

Providing Support for Special Needs Children

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All children can succeed with the right support. Being a parent of any child is not always easy. You can often feel overwhelmed and confused. If your child has special needs, these feelings may seem even stronger. You have many questions and you may not always know where to go for answers. Sometimes you might not even know what to ask.

This article covers the first eight years of your child's life. It gives information that may answer some of your questions. There are no answers that will work for everyone. There are different answers for each family. You will have to decide what is best for you, your family, and your child.

Before you get started, here are a few things to remember:

- A family is the most important support a child can have.
- Every family and every child has strengths.
- In the early years, help and support are very important.
- Your child may need special services and supports to learn.
- There are laws that can work for you and your child.
- You should have a dream for your child.
- It is important to have a plan that will help the dream come true.
- Include your child in activities with all children in the community.
- You are not alone. Reach out—others have been there and can help.

Remember this article is only a guide. You know best what information will be useful. One thing is sure, you can make a positive difference in your child's life! We hope that this article will help support your dreams and lead you to people who can get you started.

A Family is the Most Important Support a Child Can Have -

Being a Parent is a Very Important Job -

You help your child learn and develop every day. You are your child's first teacher. You are there to give help and support when it is needed. When you have a child with special needs, it is sometimes hard to know if you are doing the right thing. Your love and concern for your child is a good beginning.

As the *parent* of a child with special needs, you may be making decisions for your child that other parents don't face. You may meet with many different people who will provide the services needed by your child. You will need to know what kinds of services are available so you can make decisions that you think are best for your child and your family. This article is a good place to start.

All Families and All Children Have Strengths -

People with different strong points can help each other. Discovering your child's strengths and interests is important. Knowing them will help as you plan for your child's education and development.

Make a list of your child's needs and what can be done to meet these needs. You play an important role in getting the services that can be provided for you and your child.

Help and Support are Important in the Early Years -

Trust Your Feelings -

Trust your feelings about your child. If you have a concern, get advice and help as soon as you can. The sooner your child's special needs are met, the better off your child and family will be.

The chart in this article lists signs of development for children between one month and five years of age. Remember, each child is different and may learn and develop at a different pace. However, if you notice that your child's development is very different from other children of the same age, you may want to talk

with someone about your concern.

Where Should You Start?

Your doctor or public health agency can be a good place to begin. Most doctors and nurses have a lot of experience with children. They may send your child to special doctors for tests. Or they may ask you to wait a month or more to see how your child develops. Social service agencies or your local school system might also be able to help. Many states, local public school systems, and social service agencies have people to help you and your child. Try to call them as soon as you can.

No one knows your child as well as you do. Before you meet with a doctor or teacher, make a list of the things you notice about your child that concern you. The notes and lists you keep over time will help you talk about your concerns. Also, your notes will tell you and the doctor or teacher of any changes you have noticed. Your notes will help you remember little things you might forget to say during the meeting.

They may test your child and ask you questions:

- How does your child move? For example, does your child turn over?
- How does your child see? For example, does your child follow moving things with his or her eyes?
- How does your child hear? For example, does your child react to loud noises?
- Does your child make sounds or words? For example, how many words does your child use?
- How does your child act around others? For example, does your child play well with other children?

Information and findings about your child's needs will be made based on what you say, test findings, your child's health record, and what doctors, teachers, or others see when they watch your child play or do special tasks. Because your child is a unique person, it is important that the people testing your child get to know and understand him or her as a whole person. The result will be a good picture of your child, which is often called an evaluation.

The information you get from your child's evaluation should help you focus on what to do next. Ask questions. The more you know about your child's special needs, the better you can meet them. Once you know what your child needs, you can begin making an action plan.

Find the Support You Need -

As you work with your child, you may find it helpful to meet with other parents of children with special needs. Sometimes you may feel alone, angry, and stressed in your search to find the help or care that your child needs. This is natural, but you shouldn't ignore your feelings. To help your child, you must also help yourself by getting the support you need. Ask your child's teacher or doctor. There are many support groups for families of children with special needs. Find a group that makes you feel comfortable. Surround yourself with people you can trust.

It is important that you find help for your child as soon as you feel there is a problem. Finding help for your young child may prevent further *developmental delays* and may also improve the quality of your family life. Don't give up when you know you are right! You and your family's support are important to your child's development, education, and well being.

Find Services and Supports Under the Law -

When you learn about your child's special needs, you may ask yourself, "How can I help my child get the services and supports he or she needs?" The best place to begin is within your community and state. Laws have been passed to help you get the supports and services your child may need. It is important for you to know your rights and responsibilities under the law.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act -

All states get federal money under the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, also known as IDEA, and must provide a free appropriate public education to all eligible children with disabilities. No child can

be found eligible for special education until an evaluation has been done. Your state and local school district are responsible for evaluating your child. You may need to ask for an evaluation.

