SPECIAL NEEDS GUIDE

Turning challenges into triumphs
As parents, we never want to see our children struggle in school or in life. When we send our children to school we have hopes and dreams for them that we don’t often verbalize. We want them to “fit in”, get good grades, behave, pay attention, have good friends and enjoy school. Our expectations grow as our children pass through elementary, middle and high school. But what happens when your child begins to struggle academically, socially or behaviorally at school or in the home? Perhaps your child has a learning disability.

Many parents may immediately begin to worry about how their child will cope with school. It’s only natural to want the best for your child but academic success, while important, isn’t the end goal. What you really want for your child is a happy and fulfilling life. With encouragement and the right support, your child can build a strong sense of self-confidence and a solid foundation for lifelong success.

Start with learning your child’s learning needs. By understanding the different types of learning issues and their signs, you can pinpoint the specific challenges your child faces and find a treatment program that works well. All children need love, encouragement and support, and for kids with learning disabilities, such positive reinforcement can help ensure that they emerge with a strong sense of self-worth. confidence and the determination to keep going even when things are tough.

Every child comes with his or her special gifts. Kids with learning disabilities often have extra gifts they use to compensate for inabilities. It’s up to us as parents to help our kids discover these precious gifts so our children grow and thrive.

In searching for ways to help children with learning disabilities and finding their unique gifts, remember that you are looking for ways to help them help themselves. Your goal as a parent is not to “cure” the learning disability, but to give your child the social and emotional tools he or she needs to work through challenges. In the long run, facing and overcoming a challenge such as a learning disability can help your child grow stronger and more resilient.

Always keep in mind that the way you behave and respond to challenges has a big impact on your child. A good attitude won’t solve the problems associated with a learning disability, but it can give your child hope and confidence that things can improve and that he or she will eventually succeed. There are several things you can do to help with your child’s learning needs.

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I am not
genaic disorder.

I am ready to make a splash.

Like most kids, Taylor is curious, energetic and loves to play. But Taylor has two rare and serious genetic disorders. For her, every day is a fight. But with the support of our nationally recognized pediatric specialty programs and treatments like aquatic therapy, Taylor has overcome some of her toughest challenges. From congenital disorders to injuries and concussion rehabilitation, we don’t see children as patients. All we see is possibility. Learn more at amazingkids.org.

The Children’s Institute
Amazing Kids. Amazing Place.
It's important to keep things in perspective

A learning disability isn’t insurmountable. Remind yourself that everyone faces obstacles. It’s up to you as a parent to teach your child how to deal with those obstacles without becoming discouraged or overwhelmed. Don’t let the tests, school bureaucracy and endless paperwork distract you from what really matters—giving your child plenty of emotional and moral support.

You should become your own expert

Do your own research and keep abreast of new developments in learning disability programs, therapies and educational techniques. You may be tempted to look to others such as teachers, therapists and doctors for solutions, especially at first. But you’re the foremost expert on your child, so take charge when it comes to finding the tools he or she needs in order to learn.

Also, be an advocate for your child. You may have to speak up time and time again to get special help for your child. Embrace your role as a proactive parent and work on your communication skills. It may be frustrating at times, but by remaining calm and reasonable, yet firm, you can make a huge difference for your child.

Build good communication with your child’s teacher

Do not wait to bring concerns to the teacher. Early intervention into learning issues is to your child’s advantage. There are many amazing teachers in the system, who are more than willing to partner with you in helping your child succeed. Excellent communication between home and the school can alleviate a lot of your child’s stress.

At the same time, don’t forget to build a great relationship with your child. Take the time to talk to your child regularly about what is happening in school. When you have an open line of communication, concerns, struggles and stress can be identified early. When an area of concern becomes known, you have a natural forum to begin to process it with your child. A great relationship takes BOTH quality and quantity time.

Become a student of your child

Take a front row seat in the life of your child and learn about their personality.
Learn More.

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special needs
I was devastated when my oldest daughter was diagnosed with an anxiety disorder at five-years-old. I struggled to understand her during her early years and failed to parent her appropriately at times during her adolescent years, but she emerged from her teenage years successfully, with a determined spirit and resolve to help others on a similar path.

Mental illness is real – It shows up in the form of anxiety disorders, depression, ADHD, conduct disorder, bipolar disorder and a host of other diagnoses. The National Institute of Mental Health says, “Mental disorders are common among children in the United States and can be particularly difficult for the children themselves and their caregivers. Just over 20 percent (or one in five) children, either currently or at some point during their life, have had a seriously debilitating mental disorder.”

Unfortunately, society often shames and disregards those struggling with mental illness. It’s easier for parents and teachers to deny a child is suffering than to confront it and seek support. But mental illness shouldn’t go unnoticed.

