

## 5. Disability

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Children with severe disabilities may be in good health, but may have long-term activity limitations and participation restrictions, which they and their parents and carers must cope with.<sup>1</sup> Childhood disability can create serious financial hardship for parents and carers; they can have difficulty taking up employment that enables them to care for the child, which in turn reduces their ability to afford the additional care needed for their child. Parents of children with a disability can often be excluded from normal social activities outside the home. A disability affects the overall wellbeing of the parents, the child and their siblings.

This chapter presents information on the prevalence of disability among Australian children. The information is derived from the 1998 ABS Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers. Disability is defined by the ABS as the presence of one or more of 17 restrictions, limitations or impairments which had lasted, or were likely to last, for a period of 6 months or more. Children with a disability can also have a core activity restriction, if the disability limits their ability to some degree to perform tasks in relation to self-care, mobility, communication, schooling and/or employment. There are four levels of core activity restriction: profound, severe, moderate and mild. People with a profound restriction are not able to do, or always need help with, a core activity. Those with a severe restriction may sometimes need help with a core activity, may have difficulty understanding or being understood by others, or may use sign language more easily than spoken communication. People with a moderate restriction need no help but have difficulty with a core activity, while those with a mild restriction need no help and have no difficulty with core activities, but may have other difficulties, for example with walking long distances, using public transport, walking up and down stairs or bending to pick up an object from the floor (ABS 1999a).

### Prevalence of disability and core activity restriction

The indicator for the prevalence of disability is the number of children aged 0–14 years with a disability (with and without specific core activity restriction) as a rate per 1,000 children aged 0–14 years.

In 1998, based on the ABS definition of disability, it was estimated that approximately 296,000 children aged 0–14 years had a disability (Table 5.1). The rate of disability was estimated to be about 75.4 per 1,000 children aged 0–14 years.

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1. In 1998, the ABS used the term 'activity restriction' for what is called 'activity limitation' by WHO.

Table 5.1: Estimated number of children aged 0–14 years with a disability, 1998

	Age (years)	Total with specific core activity restriction <sup>(a)</sup>		Total without specific core activity restriction		Total with disability	
		Number	Rate per 1,000 children	Number	Rate per 1,000 children	Number	Rate per 1,000 children
Males	0–4	21,973	33.5	8,290	12.6	30,263	46.1
	5–9	72,901	107.5	5,167	7.6	78,068	115.2
	10–14	72,614	108.9	11,831	17.7	84,445	126.6
	0–14	167,486	83.1	25,289	12.6	192,775	95.7
Females	0–4	9,249	14.8	7,813	12.5	17,062	27.7
	5–9	43,033	67.0	4,903	7.6	47,936	74.7
	10–14	33,041	51.7	5,538	8.7	38,579	60.3
	0–14	85,322	44.5	18,254	9.6	103,576	54.1
<b>Persons</b>	<b>0–14</b>	<b>252,809</b>	<b>64.2</b>	<b>43,542</b>	<b>11.2</b>	<b>296,351</b>	<b>75.4</b>

(a) 'Specific core activity restriction' includes restrictions in self-care, mobility, communication and schooling or employment.

Note: Estimates of 9,300 or less have an associated relative standard error of 25% or more.

Source: AIHW analysis of ABS 1998 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers unit record file.

- Overall in 1998, more boys were reported to have a disability than girls (95.7 per 1,000 compared with 54.1 per 1,000). In all age groups, boys had higher rates of disability and core activity restriction than girls.

Most children with a disability (252,809 children or 85%) had a core activity restriction. The proportion of core activity restriction was lowest among children under 5 years. This is largely due to the difficulties in identifying activity restriction in this age group.

While the prevalence of disability appears to have increased from 69.9 per 1,000 children in 1993 to 75.4 per 1,000 children in 1998, the two ABS disability surveys are not strictly comparable. In 1998, a severity assessment of core activity restriction for children under 5 years of age was introduced, leading to the identification of an estimated 28,100 children aged 0–4 with a severe or profound core activity restriction. In addition, a change in the wording of a survey question from 'slow at learning or understanding' in the 1993 survey to 'difficulty in learning or understanding' in the 1998 survey is thought to have encouraged more reporting of intellectual and developmental disabilities among children aged 0–14 years.

The estimated prevalence of disability and activity restriction by area of residence is presented in Table 5.2.

