

# Parent pages



Resources for Christian parents in the 21st Century

Vol. 7 No. 1 • September 2007

## Advocating for the Special Needs Child

**A** quick glance at our congregation on a Sunday morning will reveal more than a few families with a special needs child. These children and their families are a blessing to our community; continually reminding us that God loves each of us and has a plan for us. These families are presented with unique challenges, especially when it comes to education, both in the school and the church.

For many children, the diagnosis of their needs comes at birth. This is a critical time for parents as they often feel overwhelmed by new information and concerns as well as dealing with the practical aspects of keeping this new little one healthy and safe.

School time is another critical time for these children and their parents. A whole new world of questions and concerns open up as parents begin to work through issues of what is the best way to meet the educational needs of their child. This is a time for parents to become advocates for their child and to learn and practice the skills necessary to determine what is best from

what is available.

### The Info Center

As parents, you have a unique role in your child's education. Your child comes with extras, like medical/psychological experts, equipment for health, mobility or senses, test results, and education plans. A parent is the information center for such a child. You are the one who can relay a doctor's suggestion or a therapist's recommendation.

Be sure to keep careful and well organized notes. A file or binder that holds your notes from doctor visits as well as copies of tests done and medical information is essential. Be sure it is well organized and know in advance which parts of

the file you feel comfortable sharing with educators. The more information your child's teacher has available, the better he or she can serve your child. It is a chal-



lenge to bring people together for educational meetings, so complete and well-organized information can help meetings be more efficient and can prevent delays.

Part of the information you keep on your child should be a copy of your child's educational rights. This can be obtained from your local school district office or your state department of education.

### Take Action

For some children, their disability is not readily apparent. Many children have hidden learning or emotional disabilities that go undetected or do not qualify for special education programs. If you suspect your child has a learning issue, work through your child's teacher to get him or her tested.

You have the right to request this of your local public school. If testing does not qualify your child for special educa-

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tion assistance, you may need to collect more information on your own and work with your child's teacher to create a productive learning environment for your child.

Check with your child's doctor to see if you can get a referral to a neuropsychologist. This kind of doctor is often found at a rehabilitation hospital and can do thorough testing to determine your child's learning strengths and weaknesses. This can give you important information to share with your child's teacher.

## Know the Teacher

Establishing a healthy relationship with your child's teacher and school is essential in your role as an advocate. Parents need to actively work at building relationships with the people who care for their children. Getting to know the teacher will help you when you find yourself frustrated with class rules or routines that hinder your child. Communicate your child's needs with respect and remember that your child has classmates, each with his or her own needs for which the teacher is responsible also.

Remember that the least restrictive environment for your child may represent challenges for the teacher and the fellow students. Ask what you can do to help, and then follow through on those suggestions.

## Always Look To God

It's important to keep the big picture in mind and take care to not burn bridges with staff members. It can be easy to try to control each outcome for your child, but as a parent you are not in control. God has a plan for the life of your child. Pray for His guidance and leave the details of how His plan will be accomplished up to Him.

God has given you a strong love for your special needs child. Use that to your child's advantage by practicing respectful assertiveness on his or her behalf. Involve your child, whenever possible and appropriate, in decisions. Learn to listen carefully to your child and share with teachers

what you have learned. Hold your child, and yourself, accountable for the aspects of education that are in your hands.

We are sinners in a sinful world, so we can expect difficulties and frustrations to occur. It is important to view these events as opportunities. God can and does bring good out of anything. Frustrating school situations can be opportunities to learn more about your child and how to better meet his or her needs.

Because you know your child better than anyone else, you are an important source of information. This is as valuable as a doctor's expertise. If you value the expertise of those who do the testing and those who do the teaching, you have a right to expect them to value your expertise.

When needing to bring problems to the attention of educators, work to emphasize solutions. You are in a good position to remind all concerned that your long-term goals for your child are the same. You can gently remind teachers of the difference between performance and assessment. For instance, if you are convinced that your special needs child is learning at his/her potential and is learning what is needed to prepare for the next level of education, grades and test scores become less important.

Your child has the right to an accurate assessment. If an evaluation or teaching

technique does not work for your child, you and the teacher may need to explore other options in order to determine what your child has learned.

## Don't Forget the Church

Your church needs information on how to best meet your child's needs too. It is a good idea to write a few paragraphs on your child's disability and/or health needs that can be given to each person who teaches, or cares for your child at church. Be open and available about your child's needs and offer to help. Provide information before the event so the leader has an opportunity to ask questions. The more a Sunday school teacher or youth director understands about your child, the better position he or she will be in to make careful decisions regarding your child's faith and fellowship development.

Please do not forget the opportunities for grace that God makes available for you. Raising a special needs child is a challenge, but God does not leave you alone. He loves you, forgives you, and cares for your needs even as He works His plan for your child. Take advantage of respite care programs, parent education opportunities, prayer chains, and support groups. God provides them for your blessing and care.

## Questions for discussion

1. Make a list of special needs children in your school and church.
2. How does your church or school serve the needs of these children and their families?
3. How can you help the families?
4. If there are special needs children in your child's classroom, what does your child understand about that child's disabilities?
5. How can a class or a church be blessed by the presence of special needs children?

## Resources:

For more information on being an advocate:  
■ [www.familyvoices.org](http://www.familyvoices.org)

For more information on disabilities:  
■ [www.joniandfriends.org](http://www.joniandfriends.org)

**"Parent Pages" is published by LCMS District and Congregational Services—School Ministry**

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**Vol. 7, No. 1 • September 2007**