

No Parent Left Behind

Navigating the Special
Education Universe

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Introduction – How To Know If This Book Is For You

*“Parents have become so convinced that educators know what is best for children that they forget that **they** are the experts.” Marion Wright Edelman*



- This book is a **roadmap for parents of children with learning needs** who are concerned that their children may need more help in order to achieve success in school.
- It is a **tool kit** to help you help your children.
- My goal is to **educate** you in how the system works, and to **empower** you so that you can be an effective advocate for your children.

According to the National Center for Education statistics, about 13 percent of the students in public school—**about 6.5 million children**—received special education services during the 2009-2010 school year (Monitor on Psychology, American Psychological Association, September, 2012). This, of course, does not include children who attend private schools, or those whose parents have them tutored outside of school. It does not include children who have not yet been identified as having special needs, or those who have needs but do not yet receive special education services. The actual number of children in need is likely to be higher, possibly much higher. And all of these children have parents who care about them.

All over the country, there are children who are struggling with some aspect of school—struggling and sometimes failing. There are children who don't work up to their potential, whose gifts may be stifled or even ignored. Children who don't master the curriculum, and who can't perform at grade level.

Most parents know when their children are developing well and meeting with success. They have good instincts, and they've been watching their children since they were babies. They also know when their children are struggling, "going under" for the third time, or flat-out failing.

If you take only one piece of information from this book, I hope it will be the following: TRUST YOURSELF. **You know your child best**, better than any school employee or outside professional, regardless of their degrees and certifications. **If you think there's a problem with your child or the education they are being provided, you are most likely correct.**

In the past thirty-plus years, I have almost never seen a case in which the parent was wrong about a child's **need** for some kind of intervention. Parents might not know the fancy diagnostic labels, but they know when a child's development or performance is not at an age-appropriate level. Parents often tell me they suspect there is a problem, even if they don't know exactly what it is or what to do about it.

Parents whose children are struggling need to know three basic things:

- what specific **areas of need** their child has
- what specific **services** their child needs to be successful
- **what to do** to get those services provided

This book will help you understand both the educational system and the outside services that can be used to help your children learn. It will teach you what you need to know to help your child.

To use an analogy, congress sets the rules of the education game. Schools are where the game gets played out. My goal in writing this is to **level the playing field**. Once you know how the game is played, and who you need on your team, you have a much better chance of winning. In this case, "winning" means **helping your child to be successful** in school, and in life. For most parents, this is the primary goal—the end result that motivates them.

Which parents are most likely to benefit from this book? They are the parents of children with some type of special learning need or learning disability, as defined by state and federal laws¹. These laws apply to children of average and above average ability as well as to children of below average ability.

The laws were designed to identify children who have specific disadvantages that interfere with learning.

What are these disadvantages? Essentially, they are differences in the wiring of the brain—neurological differences that affect the way a person's brain works. All behavior (including learning) is affected by how the brain works. Everything we think and do is the result of brain activity. It sounds so simple, but the connection between brain and behavior is absolute. Any child's difficulty with learning is due to his or her specific neurological development and performance. Even if you are told that the problem is "only anxiety", or nervousness, or "not being ready", or shyness—**it all comes from the brain.**

¹ The link to the federal law is included in the appendix, along with links to department of education sites for individual states

This means a child who is having difficulty can be diagnosed with any of a very long list of problems. The decision tree for determining “need” is discussed in the chapter on the Individualized Education Program and provided in the Appendix. It includes:

- specific learning disabilities (dyslexia, language-based learning disability, nonverbal learning disability, visual-spatial difficulties, problems with written language, math, sensory integration, etc.)
- attention deficit disorder
- lower cognitive ability (low intelligence)
- physical limitations
- medical problems (chronic conditions such as Crohn’s disease, seizure disorders, etc)
- behavior problems
- mood disorders
- autism and related, milder developmental disorders
- a wide range of psychological issues.

People often wonder where these brain differences come from. There are many causes, and some will be discussed in the chapter on early development. The bottom line is, we all learn in slightly different ways. Based on my experience and observations, schools are designed to teach to the **average**—the average learner, of average intelligence, with an average temperament and language skill and social style. If you’ve spent any time in a school, you may have noticed this yourself—especially if your child falls **outside** the average.

Educators will mention “differentiation” or the importance of providing an individualized approach, but in my observations, I generally find that instruction is geared to the average in regular education classrooms.

Children who learn differently—for whatever reason—may need a more adapted or specialized mode of instruction. Everyone knows people who “learn best by doing”, or who need you to “draw them a picture” or “give them a map” so they’ll understand, or even a lucky few who can remember anything they hear. We all have a preferred learning style. Fortunately, most of us can cope when information is not presented in the “best” way for us—it’s how we survived in school, where our teachers differed from year to year.

Children with learning difficulties, however, require a **different type of instruction** from what is used in a typical classroom. They learn in ways that don’t respond well to many teachers’ typical teaching style. In order for them to fully understand and be able to use essential skills such as reading and arithmetic, **they need be taught a certain, specific way.**

For example, the language a teacher uses may need to be adapted or simplified.

