

Hello my name is Katherine Rowlyk and I am going to talk about Special Education at the pre-school and elementary school level. We have been blessed with a daughter with special needs. She is almost 5 now, and we have learned so much about this process and I'm sure we will learn much more as the years go by.

The words Special education probably bring to mind children with intellectual disabilities, and certainly these kids would be eligible for services, but special education services really encompass much more. Children who are slow to talk or have a lisp, children who are very clumsy in their movements, children with autistic symptoms, children who interact aggressively or are withdrawn, kids with vision or hearing impairment, these are all examples of kids that could benefit from special education services. In fact, many very bright children can have social/emotional issues, and may really benefit from an intervention plan. Overcoming our own prejudices, as parents, is so important because our kids will benefit most when services are initiated at younger ages.

If your child is under the age of 3, you can get started with a program called First Steps (314-453-9203). In this program, your child is evaluated, and then therapists or other specialists come to your home and provide services for your child. Concerns in the areas of speech, gross and fine motor, cognition, and social/emotional development can all be addressed. One of the main goals in First Steps is to educate the parents on how to help their child. They will also help with the transition to the public school system which happens on their 3rd birthday.

The day they turn 3, a child needing special services is eligible to start pre-school, even if it's in the middle of the school year. They can be placed at any school offering appropriate services, including any of the magnet schools. They will then begin to receive their services at school, rather than through First Steps. The program is called Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE.) If your child is 3 or almost 3, and you have concerns about any areas of their development, you can contact the St. Louis Public School's ECSE division for an evaluation. A good contact is Kathy Hesse at 314-331-6153. An evaluation will be provided and afterwards a team will decide which services the child needs. Then an IEP (or Individualized Education Program) will be written. The IEP is a legal document that requires the school to provide the services needed. It is a good idea to get connected with an advocate who knows their way around the IEP process. They can help make sure your child is getting all of the services to which he or she is entitled. Two places to find advocates are Developmental Disability Resources (DD Resources) 314-421-0090 and the Department of Mental Health (DMH) 314-244-8800. These agencies will connect your child with a case manager who will advocate for them in school, as well as in the community. If your child has a diagnosis of autism, working with an organization like Judevine (314-637-4038) may be a good choice. There are so many services available, but you do have to be proactive in finding them!

Many children enter special education system at age 3, but certainly if issues arise later on, a child may be evaluated and if indicated an IEP can be written. You can request evaluations at any time through your teacher or school social worker.

The types of services written into the IEP can be quite extensive or very simple. My daughter attends a self-contained school where she receives nursing services and different therapies. A less restrictive placement might be a self-contained classroom in a neighborhood school with participation in regular gym, music, and art. Often a child may be placed in a regular classroom and just get pulled out for therapy or counseling. Or a child may have no hours out of the classroom, but may have special accommodations (seating up front away from distractions, for example, or eating lunch in the classroom instead of the multipurpose room). The placement and services will be different for each

and every child.

The IEP is a fluid document that is typically revised every year. If it is determined that the child no longer needs special services the IEP may be terminated. If you choose to leave the public school district (for instance, to go to a charter school) you can take your IEP with you, but you should not be surprised if they decide to make some changes once you get there. My opinion is that you will probably get the best special education services through the public school district. The reason for this is that the more kids a district has, the more money it receives for special education. Like the public schools, the charter schools are also required by law to support your child's special education requirements, but you may get fewer services, or lower quality services. Private schools are not required by law to provide services, but they may do so if they choose.

I know this is a lot of information but hopefully enough to get you started. And for those with typically developing children, just tuck this information away in the back of your brain in case issues arise down the road. I welcome you to get in touch with me anytime at krowlyk@yahoo.com or 314-412-2438.