

TALKING ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION SERIES

**VOLUME 1**

# **SPECIAL EDUCATION: AN OVERVIEW**

INFORMATION BOOKLET



This pamphlet is one of a series of resources prepared by the First Nations Schools Association (FNSA) and First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) to share information about how to support all First Nations students, regardless of their needs.

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**FNSA MANDATE:**

to collaborate with First Nation schools to create nurturing environments that develop learners' pride and competence in their First Nations language and heritage and equip them to realize their full potential within self-governing First Nations communities.

**FNESC MANDATE:**

to facilitate discussion about education matters affecting First Nations in BC by disseminating information to and soliciting input from First Nations. FNESC's primary goal is to promote and support the provision of a quality education to First Nations learners.

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We hope that these pamphlets provide a useful overview of key special education topics, representing an introduction to issues that some people may want to investigate in more detail. Anyone who requires more information or has specific questions is welcome to contact the FNESC/FNSA special education staff.



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# Meeting the Needs of All Students

**No two children are alike. Children all have unique strengths, gifts, skills, and challenges. They learn in many different ways, and they develop and change at various rates.**

At times during their educational experience, some children can have difficulty learning and struggle to 'keep up' with other children their age. Other children may be learning in an advanced manner in comparison to age and grade level expectations. When that happens, Special Education services can help children who need additional supports in order to be successful students.

## **SPECIAL NEEDS IN CONTEXT**

It is important to remember that all children can experience challenges and difficulties at various times throughout their lives. In some cases, a child may demonstrate temporary behaviour or learning difficulties in

response to unsettling situations they are experiencing in school or other parts of their lives. Sometimes, making changes to ensure a secure and calm environment may be enough to help alleviate the problems a child is experiencing.

In other cases, challenges may not be as temporary, and more significant and structured interventions may be needed to mitigate a student's challenges. This is when Special Education services may be appropriate.

However, while it is important to address concerns about a child's health, behaviour, or learning as soon as possible, a child must present several characteristics of a disorder, over a period of time, to be diagnosed as having a special need or exceptionality. Simply comparing a child to a list of symptoms is not enough to identify exceptionalities.

**NOTE: in this pamphlet, we use the term "parent" for simplicity, but the information is intended to be inclusive of all family members/caregivers of students with special needs. FNESC and the FNSA respect and appreciate the invaluable contributions of everyone who works to support all First Nations students - regardless of their special talents, gifts, or challenges.**

Many children who would not qualify for Special Education may show some signs of an exceptionality or challenge from time to time. The difference for a child who would be designated as having a special need is the frequency and/or intensity of the signs. It is, therefore, important to observe a child's behaviour in different situations and at different times, to identify the existence of a serious exceptionality.

It is also important to note that for all of the special needs described in this pamphlet series, symptoms may vary in severity from person to person and situation to situation. Similarly, the strategies that prove to be effective for each individual may differ significantly. The information included in this pamphlet series only provides general suggestions and information that is common for most individuals.

## Parents - A Key to Success

Parents are key for the success of children. Their interest, commitment, and support are essential ingredients of a child's education and all schools and students benefit tremendously from the active involvement of parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, caregivers, and community members. In fact, the significance of parental and family involvement is often even greater for children with special needs.

Educators and other professionals within the school system have great expertise and are a valuable resource. However, parents have knowledge, observations, experiences and understandings that are at least as important. Often, family members are most aware of a child's strengths and weaknesses. The information they can provide when a child is being diagnosed is crucial, and their participation in the design of a plan to help a child who has challenges is imperative.

In order to encourage parental support, schools must understand and send a clear message that a child experiencing difficulties does not imply bad parenting. Parents must first and foremost be reassured that they are in no way being

blamed for their child's challenges and that they will not be alone in helping to address their child's difficulties.

Professionals in the school environment must be concerned about the best interests of all children; it must be clear that they are not in a position to judge or label anyone. The only concern must be the welfare of each child. Parents and education professionals must be partners in determining the best strategies for ensuring that every child has an opportunity to succeed and reach his or her full potential.

Parents also have a right to all available information concerning their children. Parental rights are the foundation of First Nations control of First Nations education, and parents must be fully informed and have every choice in determining and guiding their child's education.

