

TALKING ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION SERIES

VOLUME 2

AN INTRODUCTION FOR PARENTS / FAMILIES

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.

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.

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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INTRODUCTION

As a parent, no one is more important in the life of your child. You are your child's first, primary, and most enduring teacher.

You help your child in countless ways:

- You help your child develop self-confidence.
- You are a role model for how you want your child to behave and interact with other people.
- You can show your child that you think education is important.
- You teach your child about values, and how to be a strong member of your family and community.

Parents of children with special needs also are key to helping their children to understand, accept, and overcome any challenges they may face.

- You know your child better than anyone.
- You can provide information no one else can.
- You can answer questions about your child's behaviours, likes, dislikes, strengths, and needs.

That information is vital in designing an education program that is right for your child.

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. FNEC 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.

But you are not alone. You, your child's teachers, other school staff, health and education professionals, can all work together as a team to help your child succeed. Together, you can ensure that your child has every opportunity to grow.

And remember ... children with special needs do achieve success. They do reach their goals - if those goals are right for them and if they receive the appropriate supports.

We hope that this handbook helps to answer some questions that parents might have about special needs. Many parents wonder and worry about the same things. This pamphlet tries to share information about some common concerns.

Of course, much more detailed information is available. Other handbooks in this series might also be of interest to you. If that is not enough information, ask your school's staff and health professionals in your community for more help. They can assist you in finding the resources you need. Do not be afraid to ask.

What Does “Special Needs” Mean?

“Special needs” refers to a variety of issues, conditions, and circumstances that affect the way a child learns.

Some students with special needs are sometimes called ‘gifted’, meaning that they might learn more quickly or perhaps more easily than some other children. These students often require special programs and services to keep them motivated and stimulated.

Other students with special needs may have one or more mental, emotional, or physical challenges or difficulties. These students also require special programs so that they can succeed in school.

Whatever their specific characteristics ...

- All students are unique.
- All students are capable of learning.
- All students, regardless of their special talents and challenges, have a right to an education program that is designed for them.

What is Special Education?

Special Education is a structure or approach to education that provides specific programs and services to children who have what are often called exceptionalities. Special Education is focused on helping all children learn – even if they need to have learning opportunities delivered in different ways and in different settings.

In many cases, students who have special needs are educated in the classroom along with all other students. They might use special equipment, do things at a different pace, and have individuals help them with various tasks, such as taking notes or meeting behavioural expectations.

In some circumstances, students with special needs or exceptionalities might also spend some of their time in different places that are designed to offer an alternative environment, and/or they might spend some time out of the classroom getting help from specialists who can provide counselling, help with their speech or movement, or other kinds of assistance.

There is no common approach to Special Education. It must always be tailored to each individual student.

Special Education is really about the importance of offering all children every opportunity for success, no matter what experiences, skills, and needs they might have.

What Should I Do If I Suspect That My Child Has Special Needs?

If you think your child is learning or behaving differently than other students his or her age, you can ask for help.

- You can talk to your school's principal or teacher; they see your child frequently, observe them with other children, and their job is to help you and your child.
- If one is available, you might want to talk to a First Nations Liaison Worker or Home School Coordinator, or an Education Assistant or Learning Assistance Teacher who you know well. People in those positions can help you understand and take any necessary next steps.
- You can also talk to your family doctor.

You should never be embarrassed to discuss your child's needs and any difficulties or differences that might worry you. All children are unique and all children have varying strengths and challenges over time. Your child's teacher should be a valuable source of help. Together, you can think about why your child might be experiencing difficulties or doing things in unexpected ways.

Often, diet, sleep habits, or routines might be an explanation for what is happening with your child, and relatively simple changes might resolve temporary issues.

If that is not the case, you can expect your child's school to help you take further steps to investigate your child's needs.

What if My Child's Teacher Suspects That My Child Has Special Needs?

If your child's teacher or another school staff person suspects that your child has special needs, he or she will speak to you about their concerns. At first, some parents might feel upset or angry if this happens. This is a very natural response of many people.

