable.
- **Create a social story:** Write a simple story about what to expect. Learn how to create a social story in the next section.
- **Use AAC devices or iPads:** If your child uses these tools, upload pictures or videos related to the activity for them to access easily.
- **Talk it up:** Build excitement by discussing the activity with enthusiasm. Highlight things your child might enjoy, like making new friends, learning new skills, or doing fun activities.
- **Address concerns:** Acknowledge and validate any nervousness your child might feel. Talk about strategies for managing these feelings, like deep breathing or having a comfort item.
- **Talk openly about the activity:** Discuss what your child hopes to gain from the experience and any concerns they might have.
- **Establish expectations:** Explain the session structure, duration, and rules. Discuss what your child can expect and how they can communicate with you during the activity.
- **Prepare for possible challenges:** Talk about how your child can handle potential difficulties, like feeling shy or not understanding something.
- **Practice coping mechanisms together.**

[Go to page 16 of the toolkit to record ideas on what you can do to prepare your child.](#)



Creating a Social Story

Social stories can help children feel less anxious and uncertain when they're preparing to take on new experiences. These stories provide a clear picture of what to expect, which can make things feel less unpredictable.

Explaining the 'why' behind the activity can help the child understand the world better and show them that you respect them enough to explain things. Instead of pressuring children to fit in with standard expectations, a well-crafted social story can relieve pressure and provide strategies for their comfort, communication, identification of feelings, and self-care. This can help children become more independent and confident, leading to better outcomes when they engage in the activity.



Social Stories

[Go to pages 17 - 19 of the toolkit to see an example of a social story that Ferdie's parents made, as well as a template and tips so that you can prepare your own.](#)

Boosting their Confidence

Helping children develop confidence is important for their personal growth and prepares them to explore the world around them. Trying new things can be overwhelming for all children, but there are some steps you can take at home to build your child's confidence when trying something new.

- Focus on their strengths and interests. Point out how passionate they are about the things that interest them, identify what they do well and praise all kinds of accomplishments, big and small.
- Break down tasks into smaller steps. Anything new they are attempting at home can be broken down into manageable parts rather than consistently being done for them. Use your judgement about what they are capable of and try not to take over too much. Whether putting on a shoe, or using a fork, give them a role in completing the task and point out their successes within those small steps.
- Provide encouragement and positive reinforcement. Celebrate their efforts and achievements to reinforce their sense of independence and competency in any and all areas of their lives.
- Model confidence and resilience. Children learn

by observing the behaviour of those around them. Demonstrate these qualities in your own life and notice how you speak about things. "I should give X a try! I might be good at Y. Oh I'm not great at Z but I still enjoy it because..."

- Embrace mistakes as learning opportunities. Help your child understand that mistakes are a natural part of the learning process. Be aware of how you speak about your own mistakes and try to frame them positively. "Oops I dropped this, but that's ok, I can clean it up." "Oh my drawing didn't turn out the way I imagined it, but I am learning." Encourage mistakes as opportunities for growth and improvement rather than setbacks.
- Celebrate diversity and inclusion. Source a range of books and videos that show people with different disabilities, circumstances and backgrounds engaging in different activities and achievements. Representation is important.
- Promote self-advocacy and self-belief. Encourage your child to communicate their needs and preferences to others. All communication is valuable and however they communicate should be acknowledged.
- Practice patience and understanding. Remember that every child develops at their own pace. Be gentle as they navigate everyday tasks in their home life.





Thinking about What's Important

It's important to think about what you and your child are hoping to achieve. Your family's goals might be different from the standard objectives for the activity, and that's ok.

Looks Like

Describe what successful participation and inclusion look like from your child's perspective. These are observable behaviours which could be physical actions, verbal interactions, or even facial expressions. For example, participating in the activity using their adapted equipment or specific behaviours such as smiling and laughing.

Ferdie's Example

 What Success Looks Like	 What Success Feels Like
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ferdie smiling • Involvement - doesn't actually have to be him kicking the ball • Better sleep through more physical activity • Cheering for others • Hearing Ferdie have the confidence to speak to other adults 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confidence • Knowing he is needed and appreciated in whatever role he takes on • Pride (ours and his) • Bravery - not being afraid to make mistakes, have falls, miss a goal etc.



Looks Like, Feels Like

This tool is a framework for identifying what successful participation looks like for your child. Go to pages 20 - 21 of the toolkit to find a template and tips.