Children from ages birth to 3 years may be eligible for *early intervention services*. Beginning at age 3, children may be eligible for a free appropriate public education. The IDEA provides support for special education and related services to children in all kinds of settings, childcare, preschool, kindergarten, elementary, middle, and high schools. Special education is a way for your child to have the supports and services he or she needs in order to learn. Special education is not a "place" but a way for your child to be educated, as much as possible, with children who do not have disabilities. You can get more information about the IDEA from Parent Training and Information (PTI) centers and from the National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities, 1-800-695-0285.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 -

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prohibits discrimination against qualified individuals with disabilities. Section 504 applies to all programs and activities that get federal money, including local school districts and Head Start programs. School districts that get federal money must provide a free appropriate public education to children with disabilities.

Some children with disabilities who are not eligible for special education programs and related services under the IDEA may be eligible for services under Section 504. Your school district must also make sure that its programs are physically accessible to children with disabilities. If your school district provides after-school-care programs for students, those programs must also be available for students with disabilities.

Section 504 provides legal rights for children with disabilities and their parents. Many states and local school districts also offer mediation services which may be helpful in settling disagreements about whether your child is eligible for services and the kind of services your child should get. Your school system should have a specific person on staff who knows about Section 504 and who can help you with your questions and concerns. You may also want to contact the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights' (OCR) at 1-800-421-3481 or go to their website at www.ed.gov/offices/OCR/.

The Americans With Disabilities Act and Your Civil Rights -

The Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) is another very important law for people with disabilities and their families. It prohibits discrimination in:

- employment;
- public transportation;
- services provided by state and local governments;
- services and accommodations offered by private businesses; and
- telecommunications.

The goal of the ADA is to remove the barriers that deny individuals with disabilities an equal opportunity to share in and contribute to American life. The law is about participation and access to the kind of opportunities that persons without disabilities enjoy. For example, under the ADA, restaurants, theaters, childcare centers, and other community resources cannot refuse to serve your child or family solely because your child or a family member has a disability. The ADA also applies to states and local school districts.

There are many booklets and other materials to help families understand their rights under the ADA. The U.S. Department of Justice ADA Information Line (1-800-514-0301) and the PTIs in your state are good places to help. You can also get information about education programs covered by ADA from OCR.

Parent Training and Information Centers -

For more information and training on the IDEA, Section 504, and ADA, contact the Parent Training and Information (PTI) center in your state. To reach the parent center in your state, you can contact the Technical Assistance Alliance for Parent Centers (the Alliance), at 1-888-248-0822. PTIs are centers run

by parents. They provide education and training to all parents on their rights under these laws. Parents and families have worked hard to make this happen. They wanted their children to learn as much as possible and they wanted their children to be happy in their neighborhoods with their friends and families.

As a parent, it is important to make sure that your child's rights are being met under the IDEA, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the ADA. Learn as much as you can about your rights and the rights of your child. Don't feel shy about asking for these services or speaking out if you have been refused access to community resources. Your child, your family, and you will benefit.

Find Services and Supports Based on Your Child's Age -

All children, with and without special needs, find some things hard to do. Your child may have needs that require special attention. As a parent, it is important to make sure that your child's education meets his or her special needs, as well as provides opportunities to be with children of all levels of ability. You may be eligible to get services and supports for your child. Under the IDEA, these services and supports are determined by the age of your child.

Birth Through Age 2 -

Under the IDEA, states have programs for infants and toddlers from birth through age two. These programs may be different from state to state. These programs may be called "Part H" because that is the part of the IDEA that is for children birth through age 2.

Once you find the right agency, you can learn about the types of programs and services in your community. As soon as you can, contact the person or office in charge of early childhood programs for information. Services for infants and toddlers must include a *service coordinator* or a *family resource coordinator*. This person is part of an early intervention team and will help explain what types of services and programs are available for your young child. Depending on what programs and services your child needs, a service coordinator will help link your family with those services.

Beginning at Age 3 -

Under the IDEA, beginning at age 3 children are served through a special education program that will meet their special needs. This program must include transportation and other support services if they are needed to help your child benefit from special education. These other services may be called related services and may include:

- audiology;
- physical therapy;
- occupational therapy;
- school health services; and
- speech pathology.

All states have preschool programs for children with disabilities. If your child has been attending a program for infants and toddlers, the local school system must evaluate your child in time so that preschool special education services can begin no later than the third birthday. Make sure your child gets into a program that offers the best chance to learn and play with children of different abilities.

