



1 in 200
children live
with epilepsy

Children with epilepsy

A teacher's resource

In Australia, approximately one in 200 children live with epilepsy. As part of the *Disability Standards for Education 2005*, all Australian schools must ensure that students with epilepsy can access and participate in educational activities on the same basis as other students. Epilepsy-specific training is recommended for all teachers who work in schools with children with epilepsy. In some states it is a requirement that teachers must undertake epilepsy training. This training is different from standard first aid training. Detailed information about how the education department in your state or territory views your obligations around supporting students with epilepsy can be found at: www.epilepsysmartschools.org.au/resources/government-policy/





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What is epilepsy?

Epilepsy is a medical condition that affects the brain and causes seizures. A seizure is a sudden and temporary change in the electrical and chemical activity in the brain. During a seizure, a child's movements, behaviours, sensations, and levels of awareness may be affected. Seizures can be provoked (brought on by certain activities or events) or unprovoked (occurring for an unknown reason).

Types of seizures and what they look like

There are two main types of seizures:

1. **Focal seizures** that involve one specific part of the brain
2. **Generalised seizures** that involve both sides of the brain.

Focal seizures do not always change the child's level of awareness. Symptoms are variable and may include lip smacking, wandering behaviour, fiddling with clothes, and feeling sick or strange.

Generalised seizures result in a loss of consciousness. Symptoms may include blank stares, jerking, suddenly falling or convulsing.

Note: Many students daydream – this does not always mean they are having a seizure.

How children are affected by seizures

Epilepsy affects different children in different ways at different times of their life. As a child's brain is still developing, it is difficult to predict how seizures will affect them in the future. The child, their family, and their doctor will discover more about what epilepsy means for them as they develop.

The most important thing to do when working with a child with epilepsy is to get to know the individual child and their condition. You can do this by consulting the child's individual Epilepsy Management Plan.

Impact

Many children and their families live with ongoing stress and anxiety around epilepsy. This may be related to issues such as the unpredictability of seizures, possible medication side-effects, fear of injury, social exclusion, the need for multiple medical appointments and the impact on the parent's employment and family dynamics.

Depression and anxiety disorders are far more common in children with epilepsy. The altered brain activity that causes seizures can lead to depressive moods, and the stress of living with a chronic condition can worsen feelings of depression and anxiety.

Schools and Early Learning Centres can play an important role in identifying and supporting children experiencing depression or anxiety. Some common symptoms of depression and anxiety include irritability, moodiness, social withdrawal, repeated absences from school, and difficulties with concentration.

Epilepsy and learning

Some children living with epilepsy will have learning problems. Learning and cognitive difficulties may be influenced by many factors, including:

- the type of seizures they experience
- the length and frequency of their seizures, and recovery time
- missed school days
- medication side-effects
- underlying neurological problems
- their social environment.

Medication

Many children with epilepsy will gain good seizure control with medication. Both seizures and medication can affect a child's:

- attention
- alertness
- cognitive functioning
- concentration
- responsiveness
- memory
- motor skills
- mood and behaviour.

What you need to know about your student's epilepsy

As a teacher, you must familiarise yourself with what epilepsy means for your student. Be sure to consult their **Epilepsy Management Plan (EMP)** and find out if emergency medication is prescribed for them. Schools and families can contact the National Epilepsy Support Service for assistance with developing EMPs. Information about prescribed emergency medication for your student will be provided in their **Emergency Medication Management Plan (EMMP)**. An EMMP is developed and approved by the child's treating doctor. Not all children with epilepsy require emergency medication.

After reading the child's **EMP** and **EMMP**, you should be able to answer these questions:

- What do the child's seizures look like?
- What (if any) are their seizure triggers?
- How do I help the student during and after the seizure?
- What defines an emergency and what do I need to do?
- Are there any risks or safety issues? What should I do to minimise these?
- Are there any potential impacts on learning? How can I support the student?

Your role as a teacher

As a teacher, you are an important source of information for the parent and treating doctor. This means that you need to:

- Understand your student's epilepsy and the impact it has on them.
- Be able to read and implement their Epilepsy Management Plan.
- Observe and record seizures accurately; this will help the doctor to diagnose and treat the child.
- Observe behaviour, share your observations with parents, and develop a consistent team approach within the school.
- Develop strategies to meet any identified individual learning needs.
- Be aware of mood changes and communicate your observations early to parents.
- Create an inclusive environment for the student by educating the class about epilepsy when the child is comfortable with this.
- Seek support from your local epilepsy organisation.

What you may notice

Students with epilepsy may experience:

Episodes of fatigue and poor concentration

- Appears slow at finishing work
- Gets overwhelmed by more challenging tasks.

Difficulty with memory

- Appears confused about what they are meant to be doing
- Is forgetful
- Has difficulty learning new concepts.

Slow cognitive processing (thinking skills)

- Slower to grasp new concepts
- Becomes easily frustrated
- Is inattentive during class
- Has difficulty following multi-step instructions.

Difficulties with executive functions (higher-order thinking skills)

- Appears careless
- Demonstrates poor organisational and problem-solving skills
- Has difficulty starting/staying on task
- Is impulsive or engages in risk-taking behaviour.





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How you can help a student with epilepsy

You can improve learning outcomes for a child with epilepsy by understanding how epilepsy impacts their learning. With just a few small adjustments, many children living with epilepsy can succeed.

- **Understand** that epilepsy can change a child's abilities from day to day.
- **Set** realistic expectations that are neither above nor below the student's abilities.
- **Allow** opportunities for rest breaks:
 - allocate an agreed place for the student to rest when needed
 - modify expectations when necessary
 - reserve more challenging tasks for when the student is most alert.
- **Provide** a predictable environment:
 - build structure into the classroom environment using daily routines and clear expectations
 - ensure the classroom is as seizure-safe as possible so risks of injury can be minimised.
- **Give** instructions that are brief and concise:
 - write down instructions, especially homework tasks
 - ask the student to repeat instructions to ensure comprehension
 - break big tasks down into smaller parts.
- **Consider** establishing a support structure for the student.
- **Decide** whether the student would benefit from a cognitive assessment.

Other resources

To find out more about Epilepsy Smart Schools and how you can access education and training for educators in your state or territory, contact the **National Epilepsy Support Service** on 1300 761 487.

This fact sheet is part of a suite of resources targeted to both parents and teachers to assist students with epilepsy in school settings.

The *Epilepsy Smart Schools – A Practical Guide* and supporting resources provide information on how a school can embed inclusive, safe and educationally sound practices for students with epilepsy and, in so doing, become 'epilepsy smart'. The guide and supporting resources can be accessed via www.epilepsysmartschools.org.au

Epilepsy support

The National Epilepsy Support Service is available Monday – Saturday, 9.00am – 7.00pm (AEST) to provide support and information across Australia. Phone: 1300 761 487
Email: support@epilepsysmart.org.au

Lived experience

We recognise all people living with epilepsy and the impact it has on their lives. We take a moment to acknowledge the lived experience they have shared with us. In sharing their stories, we acknowledge the strength and resilience people living with epilepsy have shown in the face of not getting a fair go.

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Epilepsy Smart Australia Program **National Epilepsy Support Service** 1300 761 487 **Website** epilepsysmart.org.au



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The information contained in this publication provides general information about epilepsy. It does not provide specific advice. Specific health and medical advice should always be obtained from an appropriately qualified health professional. This resource is CAL exempt.