Feels Like

Describe how your child would feel when they are successfully participating and included. Use emotive and descriptive language. For example, feels safe and supported, enjoys being part of the group or describe feelings such as happy, proud or comfortable.



Determining Reasonable Adjustments

What is a Reasonable Adjustment

These are changes made to remove or reduce barriers for people with disability to ensure that everyone has the same opportunities. Under the Disability Discrimination Act, which is part of Australian Human Rights Law, schools, businesses, and other organisations are required to make reasonable adjustments to include people with disability, as long as it doesn't cause 'unjustifiable hardship' (this is extreme difficulty or major expense). From providing visual instructions to break down tasks, to pairing your child up with a peer buddy, reasonable adjustments can be simple modifications to an activity or redefining goals and markers of achievement to suit what is possible for your child.

Thinking about Reasonable Adjustments for Your Child

It's important to be prepared and knowledgeable when trying to include your child in a mainstream activity. Doing some research beforehand and having some ideas for accommodations can be very useful if your child needs them.

It's not necessary to start your first conversation with the activity organiser by listing all the adjustments needed. But if you anticipate that some creative thinking may be necessary to make the activity inclusive and accessible, it's a good idea to do your homework ahead of time and approach the situation with a positive, can-do attitude. Your child's therapist is a great person to speak to for suggestions about reasonable adjustments.



Examples of Reasonable Adjustments

- Reduce the background noise.
- Allow alternative clothing options.
- Modify activities to match the child's physical abilities.
- Offer adaptive equipment or alternative ways to participate.
- Clear pathways from obstacles to facilitate safe movement.
- Provide visual demonstration of instructions.
- Allow extra time for tasks and provide regular breaks as needed.
- Allow the child to stand or stim while waiting their turn instead of sitting.
- Provide clear visual schedules and routines to predict transitions and expectations.
- Pair the child with a peer who can offer support and assistance.
- Provide gradual exposure to social situations, starting with smaller groups and familiar peers.
- Offer a quiet space for breaks.
- Educate staff about disability and promote inclusive behaviour.
- Repeat instructions and rephrase information to ensure understanding.

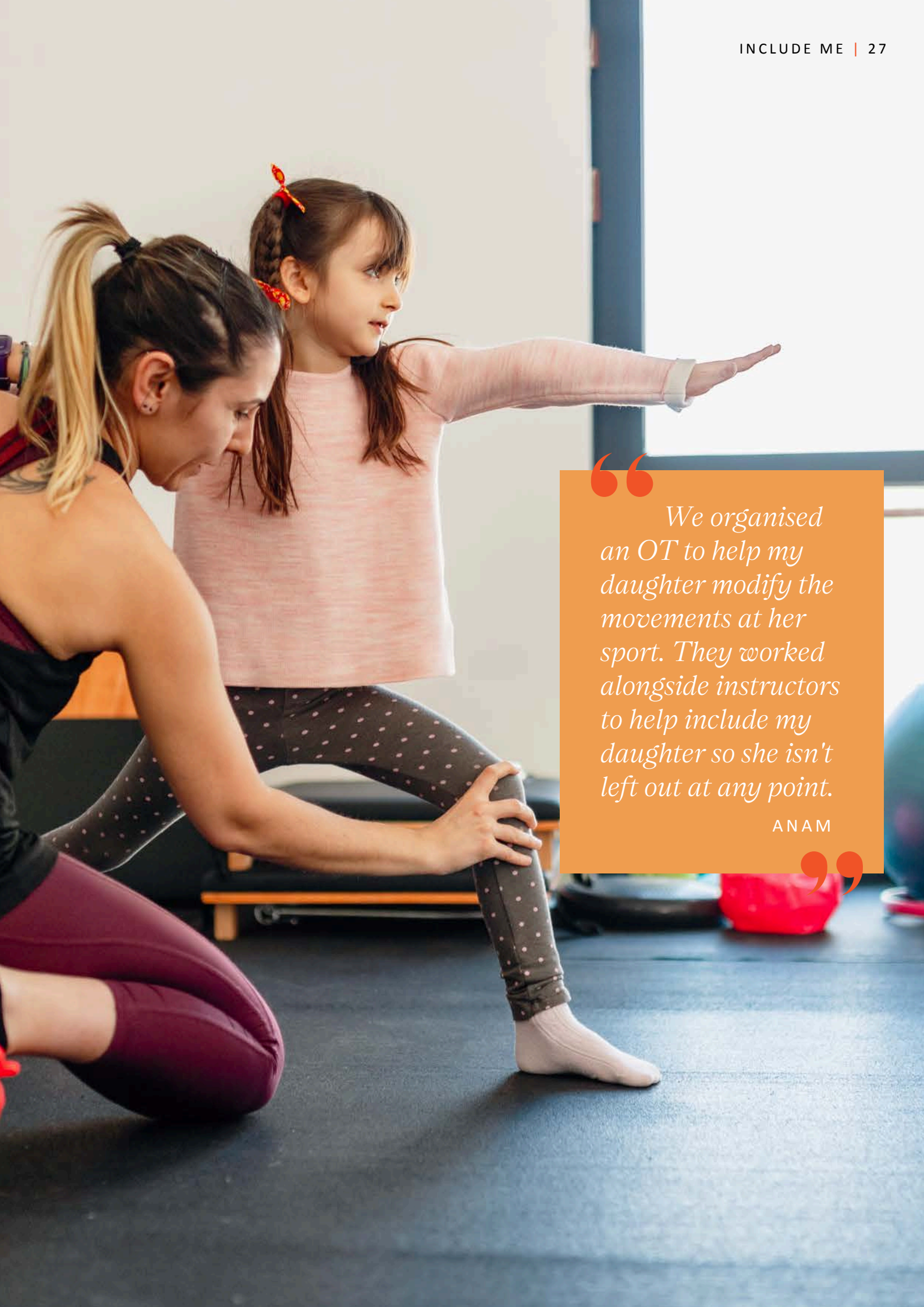
When thinking about reasonable adjustments for your child, consider their needs across the six areas of functional capacity: mobility, communication, social, learning, self-care and self-management.