If you think it would help, the school staff might be able to put you in contact with another parent whose child has special needs, as long as it can be done in a way that respects everyone's confidentiality. You can also ask the school staff for more information if you would find that useful.

What Can I Expect Next?

Once you and your school's staff have discussed the possibility that your child might have a special need, you may be asked to give your permission for an assessment by some kind of specialist.

An assessment might be completed by a physician, an educational psychologist, a speech and language therapist, an occupational or physical therapist, an audiologist, or some other individual, who has been trained to understand students' development and health. (See Appendix: Who Can Help?)

An assessment is a formal process that gathers various types of information that can be used to make the best possible educational decisions for a student. Many children are assessed to find out if they would benefit from a specific type of program, service, or medical assistance.

- Sometimes, an assessment might show that a student does not have a special need, but it might identify extra supports that might help the student achieve more success in learning.

- In other cases, an assessment might identify that a child has a specific type of special need that requires more intensive interventions.

Remember ... if it is recommended that your child should meet with a specialist, it is important to know who will make follow-up arrangements. You might be expected to do that. If you are not sure how, you can always ask for help.

You have a right to be fully informed about the assessment process for your child.

- Do not be afraid to ask questions.
- If one person cannot provide all of the information you need, ask to speak to someone else.

Why Should My Child Be Assessed?

For some parents, the need for an assessment can be frightening or embarrassing. Those are common feelings. If you are made to feel bad about the assessment process, ask to speak to someone else.

Some parents worry an assessment means that they have done something wrong or that they are bad parents. **THAT IS NOT TRUE.** Special needs can arise due to a variety factors. And blame is totally unimportant.

Remember ...

- An assessment is only meant to help determine your child's particular strengths and challenges.
- An assessment may show that your child does not have a special need but might benefit from a different kind of learning approach.
- Whatever the results, an assessment can be a very important tool in designing the best education program for your child.

You must be asked for your permission before an assessment takes place.

What Happens After an Assessment?

Following an assessment, you must be informed of the results. It is your right to have every opportunity to fully understand what the assessment means – and remember that assessment results can show many things.

- You should have an opportunity to meet with someone who can clearly explain the results.
- If you want, you can bring someone with you when you are meeting with a specialist or school staff member. Bring anyone who you are comfortable with, such as a relative, a friend, or a home school coordinator.
- Ask as many questions as you want.
- If one person cannot help you, ask to speak with someone else.

Your child may not have a special need. If that is the case, you may want to find out why your child is experiencing any difficulties. Special programs or services may still be useful, or the specialist who assessed your child may be able to recommend daily living changes (like diet, sleep or routine) that might help.

If your child does have a special need, you can work with the specialist, teacher, and other support people to develop a response and plan that is right for your child.

- It is important to remember that the decisions about how to help your child may not be the same as those for another child with a special need.
- What is best for your child is the only important consideration.

What is an IEP?

An IEP is an Individual Education Plan - a document that describes a specialized education program that will help a student succeed.

- You have a right to know if your child is going to be placed on an IEP.
- You also have the right to be involved in the design of your child's IEP.
- You have information that will help to make the IEP right for your child. You can answer important questions about your child's health, needs, interests, friends, and home life.

And remember ... being on an IEP might affect your child's graduation. Ask questions about what the IEP means for your child's future.

Because they are so important, more information about IEPs is available in another pamphlet in this series: [Talking About Special Education: A Parent's Guide to Individual Education Plans.](#)

Should Parents Be Blamed for Children's Special Needs?

NO! A child's physical, intellectual, and emotional needs can be the result of numerous factors.

- Some special needs are thought to result from differences a child has at birth. No one can control those factors.
- Other special needs may be linked to environment factors, which means that prevention programs can be useful.

But whatever the reason, blame is unimportant. Meeting the needs of all children is all that matters. Parents, family members, teachers, other school staff, and education specialists should focus on what will help a child, not what caused his or her challenges.