Parents of children with exceptionalities usually have many questions and concerns regarding their child's diagnosis and subsequent interventions - questions they may sometimes be hesitant to ask. Information must therefore be provided openly

and parents must be made to feel comfortable and welcome to request any kinds of supports they may need.

Parental and family involvement in education has numerous and significant benefits. It will ensure that the strategies being implemented in the school environment are being complemented by activities and structures in the home. Consistency is a key element in the success of children with special needs.

Cooperation and good communication between teachers and family members will also mean that any special circumstances or evolving concerns are fully understood by everyone involved in the life of the child.

Perhaps most importantly, full and active participation by parents and other family members, as well as teachers and learning specialists, will demonstrate to each child that he or she is widely valued and cherished.

# Identifying Special Needs

Sometimes, children are identified as having special needs before they enter school, by parents, their doctor, or by daycare or pre-school workers. Early identification of a child's special needs can be very beneficial, and information about a child's strengths and challenges is extremely advantageous in planning for the child's education program from the outset.

Once a child is in school, his or her parent or teachers usually identify special needs or exceptionalities. Sometimes, parents may have a concern about their child's achievement in school, and may discuss those concerns with their child's teacher or principal. Students are also assessed on a regular basis to determine whether they are functioning at grade level. As parents have a right to know the results of their children's tests, this information may highlight concerns to parents, who will ideally bring them to the school's staff.

Teachers or educational assistants, based on their observations of a child and/or assessment results, also may suspect that a child might have special needs. In that case, the school may suggest to parents a further investigation of the child's challenges.

**Regardless of who first raises the possibility that a child might benefit from additional supports, parental approval is required before a student is formally assessed for a special need and family involvement is critical for planning any related response.**

## OVERCOMING DENIAL

When parents are asked to give approval for their child's assessment, they may respond immediately with denial. Parents can feel overwhelmed by the information they are presented, and some parents may even feel guilty or fear that they are the cause of their child's difficulties.

To overcome denial, it is best to provide information clearly and without implying any blame. If relevant, it may be helpful to involve a home-school coordinator, family resource worker, or First Nations counsellor in consultations between parents and teachers.

Other parents who have experienced a similar situation may be able to help parents in coming to terms with the possibility that their child has special needs - although this possibility must

be approached very carefully in order to respect the confidentiality of everyone involved.

**Maintaining confidentiality is key to all aspects of Special Education. Parents and students must be assured that information about any assessments, results, and follow-up will not be shared without full parental consent.**

Most importantly, patience and understanding are paramount; parents must be reassured with adequate information and support, and must have sufficient time to help them become comfortable with the idea of special education and its intentions.

Once parental approval has been given, a student will be eligible for an appropriate psycho-educational assessment. In some cases, there can be a significant waiting period before these assessments take place - sometimes waiting periods of a year or more. Parents must be fully aware of what to expect for their child.

In some circumstances, parents may need to approach their family doctor for a referral to a specialist. Parents will be expected to follow-up on the referral and arrange an appointment with the appropriate specialists. It is important to ensure that parents understand what next steps are needed, and any supports possible should be provided to make necessary arrangements.

Following an assessment, if a child is diagnosed as having a special need, relevant interventions will be planned. Parents must be informed of the findings of their child's assessment, and they must also be consulted about the establishment of an Individual Education Plan - described later in this pamphlet.

## Who Can Help?

Many professionals and resource people might assist parents and students in determining and dealing with special needs. The people who come together to assist each student will depend largely upon his or her specific strengths and challenges. But no matter who is involved, it is important that parents and families feel comfortable asking for any information they need from everyone who is working with their child.

For each school and community, some of the following people will be available to help.