Go to pages 22 - 23 of the toolkit to read about how Ferdie and Molly's families and therapists came up with reasonable adjustments.



Reasonable Adjustments

Go to page 24 of the toolkit to find a blank template to record reasonable adjustments for your child.



“ We organised an OT to help my daughter modify the movements at her sport. They worked alongside instructors to help include my daughter so she isn't left out at any point.

ANAM

Melo & Victoria's Story

Melo is Dad to two children; his youngest, Victoria, now 12, has intellectual and physical disabilities. Melo shares how another parent's story provided the spark of inspiration, which led to opportunities in the local community that Melo never dreamed possible.

If someone had told me last year that Victoria would be going to Nippers, I'd have said, "tell 'em they're dreamin". We've come a long way from those early days when Victoria received the long list of her diagnoses. Back then, we actually locked ourselves away. You see, Victoria doesn't have an invisible disability, and as a tiny baby, she had a feeding tube attached to a pump, which would get blocked and start beeping. As it drew attention and people stopped and stared, it was hard not to feel uncomfortable.

A Bumpy Start

Over time, we tried a few activities, like dance and Girl Guides. But after explaining about Victoria's disability, the common responses were, "There's no space right now" or "We can't accommodate your daughter's needs".

Some activities we found were logistically impractical, and even when we had managed to get Victoria into a program, it ended up not being the right fit. We thought she'd love soccer, just like her brother, she was certainly keen at home. But we quickly realised she didn't enjoy the soccer club experience, she was overwhelmed, and there were lots of tears.

The Power of Maybe

While a lot has changed on our journey, I came to realise the most important change needed was in me. In how I saw my daughter and my thoughts about what was possible.

One day I was speaking to a parent who was telling



me how much her son Dax loved Disabled Surfers. Knowing my daughter's complex physical challenges, my instant thought was 'There's no way Victoria could do that'. But, then, watching a video and knowing Dax has significant mobility challenges too, I started to wonder... Maybe this was possible for Victoria? That simple act of asking myself what might be possible is what changed everything. Not, 'will she, or 'could she', but suddenly, 'might she' seemed to be enough!

Stepping Stones

Not long afterwards, at school pick-up, some of Victoria's friends shared their plans for the weekend. "We've got Nippers, Victoria should come too!" And I remembered the video of Dax and the joy on his face, and thought, maybe she should.

After years of Rainbow Club swimming lessons, Victoria was now enjoying being in a pool. But the ocean, or even the bay with a moving tide is a different beast. As doubt started to creep into my mind, I caught myself. I wasn't going to let my fears get in the way, not until we'd at least given Victoria the opportunity to see if she liked Nippers.

