

Don't Go it Alone

Special needs. What exactly does that mean? If you've heard of or are living with special needs issues, you may be well aware of the challenges involved. But what does "special needs" specifically refer to?

Special needs typically means the unique requirements of a person who has (or is at risk of having) learning difficulties or a mental, emotional or physical disability.

Support is important! Building a support network and finding support groups can help you learn things from people that are facing a similar situation.

Typical special needs conditions include learning disabilities and developmental delays, autism, Asperger's syndrome, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and other emotional difficulties. Also included are physical handicaps such as cerebral palsy, and hearing, vision or speech problems.

Regardless of the condition, it's a daily challenge if there is someone with special needs in your family. But it's important to remember that there are many tools and resources available to help you cope.

In this issue of *Your Source*, you will learn how to:

- Get an early start on diagnosis and planning to address a child's specific needs.
- Understand how to make the best use of the educational system.
- Tap into resources—including other parents who are on a journey similar to yours—to help your child reach his or her potential.

Don't try to go it alone in dealing with your family's special needs. This issue of *Your Source* will help you take charge and get the help you need.

Go Online Today! Log on to access *Families with Special Needs* and other helpful resources in the *Spotlight* section.



Employee Assistance Program

We care, just call.

1-800-222-0364

1-888-262-7848 TTY Users
www.FOH4YOU.com



Log on here!



Reaching Out Can Make a Big Difference

If you are a parent or guardian of someone with special needs, you are the most important person in his or her life. As you prepare to meet the challenges of each day, it's important to remember that helpful support is available to you.

What are some ideas for getting help?

- At first it can seem hard to sort through the different types of therapies, strategies and programs. But take your time with the process.
- Talking with other parents of special needs children can be a great source of emotional support. Other parents can also offer helpful experience in how to best work with school personnel, therapists and others.
- Look for a support group whose members are in a similar situation to share best practices and resources.
- If you aren't comfortable with face-to-face groups, finding informal online groups (for example, via websites, social media or email chats) can be the next best thing.
- Having someone with whom to share common experiences can make a tremendous difference.

When Special Needs Change Your Life's Path

If you have a family member with special needs, you may find yourself in territory where you never expected to go. At first your path may be uncertain, but there are steps others have taken that can provide guidance.

Focus on Diagnosis and Early Intervention

First, if you suspect that your child might have a disability, don't wait. Take the child to your pediatrician and/or a clinical psychologist as soon as possible for testing. Early detection is important; getting help in the areas of special needs can lead to a child being included in, not excluded from, regular activities.

Learn About and Advocate for the Child's Education

For every child eligible for special programs, each state guarantees special education and related services. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a federally mandated program that assures a free, appropriate public education for special needs children. Usually children are placed in public schools and the school district pays for all necessary services. These can include, as needed, services from a speech therapist, occupational therapist, school psychologist, social worker, school nurse or aide.

Autism, Asperger's syndrome, and nonverbal learning disorder are all neurological conditions, meaning that there are problems with how the brain processes information. Studies continue to show the increasing number of serious neurological problems in children.

Initially an evaluation team works with you to create an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). It's important to monitor your child's progress and ask for frequent updates. If your child is not progressing, discuss this with the teacher and decide whether the program should be changed. Ask what you can do at home to support the IEP. And be sure to speak up when you have questions or concerns, particularly if your child has been teased or bullied by other children, or excluded in any way.

Stop and Enjoy Small Successes

Regardless of how things are going, spend time together doing things that the child enjoys. Build a feeling of success by praising good effort and providing special rewards when he or she succeeds at something. This can help offset the days when things don't go so well.

If you are not satisfied with what is happening with your child's therapy or special education, what is the best approach to take?

- A. Promptly bring your concerns to the attention of the school.
- B. Give the school staff some time to make needed changes.

The correct answer is A. You should always promptly share any suggestions or ideas you would like to see explored when it comes to your child's education. First, work directly with the teacher(s) to make changes. Also talk to the special education director if there is one, and speak with the school principal. It is also good to make your requests in writing.

Now That's an Idea!

Helping Someone with Special Needs

Learn everything you can about your family member's disability. The Internet contains a treasure trove of information about specific conditions and their requirements.

Talk to other parents of children with disabilities, or join a support group (either in-person or online).

Get organized by keeping a notebook for school records, medical records, professional evaluations, and letters and notes from school staff.

Stick to a simple daily routine and take things one day at a time.

Become familiar with laws that protect your child's educational rights.

Take care of your own health and wellness, even though you may be busy with school and therapy appointments.