**Table 5.2: Children aged 0–14 years with a disability in capital cities and the balance of States/Territories, 1998 (rate per 1,000 children)**

	Age (years)	Total with specific core activity restriction		Total without specific core activity restriction		Total with disability	
		Capital city	Balance of States/Territories	Capital city	Balance of States/Territories	Capital city	Balance of States/Territories
Males	0–4	29.5	40.0	8.1 <sup>(a)</sup>	20.0 <sup>(a)</sup>	37.6	60.1
	5–9	100.4	118.5	9.5 <sup>(a)</sup>	4.7 <sup>(b)</sup>	109.9	123.2
	10–14	108.0	110.2	17.0 <sup>(a)</sup>	18.8 <sup>(a)</sup>	125.0	129.0
	0–14	79.1	89.4	11.5	14.5	90.6	103.9
Females	0–4	16.5 <sup>(a)</sup>	12.1 <sup>(a)</sup>	7.8 <sup>(a)</sup>	20.2 <sup>(a)</sup>	24.3	32.3 <sup>(a)</sup>
	5–9	63.3	72.9	9.9 <sup>(a)</sup>	4.2 <sup>(b)</sup>	73.1	77.0
	10–14	46.5	59.5	8.8 <sup>(a)</sup>	8.4 <sup>(b)</sup>	55.4	68.0
	0–14	42.1	48.1	8.8	11.0 <sup>(a)</sup>	50.9	59.0
<b>Persons</b>	<b>0–14</b>	<b>61.0</b>	<b>69.3</b>	<b>10.2</b>	<b>12.8</b>	<b>71.2</b>	<b>82.1</b>

(a) Estimates have an associated relative standard error of 25% or more.

(b) Estimates have an associated relative standard error of 50% or more.

Source: AIHW analysis of ABS 1998 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers unit record file.

- The overall disability rate in 1998 was higher for children not living in capital cities than for those living in capital cities (82.1 compared with 71.2 per 1,000). This was due to higher rates of specific core activity restriction for children not living in capital cities (69.3 versus 61.0).
- The rates for both sexes were higher for children not living in capital cities than for those living in capital cities.

The indicator for the prevalence of severe or profound core activity restriction is the number of children aged 0–14 years with severe or profound core activity restriction as a rate per 1,000 children.

Table 5.3: Types of restriction of children aged 0–14 years with a disability, 1998 (rate per 1,000 children)

	Age (years)	Profound / severe core activity restriction	Moderate core activity restriction	Mild core activity restriction	Schooling or employment restriction only <sup>(a)</sup>	Total number with specific core activity restriction
Males	0–4	31.0	2.5 <sup>(c)</sup>	—	—	21,973
	5–9	65.1	7.6 <sup>(b)</sup>	21.7	13.2 <sup>(b)</sup>	72,901
	10–14	49.5	9.7 <sup>(b)</sup>	23.0	26.7	72,614
	0–14	48.7	6.6	15.0	19.9	167,486
Females	0–4	11.6 <sup>(b)</sup>	3.2 <sup>(c)</sup>	—	—	9,249 <sup>(b)</sup>
	5–9	38.7	4.8 <sup>(b)</sup>	9.8 <sup>(b)</sup>	13.7 <sup>(b)</sup>	43,033
	10–14	23.1	2.7 <sup>(c)</sup>	8.8 <sup>(b)</sup>	17.1	33,041
	0–14	24.6	3.6 <sup>(b)</sup>	6.3	15.4	85,322
<b>Persons</b>	<b>0–14</b>	<b>37.0</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>17.7</b>	<b>252,809</b>

(a) These rates are for children aged 5–14 years. The estimates of children with schooling restriction include children with schooling restriction only and with no restriction in core activities. Some children with a mild, moderate, severe or profound restriction may also have schooling restriction.

(b) Estimates have an associated relative standard error of 25% or more.

(c) Estimates have an associated relative standard error of 50% or more.

Source: AIHW analysis of ABS 1998 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers unit record file.

- Among children with specific activity restriction in 1998, the highest rates were for children with profound or severe restriction (37.0 per 1,000).
- Disability status varied by age. Children aged 5–9 years had the highest rate of profound/severe activity restriction (around 65.1 per 1,000 boys and 38.7 per 1,000 girls).

## Main disabling condition

A person's main disabling condition was defined in the 1998 disability survey as 'a long-term condition identified by a person as the one causing the most problems' (ABS 1999a:69). The main disabling conditions reported for children aged 0–14 years are shown in Table 5.4.