We decided to try Yellow Fins Nippers, an all-abilities program with significant experience supporting children with a variety of needs. So I was confident about their capacity to support Victoria. I would also be there to read and respond to her signals. Victoria would also be close to her friends from school as the two programs were run on the same beach.

Giving It a Go

That first week, Victoria was really anxious. But everyone was kind and so supportive as she sat it out on the sand. Even though she got close, she actually didn't make it in the water. And yet, she came home raving about how much she loved Nippers.

There were more tears the following week, but patiently I reminded her that there was no rush and that maybe we could try standing close to the water... It took about 20 minutes, and she finally went all the way in... and loved it!

Then, the instructor asked her if she wanted to try the board. The answer was a firm no. After again giving her lots of time, she was happy to sit on the board on the sand, and then she was laying on the board, and eventually she was out into the open water. It was just amazing!

Beyond the Waves

Nippers is so much more than just an activity that Victoria gets to enjoy. It's also about new experiences, and new connections, not only for her, but for us as a family. Afterwards, we head to a cafe and run into people from the beach. We know that if we can give her moments like that, then we're all getting and sharing in those moments too, importantly as a family, out and about together.



Aside from the fact that Victoria deserves to be in the community as much as anyone else, her visibility helps people see disability differently. She's already done that in her mainstream school, so if she can do that out in the community as well, then that's great. My thinking is if people get to know her, they'll be more accepting not only of her, but hopefully of the next person they meet with disability as well.

And while that's not our responsibility, I really do want to pay it forward for other families. Because I know Victoria wouldn't be doing what she is today, if it wasn't for the parents who helped me see my daughter more fully. And inspired me to reconnect with hope and discover the possibility of a bright future for Victoria.

Melo's Advice

1. Ask yourself what might be possible.
2. Say yes and then work out how.
3. No, is sometimes, not yet... have patience and take it slowly.
4. Focus on, and celebrate progress. small steps lead to big gains.
5. Share your story, you never know whose life you could change.

Deciding the Next Step

The first session is complete. As a parent, it's only natural to feel a mix of excitement and relief. If it went well, that's fantastic. However, if you're not sure or if there were any issues or concerns that need to be addressed, we're here to guide you through understanding your child's experience.

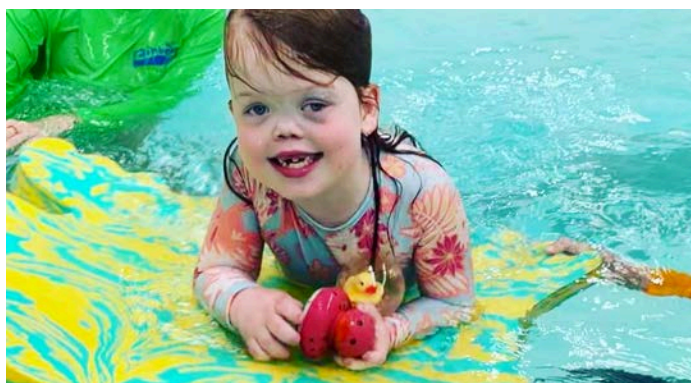
Working Out if it's the Right Fit

When deciding if a specific community activity aligns with your child's interests and needs and your family's goals, remember that 'success' can be defined in many ways.

These reflective questions can help you evaluate whether the activity was a good fit for your child and family. Go to page 25 of the toolkit to reflect on these questions and record your own reflections.

- Is my child excited to attend the activity?
- Is this fun for our family?
- Is the activity working towards the objectives we want to achieve?
- Have the discussions we've had with group members been positive and encouraging?
- Have conversations with the provider been collaborative?
- Is my child being treated fairly?
- Can I ask to make changes?
- Is my child being welcomed as part of the group or has a meaningful role?
- Has a support person been welcomed?
- Is my child passionate about this activity?

If you answered no to many of the questions, read on to find out what you can do next.



If Things Didn't Go as Planned

Sometimes, despite our best efforts, things may not turn out as expected. Here are some tips if that happens:

- Talk with your child: Ask them how they feel about the activity and if they have any concerns or challenges.
- Reconsider reasonable adjustments (revisit page 26 of this guide): Are there any additional strategies, supports or adjustments that can be tried to make the activity more suitable or enjoyable for your child?
- Talk to the activity leader: Share your observations and concerns with the instructor. They might have some suggestions that can be made to improve the activity.
- Give it time: Sometimes, it can take more than one session to know if it's going to be the right fit. As long as your child feels safe and happy, you may want to encourage them to go back a few times before making a choice.
- Explore alternative ways of contributing: If your child enjoys the environment but doesn't enjoy the activity, perhaps it is time to think creatively about a meaningful contribution your child can make. See page 11 in this guide.