If your child is already in a regular school program and is getting some services, such as a remedial reading program, but those services are not enough to help your child succeed, your child may have a disability that would allow him or her to receive special education services under the IDEA.

Visit the school, talk to your child's teachers, and watch your child in class. If you don't think the program is helping your child, you have the right to ask for changes. You want the best program for your child's needs. Continue to look for other choices. All children deserve educational programs that meet their needs and allow them a chance to develop, learn, and be happy.

It is important to share information with your child's teacher and school. The following information may be helpful for the teacher to know:

- What can your child do without help?
- What can your child do with some help?
- What seems to help your child learn?
- When is it easiest for your child to learn?
- What makes your child happy?
- What makes your child angry?
- What do you do to help you child when he or she gets angry?
- What works for you and your child?
- What would you like your child to learn?

It is Important to Have Dreams for Your Child -

Every parent has dreams for his or her child. When you find out that your child has special needs, your child will need extra help and support to make these dreams come true. Remember, your child has many strengths. With your help and support, and the appropriate education, your dreams for your child can come true.

Understanding your child's special needs can help you set goals and guide your dreams. Knowing why some goals may be hard to reach can be helpful to you. Look for different ways to help your child learn and develop. Information about how your child learns can also help family, friends, and teachers care for and teach your child. Helping others get to know your child will make it easier for everyone to work together to build on your child's strengths and meet his or her needs.

Your dreams for your child might change over time. This is natural. You and your child will also change. Try to be flexible. Remember that part of making your dreams come true means you may have to work hard to get the right services to meet your child's special needs.

You know your child best. Set goals your child can reach. When a goal is reached, set a new goal and keep trying! Think about what your child can do and build on each success. Remember, even the smallest achievement is something for which your child and your family can be proud! Work to meet your child's special needs. Think about what would help your child do more. Don't let anything stop you along the way.

You will find that others will support you and share your dreams. You can help make your dreams for your child come true. Don't give up! Remember, your child will also have dreams of his or her own that you can share.

Include Your Child in Activities with All Children -

All children learn by playing. It is important that children with special needs take part in activities with all children, including those who do not have special needs. All children can learn from one another. Your child has as much to give to others as he or she will receive from others. Good friendships can develop as children learn to work and play together.

If your child has a brother or sister, encourage them to play together. They will learn from one another, building confidence and skills needed for playing and being with others outside of the family.

You can help your child learn by including your child in many different activities. You and others who care for your child may need to think of new ways to make or buy toys, furniture, or other tools to help your child learn.

Think about what your child does well. Try to find an activity where that skill or talent is used. Look for activities or play groups your child will enjoy that can develop skills and talents. Ask about activities at school and in the community. Your local community center, YMCA, or YWCA may have programs or activities your child may enjoy: swimming, horseback riding, art, day camps, canoeing, dancing, camping, nature programs, and trips. A church or temple group can be helpful. Some offer family or other group activities. There may be a play group or preschool program your child can join.

All children need time to play. By playing, children begin to explore and ask questions. Playing gives children the chance to dream, make choices, try new things, have fun, and learn. Children with special needs should have the same chance to play and meet other children. Children are good at including everyone if we will let them.

Reach Out to Others -

Being a parent or caregiver is not always easy. Raising a child with special needs places many demands on parents and the family. Finding the right help for your child may be hard at first. You and your family need support and understanding. Help is available from many places:

- family members (husband or wife, parents, in-laws, sisters and brothers, grandparents, aunts and uncles, legal guardians, or caregivers);
- teachers;
- friends, neighbors, or members of churches or temples;
- social workers and others who work with families;
- doctors, nurses, and other health and mental health professionals;
- support groups; and
- parents of other children with special needs.

Find out if there is a parent-to-parent program in your community. Local parent-to-parent programs provide support to parents of children with special needs. To provide this support, an experienced parent is matched in a 1 to 1 relationship with a parent who has just found out his or her child has a disability. The match is usually based on a similar disability or special concern of the new parent. The experienced parent shares real-life stories of raising a child with special needs and gives the kind of support that only another parent who has been there can. They describe their experiences in everyday language. In some states, there are both local parent-to-parent programs and statewide parent-to-parent networks that provide training and assistance to the local programs. If your community or state does not have a parent-to-parent program, find out if a Parent Training and Information (PTI) center is in your state. Many groups do parent-to-parent support. Places to look for this is through the PTIs, the local schools, and organizations that focus on children with special needs.

Brothers and sisters of children with special needs also need support. Brothers and sisters may get together and form support groups or join one. These support groups are a good way for children to talk and share information about special needs.

It is important for you and your child to do things with a lot of different children. Everyone will benefit and learn from you and your child. By getting to know you and your child, others will be better able to help you by sharing their ideas, support, and other assistance.

