



Jul-Aug, 2026

Research Snapshot No. 26

Professional Collaboration for Children and Adolescents with Neurodevelopmental Disorders: A Scoping Review

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What Do You Need to Know?

Children with neurodevelopmental delays, differences or disorders (herein described as developmental differences) often require support from multiple professionals, who may or may not be aligned in the rationale for, the types of and the best context for those supports to be delivered.

- for the purpose of this paper included children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), ADHD, Tourette Syndrome and learning disorders
- Families commonly navigate education, healthcare and social care services at the same time, and rarely do these systems work collaboratively together, unless driven by an individual's or group of individuals' desire to do so.
- Fragmented services can lead to confusion, duplicated assessments and missed support opportunities.
- Strong collaboration helps improve outcomes for students and families.

What Is This Research About?

- The review examined what is known about professional collaboration for children and adolescents with NDDs.
- The evidence behind how professionals work together for children with developmental differences was explored
- The authors investigated factors supporting and barriers limiting collaboration.
- It evaluated the outcomes that were related to different aspects of collaboration.

What Did the Researchers Do?

- Conducted a scoping review using PRISMA-ScR methodology.
- The search of peer-reviewed articles included those published in English between January 2000 and December 2022
- Searched seven major databases, including:
 - Academic Search Premier, Education Source, CINAHL (Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature), ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), MEDLINE, APA PsycInfo, SocINDEX with Full Text
 - Additional search strategies included a manual search of the reference lists of selected articles.
- 317 studies were initially sourced - 29 studies were included after screening and eligibility checks.
- Used qualitative content analysis to identify key themes.

What Did the Researchers Find?

- Collaboration commonly occurred through assessment, intervention planning, consultation, teamwork and service coordination.
- Successful collaboration depended on shared goals, clear roles and effective communication. Respect, trust and information sharing were essential.
- Collaboration improved assessment quality, intervention planning & family engagement.
- Major barriers included time constraints, professional silos and legal restrictions
- Collaboration is enabled by:
 - Shared understanding of student needs.
 - Regular communication between professionals with clearly defined professional roles.
 - Mutual respect and trust.
 - Cross-disciplinary training and professional learning.
 - Active involvement of families.
- Strengths: Comprehensive overview of existing research, practical recommendations for schools and services.
- Limitations: Most included studies focused on autism, many studies were discussion papers rather than empirical research, and most evidence came from North America.

How Can You Use This Research?

- Consider what is required to develop stronger partnerships between early childhood education settings, schools and external services such as those that provide health and social support services to children and families.
- Education providers do need to currently consider not just if, but how they include families in planning and decision-making processes. This is critical for collaboration and is related to more positive outcomes for children with developmental differences.
- Multidisciplinary teams are needed support students with different profiles. This should be in place, and ways of working together should be discussed.
- Families, educators and health or social care professionals should have regular opportunities for collaborative problem-solving using technical applications and in-person meeting opportunities.
- There should be opportunities for educators, health professionals and families to engage in professional learning focused on collaboration skills.

Does This Research Align With the Framework?

1. Teamwork

The Framework highlights the importance of professionals working together across disciplines to support children and families.

This paper found that:

- Collaboration between schools, healthcare and social care services is essential for a range of health, education and social outcomes.
- Teamwork supports assessment, intervention planning and service coordination.
- Shared goals, communication and clearly defined roles lead to better outcomes.

2. Family-Centred Practice

The Framework emphasises that families are experts in their child's life and should be actively involved in decision-making.

This paper found that:

- Family involvement improves collaboration.
- Parents should be included in planning, assessment and intervention processes.
- Strong partnerships with families improve outcomes and quality of life.

3. Participation and Inclusion

The Framework promotes meaningful participation in family, school and community life.

This paper found that:

- Schools play a central role in supporting children with NDDs.
- Collaborative approaches improve educational participation.
- Inclusive practices are strengthened when professionals work together

4. Everyday Settings

The Framework recommends providing support in the child's natural environments, such as home, school and community settings.

This paper found that:

- Schools are an important setting for intervention and support.
- Effective collaboration helps deliver coordinated support where children spend most of their time.
- Support is most effective when integrated across environments.

5. Outcomes-Focused Practice

The Framework encourages practices that improve meaningful outcomes for children and families.

This paper found that collaborative practice leads to:

- Better assessment and intervention planning.
- Improved engagement and participation in education settings
- Greater family satisfaction.
- Improved quality of life and wellbeing

6. Evidence-Informed Practice

The Framework encourages practitioners to use the best available research evidence to guide decisions.

This paper contributes by:

- Synthesising findings from 29 studies.
- Identifying evidence-based factors that support successful collaboration.
- Highlighting areas requiring further research and improvement.

7. Strengths-Based and Relationship-Based Practice

The Framework promotes building on strengths and fostering positive relationships.

This paper found that effective collaboration requires:

- Mutual respect.
- Trusting relationships.
- Open communication.
- Strength-based language and approaches when working with children and families.

About the Researchers

- The research team was based primarily at the University of Turku and the University of Eastern Finland.
- Researchers specialised in education, special education, psychiatry, social sciences and child wellbeing.
- The interdisciplinary team reflected the collaborative focus of the review.

Where To From Here?

- More empirical research is needed.
- Future studies should include a wider range of neurodevelopmental disorders.
- More evidence is needed about effective collaboration models in schools.
- Systems should be redesigned to support integrated service delivery.
- Schools should continue to play a central role in collaborative support.

Key Takeaway

- Effective collaboration between education, healthcare and social care professionals improves outcomes, wellbeing and inclusion for children and adolescents with neurodevelopmental disorders, and a range of factors facilitate high quality collaboration that has an impact on outcomes obtained. More work is needed to support these factors to be understood, and potentially implemented in the Australian context.

Citation

Salminen, J., Laasanen, M., Leinonen, L., Karukivi, M., Vornanen, R., Alin, M., & Kyttälä, M. (2025). *Professional collaboration for children and adolescents with neurodevelopmental disorders: A scoping review*. **European Journal of Special Needs Education**, 40(1), 16–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2024.2314422>

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Department of Health, Disability and Ageing. (2025). National Best Practice Framework for Early Childhood Intervention. Australian Government. <https://www.health.gov.au/our-work/national-best-practice-framework-for-early-childhood-intervention>

This Research Snapshot was prepared by Dr Charmaine Bernie, PRECI Board Member and Assistant Professor at Bond University in Queensland.

In the spirit of reconciliation PRECI acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respect to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.