Does Having a Special Need Mean My Child Cannot Finish School?

NO! Some students with special needs face specific difficulties. They also have many different talents and gifts.

Many students with special needs are very capable academically. Others have strengths in art, music, sports, or some other area that is of interest to them.

Students with special needs may require particular supports to allow them to find and make the most of their talents. They may struggle with some parts of school. That is actually true for all students - including those who do not have special needs.

Students with special needs have a right to be accommodated by schools and the education system, so they can complete school. With the right help, this can happen.

Can My Child Achieve Success?

Absolutely YES! All students with special needs can achieve success. What that success will look like depends on the unique strengths, challenges and interests of your child. But it is true for all students.

You, your child, teachers, and specialists can all work together to help think about what success can mean for your child.

Setting up the most appropriate program means helping children to set and achieve goals that are right for them.

Final Reminders

- You are your child's first and most important teacher.
- You know your child better than anyone else.
- You and your child's teacher, other school staff, and health and education professionals can work as a team to help your child.
- Students with special needs achieve success when they are provided the right supports and are encouraged to reach goals that are designed especially for them. You have the right to ask any questions you have about your child's education.
- You have a right to be informed if your child is going to be assessed, about the results, and before they are placed on an IEP.
- Many children are assessed for a variety of reasons. The assessment process can provide important information that can help to determine what education program is best for your child.
- All information about your child, including assessments and results, **MUST** be kept confidential. No information can be shared without your full consent.
- Special education is not about blame. All that matters is meeting the needs of your child.
- All children are unique. All children have a right to the best education possible. You can help make sure your child's needs are met by asking questions and being involved in the planning of your child's services, programs, and goals.

APPENDIX:

Who Can Help?

There are many professionals and other resource people who can assist you and your child. For each school and community, some of the following people will be available to help. The people who come together for each student will depend on his or her specific strengths and challenges. But no matter who is involved, you should feel comfortable asking everyone for any information you need.

- **Preschool teachers** often identify a child who is experiencing challenges. They can help to implement interventions at an early age, when they are often very effective.
- **Doctors** can identify physical problems that interfere with learning and recommend medical tests and possible strategies to help.
- **School nurses** can help with testing for sight and hearing and can help you manage information sharing and follow-up services.
- **Teachers**, who see children daily, are in a good position to identify challenges and work with specialists to develop ways to help students with special needs. Effective teachers focus on each child's strengths and are open to changes to support all students' success.
- **School psychologists** assess a child's development to help identify strengths and any sources of difficulty. They can test students for mental and emotional challenges that might be interfering with their learning.

- **Speech Language Therapists** help students with their listening, speech, and communication skills (see [Talking About Special Education Volume 5](#) for more details about speech and language therapy).
- **Audiologists** test how students hear different sounds, which can have important impacts on their learning. If a child does have a hearing difficulty, teachers for students with hearing challenges can help the student adapt to the school environment.
- **Optometrists** can test and strengthen students' seeing and hand-eye coordination.
- **Psychologists, psychiatrists** and **social workers** can help parents and children deal with emotions. They can help families understand how to support children with special needs, which can be difficult for anyone.
- **Physical education specialists** can help students improve their coordination and overall physical development through appropriate activities.
- **Physical therapists** diagnose and help address physical problems that restrict a student's movement, use exercise and other techniques to ease pain and boost muscle strength, and develop fitness and wellness programs.
- **Occupational therapists** help students with daily living skills and self-care tasks, and make recommendations about technologies that might help.
- **Home School Coordinators** and **Family Resource Workers** can help you review relevant information, consult with professionals, and arrange appointments.
- **Community group leaders** (such as drum and dance group instructors, coaches, etc.) can help to improve your child's self-esteem and can help 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 share their understandings and experiences, but any arrangements for parents to meet should maintain the confidentiality of you and the other parents.

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

FOR MORE INFORMATION:



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