Remember it is not the size of the support group that is important, but rather how well it works for you. One good friend or supportive relative may be the most helpful to you. Only you can decide what is best for you and your child.

Your love and dreams for your child are your greatest strengths. Use these strengths to reach out to others who know what it's like and can give you support.

Helpful Hints -

These are helpful hints taken from the previous pages. They may help in your search to meet your child's special needs.

- Get help and advice right away if you have a concern about your child's development and learning. It may prevent some developmental delays.
- Start by talking to your child's caregiver, doctor, or teacher.
- Make notes and lists of questions for meetings.
- Bring a friend or relative with you to give support when meeting with doctors and teachers.

- Keep good records of shots, tests, letters from doctors and teachers, and notes from meetings, and put them in a file.
- Learn all you can about your child's special needs.
- Learn as much as you can about your legal rights under The Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA).
- Try to learn as much as you can about supports and services that can help you and your child.
- As a parent or caregiver it is important to make sure that your child's education and environment meet his or her special needs.
- Ask for changes if something is not working.
- Imagine goals and dreams for your child and talk about them with others who know your child.
- Your child has special abilities and talents. Use your child's abilities to create a plan to make the dreams come true.
- You know your child best; set goals your child can reach.
- Keep notes of your child's progress.
- Get the support you need by joining a support group, or by talking to other parents, friends, or family members you can trust.
- Brothers and sisters of children with special needs need support and attention, too.
- Include your child with special needs in activities with all children, both with and without special needs.
- Gather as much information as you can about programs your community offers children your child's age.
- Be sure to look at your whole child: your child's strengths as well as the areas for which your child needs supports and services.
- Do not give up when you know you are right!

Developmental Progress Chart -

See How Develops -

Every child is different. This chart gives *general* milestones in a child's development. The information below lets you know what to expect. It will help you record your child's progress.

As you measure the progress, make notes on the chart. These notes will provide a good record of your child's development.

At 1 month, most children ...

- Lift head a little when lying on stomach
- Watch objects for a short time
- Make "noise in throat" sounds
- Stay away from annoying sensations such as cloth or blanket on the

At 2 months, most children ...

- Hold their head up (bobbing when supported in sitting position)
- Sometimes copy or respond to a smiling person
- Roll part way to side
- Make sounds of discomfort

At 3 months, most children ...

- Lift head and chest when lying on stomach
- Recognize bottle or breast
- Smile when talked to
- Show active body movement

- Follow moving things with their eyes

At 4 months, most children ...

- Hold head up for a long time without bobbing
- Laugh out loud
- Roll from front to back
- Like to play
- Grab an object held near their hand
- Make sounds when talked to

At 6 months, most children...

- Sit with little support
- Respond to a friendly voice with a smile or coo
- Roll from back to stomach
- Turn and look at sounds
- Change object from hand to hand and from hand to mouth

At 9 months, most children...

- Sit alone and change position
- Say "mama" and "dada"
- Crawl and respond to people they know
- Respond to their name

At 12 months, most children...

- Pull themselves to stand and may step with support
- Can nod their head to signal "yes"
- Give love
- Pick things up with thumb and one finger
- Say two or three words

At 15 months, most children...

- Walk without support
- Do some self-feeding
- Speak and make their voice go up and down
- Drink from a cup held by someone
- Use four or five words

At 18 months, most children...

- Walk (may run a bit)
- Use five to ten words
- Climb up or down one stair
- Pull toys that have wheels
- Mark on paper with crayons
- Understand easy directions

At 2 years, most children...

- Give toys when asked
- Recognize a familiar picture and know if it is upside down

- Kick large ball
- Turn pages in a book (two or three at a time)
- Use two or three words together, such as "more juice"

At 3 years, most children...

- Walk up stairs holding railing
- Unbutton large buttons
- Stand for a moment on one foot
- Talk of toilet needs
- Open doors
- Stack objects by size
- Ask and answer simple questions
- Speak clearly and are understood by family members

At 4 years, most children...

- Can hop in place
- Throw a ball above their head
- Wash hands without help
- Copy a circle
- Begin to play with other children
- Know their own sex, age, last name
- Answer out loud to "Hi" and "How are you?"
- Point to six basic colors when asked

At 5 years, most children...

- Run on tiptoe
- Understand "yesterday" and "tomorrow"
- Print a few capital letters
- Know their name in print
- Use sentences with correct grammar, such as, "May I go to the store?" or "I want a big cookie."
- Play together with others
- Put their shoes on the correct feet

If you have questions about your child's growth and development, call your doctor or public health agency, Child Find, social service agency, or your local public school system.

The above information is adapted from the Illinois State Board of Education's Child Find materials.