Table 5.4: Main disabling condition of children aged 0–14 years with a disability, 1998

Main disabling condition	Number			Rate per 1,000 children		
	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons
Intellectual & other mental <sup>(a)</sup>	100,973	31,023	131,996	50.0	16.1	33.5
Respiratory diseases	32,190	20,551	52,742	16.0	10.8	13.5
Diseases of ear	8,759	10,005	18,764	4.3	5.2	4.8
Nervous system diseases	9,518	7,715	17,234	4.7	4.0	4.4
Disease of eye	4,298	2,876	7,174	2.1	1.5	1.8
Other musculoskeletal disorder	2,298	3,163	5,460	1.1	1.6	1.4
Psychiatric <sup>(b)</sup>	2,578	1,020	3,598	1.3	0.5	0.9
Other circulatory diseases	1,561	1,412	2,973	0.8	0.7	0.8
Head injury/any other brain damage	1,031	1,028	2,059	0.5	0.5	0.5
Arthritis	781	626	1,407	0.4	0.3	0.4
Stroke	—	299	299	—	0.2	0.1
All other diseases and conditions <sup>(c)</sup>	28,788	23,857	52,645	14.4	12.5	13.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>192,776</b>	<b>103,575</b>	<b>296,351</b>	<b>95.7</b>	<b>54.1</b>	<b>75.4</b>

(a) Includes the group entitled 'Intellectual and developmental disorders' and 'Other mental and behavioural disorders'. The definition has changed since the 1993 survey and now includes Down syndrome.

(b) Includes the group entitled 'Psychoses/mood affective disorders' and 'Neurotic/stress-related /somatoform disorders' in ABS publications. The definition has changed since the 1993 survey.

(c) Includes other physical diseases and conditions such as spina bifida, neoplasms and diseases of urinary system, genital organs and breast.

Note: Estimates of 9,300 or less have an associated relative standard error of 25% or more, and estimates of 2,700 or less have an associated relative standard error of 50% or more.

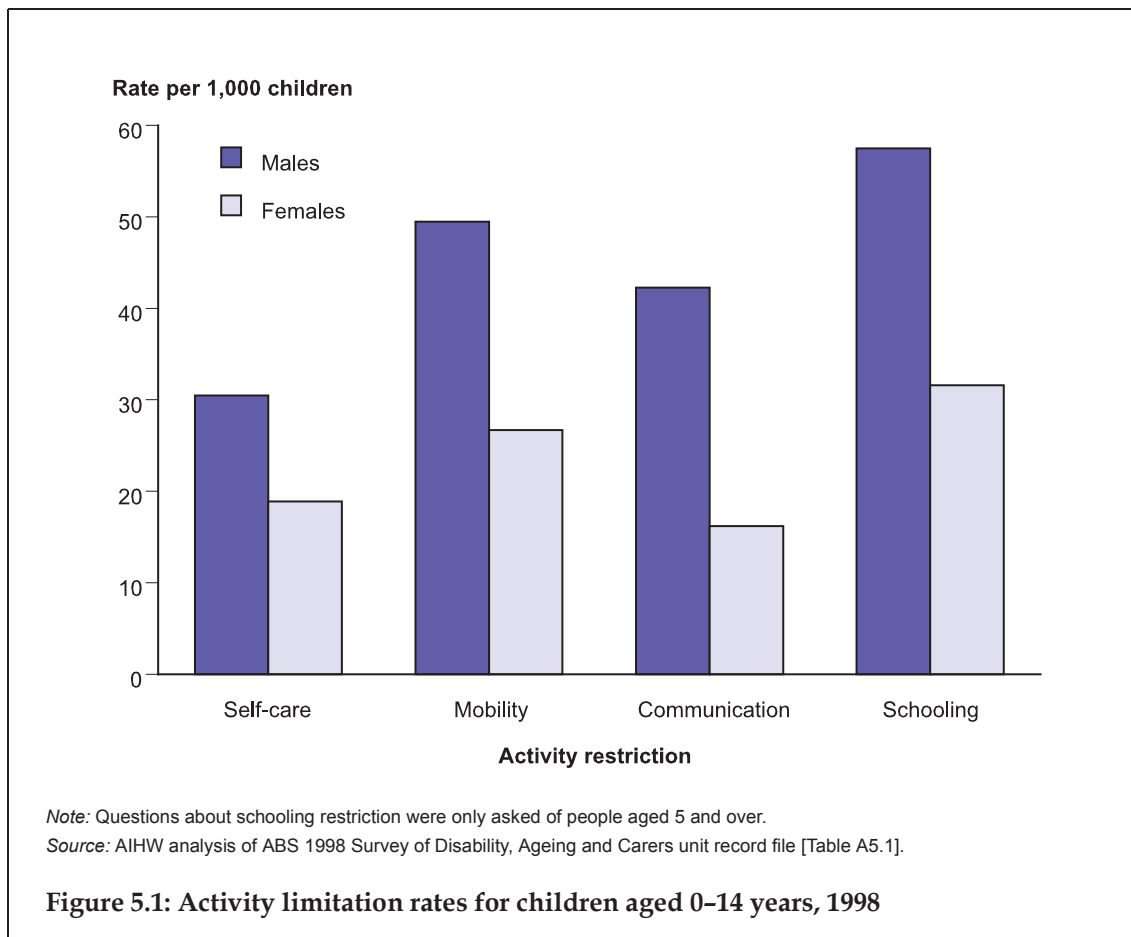
Source: AIHW analysis of ABS 1998 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers unit record file.