- **Preschool teachers** often identify a child who is experiencing difficulties and help to implement interventions at an early age, when they can be most effective.
- **Teachers**, who observe children daily and implement assessments on a regular basis, are well positioned to detect challenges and work with specialists to develop programs and intervention strategies to help a child with special needs. Effective teachers also focus on each child's strengths to enhance their self-esteem and confidence, and are open to classroom adaptations that support all students' success.
- **Doctors** can identify physical and mental health problems that interfere with learning and recommend further medical testing and possible strategies to help.
- **Home School Coordinators** and Family Resource Workers can help parents review relevant information, consult with professionals, and arrange appointments.
- **School nurses** can recommend and help with testing for sight and hearing, and coordinate information sharing and intervention services.
- **School psychologists** may assess a child's development in order to identify his or her strengths and particular sources of difficulty, and can test for perceptual problems that can interfere with learning.
- **Psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers** help parents and children deal with emotions. They can also help families build their capacity for supporting children with special needs and can help families and children understand their needs and accept themselves and their situations.

- **Audiologists** determine a child's auditory ability - that is, whether and how they hear different sounds, which can have significant impacts on learning.
- **Physical therapists** diagnose and help address physical problems that restrict movement, use exercise and other techniques to ease pain and boost mobility and muscle strength, and develop fitness and wellness programs.
- **Occupational therapists** help students with daily living skills and self-care tasks, support students with cognitive issues, and make recommendations about adaptive technologies.
- **Optometrists** test and help strengthen students' eye functioning, hand-eye coordination, and visual capacity.
- **Teachers for students** with hearing challenges help children with auditory challenges adapt to the school environment.
- **Physical education specialists** help students improve their coordination, motor skills, behaviours, and overall physical development through appropriate activities.
- **Speech Language therapists** help students with their listening aptitudes, vocabulary, comprehension, memory, and overall capacity to communicate (see [Talking About Special Education Volume 5: Speech and Language Issues](#)).
- **Community group leaders** (such as drum and dance group instructors, coaches, etc.) can help to improve the self-esteem of children, especially those who do not always readily experience success in school. Community leaders can encourage students who have a range of abilities to find, build, and enjoy their special skills and talents.
- **Other parents of children with special needs** can clarify information, processes and recommendations, and share their understandings and experiences. [Arranging for parents to meet, however, should be approached cautiously to respect the confidentiality of everyone involved.](#)

# Individual Education Plans

Students who are identified as having a special need will require an Individual Education Plan (IEP) – a written document that describes the adaptations, modifications and services needed to support the student's success. An IEP is intended to serve as a tool for collaborative planning among the school, parents, family members, and specialists.

Among others, parents have a wealth of information that can help with the development of an IEP. They also have a right to be informed if their child is going to be placed on an IEP.

**A fundamental question parents can help answer? What skills are most important for my child to develop in order to enhance his or her life, now and in the future?**

Parents can also contribute critical information, such as ...

- Family history, medical history, and health care needs.
- A description of the child's strengths, needs, and hopes.

- Ideas about what their child should learn, including short and long-term goals.
- Strategies that have been successful with their child in the home, and suggestions for teachers to use in the school setting.
- Responses to proposed strategies, what they perceive to be appropriate and feasible, and anything they might feel to be questionable or potentially problematic.
- Information about their child's community activities, as well as other people and situations that affect their child's lives.

Given the importance of IEPs, two specific pamphlets are included in this pamphlet series: *Talking About Special Education Volume 3: Individual Education Plans* and *Talking About Special Education Volume 4: A Parent's Guide to Individual Education Plans*.

# What Is an Advocate?

People who have special needs - including children, teens and adults - often need an advocate. An advocate is someone who is dedicated to helping an individual student, always with their best interests in mind and a good understanding of their unique skills and challenges.

Advocates are active mediators between people with special needs and their environments. Ideally, advocates for students with special needs will:

- Make positive things happen on the students' behalf;
- Help set up appointments and follow-up on recommendations and specialist advice;
- Always try to understand what the students are experiencing and why they may be acting in different ways;
- Work with students and their school teams to help pace and time interventions based on the students' needs;
- Help students strive for realistic goals and plan for successful experiences;

- Be a sounding board, listening and helping if circumstances become difficult at times; and
- Cherish the students as individuals, recognizing their gifts and accepting them for who they are.

Clearly parents are natural advocates for their children, and they often fill this vital role. Other family members can also be strong advocates, and other professionals in the community can fulfill some or all of an advocate's tasks or support those who are playing an advocacy role.