If you suspect your child is suffering from mental illness, seek help. It’s no different than asking for help with diabetes, cancer or some other illness. Here are a few tips on what to do.

Seek professional help and begin educating yourself – Start with your child’s pediatrician and ask questions about behavior that seems unusual. Learn all you can, you don’t have to have a medical background to begin to understand mental illness. You know your child better than anyone and can offer valuable insight with medical professionals. I was first told my daughter had ADHD but I suspected something different. As I continued to inform her doctor of her symptoms, the correct diagnosis emerged which led to appropriate help.

Let go of your guilt. It’s not your fault – Parents of children with mental illness are quick to blame themselves and hide in shame, but there’s no reason to take responsibility for a biologically-based mental illness. Don’t feel guilty that your child behaves differently than your neighbor’s child. Good parenting doesn’t prevent or solve mental illness.

Break the silence – Talk with school officials, other parents and appropriate leaders such as church pastors and community authorities to improve the situation for your child. Find a support group of parents coping with mental illness. Make an intentional choice to not hide in shame.
Don’t let it destroy your family –
Support one another. Unite together as a team, educating other children in the family on the illness while being sensitive to your child’s feelings about the diagnosis. Don’t allow siblings to demoralize or make fun of their behavior. Help your other children understand their sibling cannot always control his or her behavior. In addition, stay calm in the face of danger or unusual behavior.

Let your child know you love him and will always be there for him. Children with mental illness need more reassurance than other children. They need to feel loved and understood, even on days when their behavior spirals out of control. Make your home a safe place and encourage them to ask questions and express their feelings. We were careful to alleviate situations that might cause anxiety for my daughter such as leaving her alone or placing her in a vulnerable situation.

Keep an open mind about solutions – Don’t dismiss an alternative without exploring it. Stay educated on ongoing research to determine the latest methods of treatment. Seek others’ opinions on available options and try different methods. I was resistant to medicating
Talking to your kids about disabilities

By Sarah Lyons

“Why do you talk like that?” I heard the question come from behind me as I helped another child in the Sunday school class. “It’s just the way I am,” I heard my sister-in-law wisely answer the curious boy.

My sister-in-law, Kara, was born with Cerebral Palsy. She was helping me in the classroom that day when one of the kids noticed her speech is different. Kara has been taught to answer “It’s just the way I am.” after years of questions about her differences.

Our kids have grown up around their beloved Aunt Kara and accept her as she is but there came a time when each of them have asked about Kara’s disability and why it makes her different.

Chances are, at some point, your child will meet someone at school or in the community that has disabilities. It is normal for children to have questions about people who are different, which means parents should be prepared to answer their questions in an intelligent and appropriate way. Here are some tips to get the conversation started:

Everyone is different but the same

All of us have unique gifts, personalities, and challenges. No two people are the same and this is a great thing because diversity makes life interesting and fun. While we are all different, everyone has things in common too. All people, including people with disabilities, want to have friends, be shown respect, and have the desire to be accepted. Encourage your child to embrace the differences of others and find common ground, as well. If your child is interested in a popular television show, book, toy or game; chances are a person with special needs is too. Ask them what they love to do, I would guess they will be happy to tell you.

Types of disabilities

Some disabilities are obvious and some are not. Some people may need a walker or wheelchair to help them move around. Others may have a cognitive (thinking) disability that is not as visible. Explain in simple terms that people struggle with different things and may need a little extra help from a physical tool (like a wheelchair) or help from others. People can have impairments with sight, hearing, walking, speech, cognitive or a variety of other things.

It is important to note that just because someone is in a wheelchair, it does not mean they have a cognitive disability. Also, disabilities are not contagious and children are not going to “catch” the disability. These things may sound obvious to adults, but children process things differently and many have these questions.

Have you HEARD?

We speak miracles at DePaul School for Hearing and Speech

www.DePaulHearingAndSpeech.org

special needs
**Name calling is never okay**

Emphasize that people with disabilities have feelings too. Name calling is hurtful, disrespectful and is a form of bullying. People with disabilities need others to stand up for them when they cannot stand up for themselves. Encourage your child to tell an adult if kids are teasing another child. Your child can be an example to others by being kind and respectful. Parents can set an example by using positive language and behavior towards others, as well.

**A note about “rude” comments**

Kids are curious and love to ask questions. Many times they will speak exactly what is on their mind, without thinking about whether the comments will be hurtful. This can be very embarrassing to parents. So what do you do if your child blurts out a rude and embarrassing comment? Start by answering calmly and matter of factly. If, for example, your child says “Why is that boy in a wheelchair?” Simply answer, “He needs it to move around. Why don’t you say hello?” If the child is reluctant, say hello to him yourself along with something like “John likes trains. Do you like trains too?” If the person accompanying the child responds, follow their lead.