- In 1998, intellectual and other mental disorders were the most commonly reported main disabling condition of children aged 0–14 years, with a rate of 50.0 per 1,000 boys and 16.1 per 1,000 girls. These conditions were highest in the 10–14 years age group. The rate of disability due to intellectual and other mental disorders in 1998 was almost twice that reported in 1993 (33.5 compared with 16.3 per 1,000 children). Changes to a survey question in 1998 are thought to be responsible for the increased reporting of intellectual and developmental disabilities among children aged 0–14 years, especially among boys.
- Respiratory diseases were the second most frequently reported disabling condition of children aged 0–14 years, with a rate of 16.0 for boys, and 10.8 for girls. These diseases were most frequent among children aged 5–9 years and were more common for boys than for girls.
- Diseases of the nervous system and of the ear were also among the most frequently reported main disabling conditions.

A number of the conditions covered in this report cause disability. Asthma was estimated to be the main disabling condition for 49,800 children, accounting for 17% of all children with a disability. Congenital malformations were estimated to affect over 15,300 children, accounting for 5% of all children with a disability. Cerebral palsy and epilepsy were estimated to affect over 8,200 and 5,800 children, respectively, and accounted for 3% and 2% of all children with a disability, respectively. Accidents or injuries have caused some disabilities – this is estimated to be the case for over 7,100 children, and these account for 2% of all children with a disability.

### Activity limitation

Children are regarded as having activity limitations if they have difficulty doing a particular activity, need help from another person or use an aid.



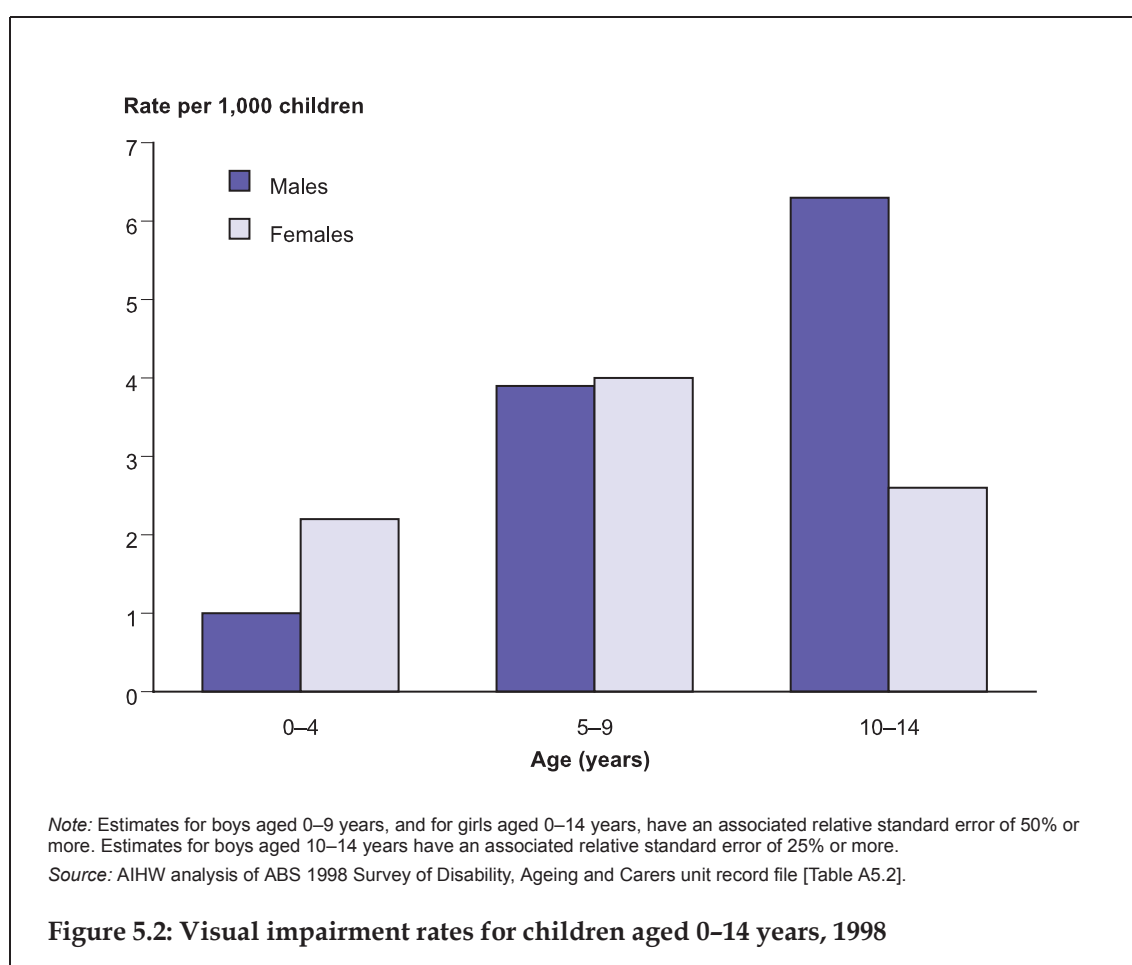
- In 1998, the most commonly reported activity restriction was schooling limitations, followed by mobility and communication limitations.
- The rates for all activity limitations were higher for boys than for girls.