## WHAT MAKES AN ADVOCATE SUCCESSFUL?

Advocates should have hope that creative solutions to each new challenge can be found. They also need a good understanding of what alternatives can be tried. This means an advocate primarily needs adequate information.

Advocates will ideally approach each situation with ideas that are realistic, appropriate, and feasible. Because the experiences of people with special needs are usually quite complex, advocates are most successful when they work within

the community and with other service providers to coordinate a network of support.

These factors are also important considerations for everyone working to support individuals with special needs.

1. Often, people are born with specific special needs, even if the effects are not visible for many years. Assigning blame is never helpful.
2. While challenges may affect individuals throughout their lifetimes, the signs may change over time, and responses usually need to evolve as students grow and develop.
3. The range and severity of special education diagnoses and characteristics are very broad; **within a wide spectrum, every person is unique, and what works well for one person may not work well for someone else** – even if they fit within the same special education “category.”
4. Goals and decisions for an individual with special needs should be based on a realistic assessment of his or her own strengths, challenges, hopes, and goals.

5. Some special needs affect both perception and cognition, perhaps making a person unaware of their limitations with memory, attention, behaviour, or emotional control. Assumptions about an individual's motivations or understandings are usually not helpful, and negative judgements are never appropriate.

#### **HELP ADVOCATES TOO.**

Being an advocate can be tiring and sometimes frustrating. Advocates must show endless patience, not only with individuals who have special needs but also in arranging for their necessary care and interventions. Advocates also benefit from as much support as possible. It is important for others to lend them a hand – or maybe just give them opportunities to talk to someone.

**Finally, what is the most important thing to remember? With appropriate assessments, IEPs, and a team of supportive professionals and advocates, students with special needs can overcome unique issues that may affect their learning and can achieve to their full potential.**

## APPENDIX ONE:

# Some Terms to Know

FNESC and the FNSEA are working with First Nations school staff to assist students who have the following types of exceptionalities, among others.

### BEHAVIOUR: SEVERE

- Students may be diagnosed with a severe acting out behaviour exceptionality if they are consistently and extremely disruptive in most environments (school/home/community). These students may be involved in delinquent behaviours (stealing, aggression, fire setting etc.) and may present a threat to others' safety (they may be physically or sexually assaultive).
- Some students may instead display severe internalizing behaviours, meaning they persistently appear vulnerable and fragile. Such students are often profoundly withdrawn and isolated. They also may have attempted suicide or be at risk of suicide.

A physician, psychologist, or psychiatrist completes a formal diagnosis of this exceptionality. Individuals identified with this type of special need require coordinated school/community interventions designed to manage, protect, and keep the student in school.

### MENTAL ILLNESS: SERIOUS

Students with a serious mental illness may experience significant distress in school, home, or community environments. They may experience confused thinking or a reduced ability to concentrate, and are often profoundly withdrawn. These students often seem very vulnerable or fragile and can be seriously 'at risk' in the classroom and other environments without extensive support.

A qualified mental health clinician usually diagnoses students who have this type of exceptionality.

## AUTISM SPECTRUM EXCEPTIONALITY

Students with a more moderate diagnosis of autism spectrum exceptionality:

- Experience difficulty with reciprocal social interactions (appear unaware of others' feelings, tend not to seek social interactions)
- Experience delays in both receptive language and/or expressive communication (have difficulty engaging in socially appropriate conversation)
- Often get upset over small changes in routine
- Frequently exhibit restricted, repetitive patterns of interest and/or behaviour
- May have unusual or unusually limited reactions to sensory stimuli

Students with more serious conditions within the autism spectrum:

- Experience considerable difficulty in developing functional communication (they may need to use simple gestural sign language and/or a communication board)
- Often exhibit repetitive behaviours (finger flapping, rocking, or slapping themselves)
- Often have serious difficulty establishing social relationships (they are difficult to comfort or appear socially isolated)

The impacts for these students can range from mild to severe and may improve or change throughout an individual's lifetime.