Sometimes we walk away too soon. But sometimes we stay too long, both for ourselves and for our children. So I think that reflecting and using this guide to face these tricky questions, gives you permission to walk away if you think on it and go, 'No, you know what? This isn't worth my energy. There are alternatives!'. You've gotta do what's right for you, for your family.

NATASHA

Advocating for Your Child

Not every activity will be a perfect fit for your child. If the first session didn't meet your child's needs or expectations, here are some tips on how to advocate for them and navigate the next steps:

- Discuss with the instructor: Schedule a meeting or call to discuss your child's experience. Explain the challenges they faced and what could be improved. Ask for their perspective on what happened and potential solutions.
- Connect with other parents: Seek support from other parents of children with disability who have participated in similar activities. Their experiences and insights may be valuable.
- Document your concerns: Keep a record of your conversations, requests, and any agreed-upon solutions. This documentation can be helpful if further advocacy is needed.
- Know your rights: Educate yourself about disability rights and anti-discrimination laws in your area. This knowledge can empower you to advocate for your child effectively.
- Seek support: Use disability advocacy organisations or support groups for guidance and information on your rights and options.
- Celebrate small victories: Even small changes can make a big difference for your child. Acknowledge and celebrate their progress and resilience throughout the process.

Remember, you are your child's best advocate. Trust your instincts and don't be afraid to speak up. There is no shame in seeking adjustments or finding a better fit for your child.

However, if you've tried everything and your child still isn't happy with the activity, it might be time to move on. Here are some things you can do to support your child:

- Remind them that it's okay if things don't work out. There are plenty of other activities to try.
- Encourage them to focus on their strengths and interests.

- Celebrate any progress your child has made, even if it's not what you initially planned.

Getting Help from an Advocate

Despite your best efforts, if the activity still isn't working out, you don't have to walk away if neither you nor your child want to.

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) of 1992 prohibits discrimination based on disability in areas such as education, access to public places, provision of goods and services, activities of clubs and associations, and sports. This is a fundamental human right, and denying participation based on disability is just as unacceptable as denying participation based on gender, race, religion, or sexual orientation. It is your child's right to have reasonable accommodations made for them.

If you find yourself in a challenging situation, there are legal and advocacy services available to assist you, but these battles can be difficult and emotionally draining. It is important to take the time to consider the different factors affecting you and your child before making any decisions.

Here are some questions you can ask yourself to help determine if you should take things further:

- How important is this activity to my child?
- Do I have the time, energy and resources to pursue this?
- Would it be more harmful to my child to leave or to stay and face the barriers?
- Are there other local options available?
- Do we have a support system to help us through this?



Advocacy Contacts

Go to page 26 of the toolkit if you are looking for advocacy advice and support.

“

It's made me ask myself, 'Why can't my daughter be included? Why not try? Why not help people see how easy it can really be?'

Our children need to be included, accommodated, and given space to participate.

KYMIE

”



Looking Ahead

We hope, after reading Count Me In, you are feeling confident and empowered to support your child to explore their interests in the local community. And you're ready to enjoy all the benefits of participation and inclusion.

The beauty of inclusion is that these benefits will be felt far beyond your child and even the other children in their team, class or group. You are helping to create a ripple effect of change throughout the community. Shifting perceptions and challenging stereotypes, and in the process, helping to create a more equitable society for all children with disability.

And whilst the path towards inclusion is not always well-paved, remember, this guide is here to support you and is something you can always come back to if you face challenges along the way. We also encourage you to seek the support of other parents and families raising children with disability through parent groups, peer-support organisations, or online communities, such as our private Facebook group, the Belongside Community.

No journey needs to be travelled alone. And we are here walking beside you, as we discover a future full of possibility for our children.





Belongside *Families*

Belongside Families is an independent family-led organisation, for parents and caregivers raising children with disability, developmental delays and autism. Through peer groups, workshops, educational resources and stories, we empower families to grow their skills, knowledge and confidence to support their children and family to thrive.



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