Education and schooling

1 in 200 students in Australia live with epilepsy, and most experience successful pathways through primary and secondary education. As a parent or guardian, you want to know that your child is in safe hands, is getting the best education and is able to participate in all school and community activities to the best of their capabilities.

Your child may have an epilepsy diagnosis, but you may not consider that they have a disability. However, under the discrimination law framework, the definition of disability is stated broadly. Having an epilepsy diagnosis would be considered a disability in the context of discrimination law, as would other medical conditions such as asthma, diabetes and arthritis.

In some states, schools are required to provide appropriate emergency first aid response and post-seizure support when a student has a seizure, based on individualised Epilepsy Management Plans. However, as epilepsy can involve several challenges that extend beyond the seizure itself, some additional preparation may be necessary to ensure that your child is confident and capable of participating in school life. In many cases, this requires additional planning, conversation and understanding between children with epilepsy, their parents, peers, teachers and the school community.

Thankfully, there are various resources and training available that can empower a school community to support and include your child, as well as promote awareness about epilepsy. Epilepsy Smart Schools is an evidence-based program developed to support schools to provide a safe and inclusive educational environment for students living with epilepsy. The program helps schools to become ‘Epilepsy Smart’ by implementing epilepsy management plans for students with epilepsy, participating in epilepsy specific training, and holding events that promote better awareness and understanding of epilepsy.

While every person’s epilepsy and educational journey is unique, obstacles commonly faced by children with epilepsy at schools include:

- Not being able to participate in activities, such as sports and camps
Missing classes/ school days

Embarrassment due to seizures, seizure behaviours or accidents

Anxiety, depression and moodiness, including anger and frustration related to seizures or medication.

Epilepsy can also impact on a child’s cognition and learning. For example, they might experience:

- Cognitive overload (e.g., finding it hard to keep up at school), which can cause seizures
- Seizures that can also make it difficult to concentrate and remember new information
- Memory difficulties as a side effect of medication
- Impacts related to a co-existing developmental condition (e.g. autism).

Beyond seizures and medication, epilepsy can have a broader impact on a child’s quality of life and experiences at school. For example:

- Children with epilepsy have higher rates of depression and anxiety, especially among those with more complicated epilepsy
- Parents perceived levels of stigma, low mood and worry, and unmet needs for information and support can impact behavioural difficulties in children with epilepsy
- Parents of children with epilepsy have also been found to have lower quality of life and higher levels of anxiety and depression compared to parents of healthy children
- Epilepsy sometimes co-exists with other developmental conditions, such as autism, intellectual disability, and cerebral palsy.

While epilepsy can have a significant impact on your child’s experience at school, the available support and resources can help you manage their educational journey and achieve positive outcomes. The Epilepsy Smart Schools website provides information and tools to facilitate family and school discussions and planning, which will provide a strong foundation to support your child throughout their school years. We encourage you to go through the resources and tools available on this website and discuss your child’s learning and support needs openly with your child’s school.