

## Tips on Choosing a School for Special Needs Children

Finding out that a child has a disability is both overwhelming and frightening. The initial diagnosis is the beginning of a long and difficult journey, but with the proper support system and appropriate knowledge in place, the journey will be more than manageable for parents.

Today, children with disabilities are usually diagnosed between the ages of birth and 3 years. Below the age of 5 years there are two separate systems for infants/toddlers and preschoolers. The family pediatrician can help parents find a service coordinator from the Department of Health to obtain evaluations and clinical services for children birth to 3 years. The local public school district is responsible for helping parents with evaluations as well as appropriate educational programs for children 3 to 5 years.

In addition, local counties and school districts have a list of approved programs and providers for children with disabilities. This list provides parents with the opportunity to access services at no cost to the family. With this list in hand, parents can then look on the internet to determine if the programs and providers have websites which provide detailed information about their services, children served, application procedures and program history. Parents can also call programs and providers to request a tour, a CD and or brochure.

Since special education services have been in place for children with disabilities for many years, an internet search also provides parents with information about organizations which have been developed by parents for parents. Local organizations provide parents of children with disabilities with lectures, and seminars. The national organizations for parents are involved with policy issues affecting children with disabilities such as educational services, therapeutic services, clinical treatments and teacher certification. For parents who are having difficulty understanding the educational system, Wright's Law is a very popular site for parents who have questions and/or concerns about parents' and students' rights.

When parents visit different programs, they should be prepared with a list of questions such as: How long has the program been in existence? What is the program's philosophy? What are the disabilities of students served with the program? Does the program provide related services? Are the teachers and therapists certified?

It is also important for parents to ask to visit a classroom. Parents should feel comfortable about placing their child, particularly a young child within a new setting. By seeing the inside of the building, the classroom and the other children, parents are able to determine if this would be a good place for their child. If after visiting several programs in the immediate area parents do not find an appropriate program, parents should visit programs in other areas for comparison purposes. Do not settle, your child is important.

I recommend that parents keep a diary of their experiences, thoughts and questions about the schools that they have visited and will visit in the future. It is hard to remember specific information and/or personal impressions several weeks after a site visit has occurred. In fact, parents should keep a diary throughout their children's special education schooling. This provides parents with an opportunity to look back and reflect on how far their children have progressed in the special education system. Parents do a great deal of networking with one another. Often the information that is chronicled within a diary may be helpful to another parent who is just beginning the exploration process of finding programs and services. The best advice parents can follow is to make sure they investigate programs themselves and also talk to other parents.