Some children will need a sensible “visual” to help them make sense of a lecture.

Some children won’t simply “pick up” social skills, or skills for organization and note-taking, or skills for written language, when they are merely presented as part of a regular school day.

Special education laws were designed to help these children. The idea was that children at risk for failure in the learning environment would be identified and provided with the types of instruction or accommodations that would **allow them to learn and be successful**. This has turned out to be easier in theory than in practice.

In fact, it’s often not a problem to get your child to **qualify** for services. Schools are often in agreement with parents that **an obstacle to learning** exists. It’s what happens afterward that determines whether your child will overcome or compensate for these learning difficulties—or whether they will struggle even more, fall farther behind, and ultimately fail.

So, is this book for you?

It is, if you have a child covered by federal law and:

- you aren’t sure they are getting the help they need;
- you know they are not getting enough help, and don’t know what to do about it;
- you don’t even know the right questions to ask to understand your child’s needs;
- you don’t know if you can believe what the school tells you about your child’s skills and performance;
- you feel overwhelmed at school meetings, with ten school personnel sitting around the table and only one of you;
- you don’t know whether your child is making progress;
- you don’t know what to expect from a Team Meeting, or how to interpret an Individualized Education Program or 504 Accommodation Plan;
- you don’t understand what the testing results mean;
- you don’t know what steps to take to begin getting services for your child;
- you don’t know whether an outside evaluation is needed, and what it might tell you that a school evaluation will not;
- you aren’t sure what an educational advocate could do for you, or whether you need to work with one
- you don’t know when in this process you should consult an attorney, and what an attorney can do for you.

Why should you listen to me? For parents who truly need a book with this kind of information, there is still the question of who I am. What qualifies me to offer

you advice, checklists, and opinions about the way education—and especially special education—works today?

I have been working as a psychologist for more than 30 years. I have worked in hospitals and mental health clinics, as well as in schools. I have had training in neuropsychology and am licensed as both a clinical psychologist and a school psychologist. I specialize in working with children and adolescents, and have seen more than 1600 clients for individual evaluations. I have spent years of my life (in terms of hours) in hundreds of school meetings and classroom observations, and in dozens of school systems. I have advocated for children's needs for over 30 years—in places ranging from the post-testing meeting with parents to a Special Education hearing. In some cases, my results have shown parents that their children were receiving the appropriate help, and were making good progress. In other cases, I have recommended additional services or programs to meet a child's needs. In all cases, to the best of my ability, I have provided information and support to parents, so they could be **effective advocates** for their children.

I see what I do as a blend of science and art. I use my knowledge base and my testing skills, but there are several additional, equally important aspects of what I do—the detective part of pulling the scores and behaviors and clues together, the art of integrating what I know and writing it well, and a willingness to advocate in the most truthful, effective way for necessary services. I have to accept the strengths and weaknesses of the education system as it currently exists, but I **don't** have to accept what is offered if it isn't right for the child. My moral center demands this level of commitment, and I feel passionately about making a difference in the lives of many children. This is our future—well educated, emotionally healthy children who will be fully functioning members of society.

Children are the **most important** members of the education system. Their success validates the work of everyone in the system. They are the reason I do the things I do, and my goal is simple. As it says on my website, my mission is “making school work for your child.”

Table of Contents

Introduction – How To Know If This Book Is For You.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	vii
Chapter 1 - So, Who Are These Children?	1
Chapter 2 - Where It Starts	18
Chapter 3 - The Way Things Work in the Game of (Education) Life	29
Chapter 4 - Why An Independent Evaluation?	44
Chapter 5 - The Independent Evaluation	53
List of Tests.....	58
Background Information	58
Behavior during Testing	59
Test Results	61
Academic Tests.....	62
Emotional Functioning.....	67
Summary.....	68
Chapter 6 – After the Evaluation: Next Steps, Potential Problems, and Knowing your rights	77
Chapter 7 - Team Meetings and the Individualized Education Program	94
Chapter 8 – The Individualized Education Program—What it should and must include	105
Chapter 9 – Placement and Accommodations – Two Areas of Possible Concern in an IEP or 504 Plan.....	131
Chapter 10 – How to Tell if Your Child is Making “Effective Progress”	150
Chapter 11 – Why is a School Observation Important?	164
Chapter 12 - What if things don’t go well? What are your options?	179
Chapter 13 - Keeping Faith- monitoring, follow up, and other professionals in the mix	199
Appendix 1 - Decision Tree For Determining Eligibility For Special Education Services	221
Appendix 2 - Individualized Education Program- blank form.....	223
Appendix 3 - Book List.....	233
Appendix 4 - Federal Law	235
Appendix 5 - State Department of Education Websites	236
Appendix 6 - Special Education Organizations	238

ROADMAP

The Game of (Education) Life