It is always better to treat others as you would like to be treated than to hurry away in an embarrassing situation. Later, when you are at home, you can ask your child if they have any other questions about others with disabilities and reinforce the value of treating everyone equally.

My sister-in-law, now thirty-eight-years old, has been asked many questions over the years, some rude and some just curious. She has learned to handle them well because she knows that, just like anyone else she has challenges to overcome and successes to celebrate. Kara loves watching movies, dancing to music and

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send everything requested. That might include a registration fee, teacher recommendation letters, transcripts from previous years and standardized test scores. The deadline for applications for many schools is mid-January for the following fall. Some schools have rolling admissions, which means there is not a set cut off, but spaces are filled on a first-come, first-served basis.

Apply for financial aid as soon as possible. This is one reason it’s important to apply early. Scholarships and financial aid go quickly, and you can miss out if you don’t pay attention to deadlines. Apply as soon after the financial aid starting date as possible for the best chance of receiving aid.

If you feel a private school is the best choice for your child, it’s important to start now by collecting and filling out admissions forms, scheduling visits and testing, and applying for financial aid.

- SSAT site http://www.ssat.org/ssat/info/home.html
- ISEE site http://erblearn.org/parents/admission/isee
- List of private schools/reviews http://erblearn.org/parents/admission/isee

Katrina (Kathy) Cassel, M.Ed., lives with her husband, seven of their children, and an assortment of pets in the Florida panhandle. Katrina is the author of ten books.

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Specialists are absolutely opposed to redshirting. Their argument is that redshirting "labels children as failures at the outset of their school experience." Other studies claim that there is no long-term academic advantage to this practice, and some say that these children are more likely to drop out of high school and college, have lower future earnings and need special-education services.

On the other side, proponents of redshirting cite studies showing that these children are more likely to go to college and less likely to need special-education services. They also enter kindergarten with greater social confidence and are more likely to do better in math and reading than their peers in the early grades and even into high school. Furthermore, they are more likely to excel in sports and have leadership roles in high school.

In making a good decision on whether to redshirt a young child, Deborah Stipek, dean of the Stanford School of Education, says that parents need to consider the type of kindergarten their child will be attending. She usually advises them "to visit the kindergarten and sit in the back of the room and envision their child in that setting." Finally, she says, "I think it really depends on the kid in the context of what the educational program demands." ■

Parents should send questions and comments to dearteacher@dearteacher.com or ask them on the columnists’ website at www.dearteacher.com.

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And that’s when it hit me – Kevin was dressed in his Invisibility Cloak.

Over all those years, thousands upon thousands of times, when the boys ran to me for help or permission or protection (from each other), they sought me out – even though my husband was within arm’s reach. Why? They simply didn’t see him.

The Invisibility Cloak concealed my husband like Harry Potter trying to escape the clutches of Voldemort. It veiled him from the always-needing-me Muggles so they’d walk right past him in search of me.

Like having your sight restored after years of blindness, it all became so clear now. The verbal battles I refereed, the split-decision judgments I rendered, the permission-granting wishes I delivered like anticipated birthday gifts. All these requests from my kids occurred – not because I was their favorite parent, as I had begun to foolishly believe – but because of my husband’s covert presence in the house. I had been duped by Dad’s Magic.

Hold on a minute…those times when my husband claimed he “didn’t notice” the laundry basket at the bottom of the stairs waiting to be carried up, the garbage bag waiting to be taken outside or the cat vomit waiting to be cleaned up, it wasn’t the ol’ Invisibility Cloak trick, was it?

Darn, my husband even used his magic on me. He’s good. ■

Lisa Beach is a freelance writer, blogger, mother of two teenagers, and former stay-at-home mom/homeschooler who lived to write about it.

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taking care of animals. She loves eating candy, pizza and tacos. She is fun to be around and loves to get out and explore new places. People with disabilities are just people. Sometimes that simple fact is all kids need to know. ■

Sarah Lyons is a freelance writer from Olathe, KS.

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their learning style, how they deal with stress, their strengths and their preferences.

Remember that your influence outweighs all others. Your child will follow your lead. If you approach learning challenges with optimism, hard work and a sense of humor, your child is likely to

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my daughter in the beginning but her psychiatrist helped me recognize that counseling alone wasn’t enough due to her heightened emotions. After several months of counseling, she learned how to manage her anxiety and was able to come off the medication a few years later.

The impact of mental illness in children cannot be denied; but with the proper tools and education, more children can get the help they need to overcome its devastating effects and lead productive lives. A mental illness diagnosis doesn’t mean your child will never lead a normal life. I’m thankful to report my daughter recently graduated from college with an Early Childhood Education degree and is excited about her next chapter in life as an elementary school teacher. ■

Gayla Grace holds a master’s degree in Psychology and Counseling and is a freelance writer and mom to five children.

Mona Chabra is a freelance writer from Sewickley.