

Generalisation

Generalisation is a critical concept in teaching students with disabilities. It refers to the ability of a student to apply a skill or behaviour learned in one setting, context, or with one person, to other environments, situations, or individuals. Without generalisation, a skill may remain isolated and not functionally useful in the student's everyday life.

Importance of Generalisation

1. Real-World Functionality

- Students need to use skills across multiple real-life settings:
- A student who learns to ask for help in the classroom must also do so on the playground, in the library, or at home.
- A student who learns to use a communication device with a teacher should be able to use it with peers and other staff.
- Without generalisation, the skill is context-bound and does not serve the student in natural, everyday environments.

2. Increased Independence

- When students can generalise skills, they depend less on specific cues, routines, or people. For example:
- A student who only follows instructions from one teacher may struggle when there is a relief teacher or at community outings.
- Generalised behaviours lead to greater autonomy and resilience.

3. Supports Positive Behaviour

- Behaviours that are generalised reduce the risk of challenging behaviours emerging in unfamiliar settings. For instance:
- A student who knows how to request a break in the classroom, but not in the playground, may engage in problem behaviour when overwhelmed.
- Generalisation helps students maintain regulation across settings.

Why Explicit Teaching and Support Are Needed

1. Students with Disabilities May Struggle to Generalise Naturally

Unlike neurotypical learners, many students with disabilities:

- Learn in a highly structured way.
- Rely on specific prompts or routines.
- May not automatically apply what they've learned to new settings, people, or materials.

Thus, we cannot assume that learning in one place will "carry over" to another without deliberate planning.

2. Explicit Teaching Promotes Transfer

Explicit instruction includes:

- Modelling the skill in different settings.
- Prompting and reinforcing the skill across environments.
- Practising with different people and materials.

This ensures the student recognises the relevance of the skill beyond the original learning context.

3. Supports Are Often Needed to Scaffold Success

Supports might include:

- Visuals, schedules, or social stories adapted for multiple settings.
- Peer training to help include the student in social routines.
- Generalisation goals built into the IEP (Individual Education Plan).

These tools help students build fluency and confidence, ensuring the skill is not dependent on specific conditions.

Practical Example

Skill: Washing hands

- Taught in classroom sink
- Generalised to school bathroom, home bathroom, public toilet
- Requires: Visual sequence cards in all settings, adult support at first, eventual fading of prompts

Without support, the student might only wash hands correctly at the classroom sink. With explicit teaching, the skill becomes useful and meaningful in all environments.

Why It Matters

Promotes real-world independence
Prevents context-bound learning
Reduces challenging behaviours
Builds lifelong functional skills

What It Needs

Multiple opportunities for practice
Explicit prompting and reinforcement
Instruction with different people
Use of generalisation-focused goals

Visual Guide: Generalisation of Skills Across Settings

Teaching Stage	Skill Taught in Initial Setting	1	0	0	0	0
	Practice with Different People	1	1	0	0	0
	Use in Different Environments	1	1	1	0	0
	Use with Varied Materials	1	1	1	1	0
	Independent Use Without Prompts	1	1	1	1	1
		Classroom	Playground	Toileting Area	Canteen	Home

Skill Generalised

Generalization strategies are critically important when supporting adolescent students with intellectual and other disabilities as they prepare for work experience and navigate the transition from school to post-school life, including to employment and disability programs.

These strategies ensure that the skills students learn in structured school settings are successfully transferred and applied in real-world contexts, which is often a significant challenge for learners with cognitive disabilities. This is because Generalization refers to a student's ability to apply learned skills or behaviours in different environments, with different people, and under different conditions than those in which the skills were originally taught. For students with intellectual disabilities, this often needs to be explicitly planned and taught, as it does not occur automatically.

Generalisation Support Checklist

	Focus Area	Checklist for Teachers
1	People	Has the skill been practised with different staff or peers?
2	Settings	Has the skill been used in other settings (e.g., playground, bathroom)?
3	Materials	Has the student used different materials/tools for the same task?
4	Time of Day	Has the skill been practised at different times (e.g., morning, afternoon)?
5	Prompt Fading	Are prompts being systematically reduced over time?
6	Reinforcement	Is reinforcement still being used in new settings?
7	Monitoring	Are data collected on generalisation attempts and successes?
8	IEP Goals	Is generalisation included as an explicit IEP goal?

Why Generalization Strategies Matter in Work Preparation

1. Real-World Application of Skills

Students with intellectual disabilities may master a skill (e.g., using a photocopier, responding to instructions) in a classroom or simulated task setting, but fail to do so in a real workplace due to environmental or contextual changes. Generalization strategies help bridge this gap by:

- Varying settings during practice (e.g., classroom, school office, community business).
- Engaging multiple people (e.g., different staff or peer mentors).
- Introducing variations in tools or routines (e.g., different brands of equipment, types of tasks).

2. Preparation for Diverse Workplace Demands

Workplaces differ greatly, and generalization ensures that students can adapt skills (e.g., communication, self-regulation, time management) in new or unpredictable contexts, increasing their employability and independence.

Supporting the Transition to Post-School Options

1. Bridging School and Adult Services

Students transitioning to NDIS-funded day programs, supported employment, or open employment will encounter different routines, expectations, and staff. Generalization strategies help students:

- Apply familiar routines (e.g., clocking in, using visual schedules) in new environments.
- Continue using self-determination skills (e.g., requesting help, making choices) in adult settings.
- Maintain vocational skills across changes in service providers or programs.

2. Reducing Dependency on Specific Supports

By promoting skill transfer, generalization reduces a student's reliance on specific prompts, staff, or locations. This supports long-term independence, an essential outcome for successful transition planning.

Key Strategies for Teaching Generalization

- Teach in multiple environments: Practice job skills at school, on-site work experiences, and community settings.
- Use multiple instructors: Include teachers, aides, job coaches, and workplace mentors in training.
- Vary materials and examples: E.g., teach money handling with real and toy money, different cash registers.
- Reinforce flexibility: Praise when students adapt to change or problem-solve independently.
- Use natural cues and supports: Replace verbal prompts with environmental cues (e.g., signs, checklists).
- Involve families: Extend learning into the home and community through structured routines and shared goals.

Conclusion

For adolescents with intellectual and other disabilities, generalization is not optional—it is essential. Without it, even well-learned skills may not transfer to post-school life. Educators must embed generalization into Individual Transition Plans (ITPs), curriculum delivery, and work experience preparation, ensuring students are not only taught “what to do” but are also supported in learning “where, when, and how” to do it in the real world. This enhances their dignity, independence, and inclusion in community and work life.

GENERALIZATION STRATEGIES



Teach in multiple environments



Use multiple instructors



Vary materials and examples



Reinforce flexibility

Generalizing skills and behaviours from school to post-school