## HEARING IMPAIRMENT

- Students who are diagnosed as having a moderate hearing impairment may require the use of hearing aids or a personal FM system and often experience considerable difficulty following classroom discussion when background noise is present. Their hearing loss can often affect these students' vocabulary development, understanding of abstract ideas, and/or understanding of idiomatic language, and may lead to social isolation without interventions.
- Students who are deaf or profoundly hearing impaired may require both hearing aids and specialized auditory and speech training to develop functional communication or may rely on sign language to communicate.

## SPEECH LANGUAGE EXCEPTIONALITY

Students diagnosed with speech/language exceptionalities have persistent difficulty understanding and using spoken language.

- Students with speech production issues may have a noticeable stutter or hesitation in speech, or persistent problems articulating sounds in words, sometimes leaving out sounds or substituting an incorrect sound.
- Students with expressive language issues may have difficulty finding correct words to express meaning, often have difficulty expressing complex ideas, or may use limited vocabulary/incorrect grammar to express ideas.
- Students with receptive language exceptionalities have difficulty carrying out multi-step directions or learning new vocabulary and remembering sequences of numbers.

## FETAL ALCOHOL SPECTRUM EXCEPTIONALITY

Students with a Fetal Alcohol Spectrum exceptionality often have difficulty with both learning and social interactions.

- Learning difficulties may include understanding “abstract concepts,” generalizing, sequential thinking, and/or remembering concepts and facts from one day to the next.
- Behavioural difficulties may include predicting and/or understanding consequences of behaviour, perceiving ‘social cues’ (often alienating peers), and/or easily becoming over-stimulated and/or overwhelmed, often leading to outbursts.

Multidisciplinary teams are needed to appropriately diagnose and address these serious issues.

## INTELLECTUAL EXCEPTIONALITY

- Students with moderate intellectual difficulties require planned instruction to learn self-care skills, personal safety, appropriate social skills, effective communication, and functional academic skills.
- Students with severe intellectual difficulties require ongoing assistance for personal care/safety, communicating their needs and wants, and participating in daily living activities. Building modifications are often required for their personal care needs (e.g. toileting).

An educational psychologist usually completes formal diagnosis of this type of exceptionality.

## PHYSICAL EXCEPTIONALITY / CHRONIC HEALTH

- Students with a moderate physical exceptionality require periodic assistance with mobility or self-care skills (e.g. toileting), and/or academic tasks. They may have visual, motor, or hearing impairments that impact their ability to play and learn, and may need special devices for communication.
- Students with chronic medical conditions (e.g. cancer, chronic fatigue syndrome etc.) often miss school and have reduced endurance.
- Students who are severely physically dependent require ongoing support for all activities of daily living (i.e. toileting, eating, dressing, etc.) and often use special devices for communication.

Building modifications are often required for these students to fully participate in their learning program.

## VISION IMPAIRMENT

- Students with a moderate visual impairment may require close seating to see posted information, adapted materials (such as enlarged print and/or enhanced contrast), and specialized equipment. They also may need assistance to find their way in new environments.
- Students who are blind and/or severely visually impaired require specialized materials, orientation and training to independently find their way in familiar environments, and may require assistance with personal care.

For educational purposes, a visual impairment interferes with a student's optimal learning and achievement and can result in a substantial educational disadvantage, unless adaptations are made in the methods of presenting learning opportunities, the nature of the materials used, and/or the learning environment.

## MULTIPLE EXCEPTIONALITIES

Students with multiple exceptionalities have a cluster of several difficulties that together result in a significant impairment of school functioning. For example, a student with a mild to moderate learning disability, combined with ADHD and moderate behaviour issues, could have serious difficulties requiring significant levels of support.

OTHER VOLUMES AVAILABLE IN THE  
*TALKING ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION* SERIES:

VOLUME 1: AN OVERVIEW

VOLUME 2: AN INTRODUCTION FOR PARENTS / FAMILIES

VOLUME 3: INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLANS

VOLUME 4: A PARENT'S GUIDE TO INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLANS

VOLUME 5: SPEECH AND LANGUAGE ISSUES

VOLUME 6: ATTENTION DEFICIT / ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVE  
DISORDER

VOLUME 7: FETAL ALCOHOL SPECTRUM DISORDERS

VOLUME 8: AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

VOLUME 9: GIFTED EDUCATION

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