## Visual and hearing impairments

Sight and hearing problems can play a role in hindering children's development and their ability to learn.

### Visual impairment

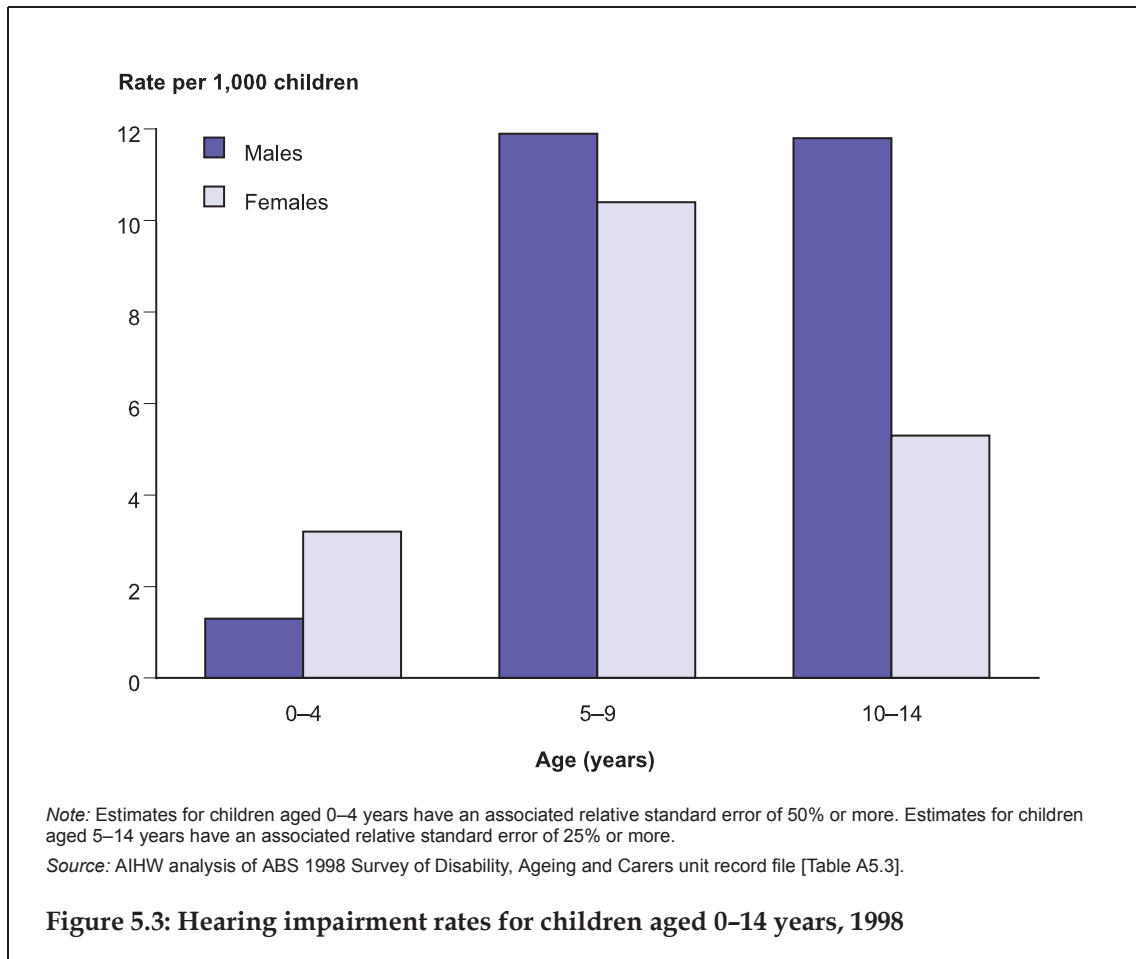
Overall in 1998, approximately 13,600 children were estimated to have some form of visual impairment or loss of sight (not corrected by glasses or contact lenses; ABS 1999a). Of these, 59% were boys and 41% were girls.



- In 1998, 3.5 per 1,000 children aged 0-14 years had some form of visual impairment. Visual impairment was highest among boys aged 10-14 years and girls aged 5-9 years.
- Most visual impairment was partial loss of vision. Of children aged 0-14 years, 3.3 per 1,000 were reported as having this condition, with higher levels for boys (3.7) than girls (2.9). Only 0.2 per 1,000 children had a total loss of vision.
- Only 8% of visual impairment was due to complications of surgery, injury and other external causes.

### Hearing impairment

Hearing impairments (loss of hearing where communication is restricted, or where an aid is used to help with or substitute for hearing; ABS 1999a) are more common than visual impairments among children aged 0–14 years. In 1998, approximately 28, 800 children were reported as having some form of hearing impairment.



- Of all children aged 0–14 years in 1998, 7.3 per 1,000 had some form of hearing impairment, with 0.6 per 1,000 children reporting a total loss of hearing and 6.7 per 1,000 a partial loss of hearing. Overall, hearing impairment was highest in the 5–9 age group (11.1).
- More boys than girls were reported as having a hearing impairment (8.3 compared with 6.3).
- The highest rates were for boys aged 5–9 and 10–14 years and girls aged 5–9 years.

## Effect of disability on schooling

In 1998, it was estimated that approximately 241,000 out of 249,000 (97%) children aged 5–14 years with a disability attended school. The most common main disabling conditions for these children are intellectual disability and hearing impairments (AIHW: Moon et al. 1998).

**Table 5.5: Schooling characteristics of children aged 5–14 years with a disability, 1998**

Schooling characteristics	Number			Per cent		
	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons
<b>Schooling arrangements</b>						
Mainstream school	141,830	80,525	222,355	90.6	95.3	92.3
No special class	101,840	61,549	163,389	65.1	72.9	67.8
Special class	39,990	18,976	58,966	25.6	22.5	24.5
Special school	14,649	3,961	18,610	9.4	4.7	7.7
<b>Difficulties at school</b>						
Fitting in socially	43,971	15,947	59,918	28.1	18.9	24.9
Hearing difficulties	7,141	4,037	11,178	4.6	4.8	4.6
Sight difficulties	2,681	3,571	6,252	1.7	4.2	2.6
Other difficulties	45,088	25,941	71,029	28.8	30.7	29.5
<b>Need time off school</b>						
	9,799	6,432	16,231	6.3	7.6	6.7

### Notes

1. Children may fall into more than one or none of these groups.
2. Estimates of 9,300 or less have an associated relative standard error of 25% or more, and estimates of 2,700 or less have an associated relative standard error of 50% or more.

Source: AIHW analysis of ABS 1998 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers unit record file.

- In 1998, most children with a disability were enrolled in mainstream schools (92.3%), 67.8% in no special class and 24.5% in a special class.
- A special school was attended by 7.7% of children attending school.
- Around 61.6% of children with a disability who attended schools were reported to have difficulties at school because of their disability.
- The most frequently reported difficulty was fitting in socially. Approximately 1 in 4 children (24.9%) with a disability were reported as having this difficulty.
- About 6.7% of the children needed time off school because of their disability.

