



EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIAL EDUCATION GUIDE



ABOUT ASAH

ASAH is a New Jersey association of special education partner schools serving roughly 10,000 students with disabilities. Our member schools are committed to great outcomes for every child.

Our members provide highly specialized services to infants, children, teens, and young adults with disabilities including autism, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, Down syndrome, learning disabilities, communication disorders, physical disabilities, mental health and behavioral disabilities and more. Founded in 1974 by thirteen specialized schools, ASAH now serves more than 130 school locations. We developed the first code of ethics and standards for New Jersey's private special education programs, and we continue to advocate for legislative and regulatory changes to improve the quality of life for students with disabilities and their families.



Be sure to visit our website for more resources and tools, including advocacy videos and our special education Placement Toolkit, with links to documents and other resources to help you advocate for your child

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ASAH is the state affiliate of the
National Association of Private Special Education Centers.



A LIFETIME OF DIFFERENCE

Research continues to show that effective, appropriate special education and related services provided at an early age by skilled professionals can make a lifetime of difference.





IT STARTS WITH BEING VALUED

Your child needs to feel valued and understood at school. This helps them build confidence and a positive attitude toward learning. When your child feels seen and heard, they are more likely to engage in class, try their best, and enjoy school.

Well-trained teachers make it happen. They create a safe space for your child to ask questions, make mistakes, and learn without fear of judgment. This sense of belonging helps your child grow academically, emotionally, and socially.



WHY IT MATTERS

No one knows what the future holds, but we do know that quality early education is key to helping children with disabilities develop the skills they need to succeed. Without it, they may face more challenges as they get older.

During early childhood, your child's brain is growing quickly, and with appropriate help, they have the chance to make great progress. Effective programs can teach your child important skills like how to interact with others, follow directions, and express themselves. These programs help your child build the skills they need to succeed in school and life.

The earlier
your child
gets the right
support, the
better chance
they have to
maximize their
potential



Your Child
Needs
To Feel
Valued And
Understood
At School



RELATED SERVICES

The quality of therapy matters. Evidence-based intervention means that services and techniques are backed by research showing they can help your child improve key skills. The earlier these therapies start, the more effective they are, leading to better outcomes in school, social skills, and overall independence for your child.

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Services and techniques are backed by research

READY TO LEARN

Learning readiness means being able to listen, follow directions, pay attention, and work with others. These skills are the building blocks for later learning. When your child learns these skills early on, they can develop the habits they need to be lifelong learners.

SELF-REGULATION AND EXECUTIVE FUNCTION SKILLS

Self-regulation skills are the ability to manage emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations. For young children, this means being able to calm down when upset, wait for their turn, or focus on a task. These skills help your child develop patience, stay organized, make good choices, and get along with others.

Children need to develop habits for lifelong learning



Speech Therapy can help your child with communication, allowing them to express their needs and connect with others.

Occupational Therapy (OT) focuses on skills needed for daily activities, such as dressing, eating, or staying organized at school.

Physical Therapy (PT) can help your child develop strength, coordination, and mobility.



SMALL CLASSES, EXPERIENCED TEACHERS

Teachers, therapists, and other staff should be well-trained and experienced in working with students who have disabilities. Staff members who know how to provide the appropriate support can create effective learning plans and adapt lessons to help your child succeed. They understand how to manage your child's behaviors and help them with social or emotional challenges.

THE IMPORTANCE OF READING

Reading is an important skill. When your child has trouble learning to read, it can lead to frustration and behavior problems. They might start feeling upset, embarrassed, or stressed.

These feelings can cause your child to act out in class, avoid school, or have difficulty paying attention. It can also negatively impact their self-confidence. Your child may need direct instruction in order to learn how to read and may need approaches that require teachers with special training.



FRIENDSHIPS

Early childhood friendships can help your child develop social skills, learn how to share, and understand emotions. Friendships also teach important lessons like teamwork, problem-solving, and how to be kind to others. Early friendships build a foundation for healthy relationships as your child grows up, helping them interact with peers, teachers, and family in positive ways.

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SETTING YOUR CHILD UP FOR SUCCESS

When a child with disabilities does not receive quality specialized education and therapies at a young age, they may struggle to keep up with their peers in school and other areas of life. They can fall behind in important skills like reading, communication, and social interaction. They may miss important windows of opportunity, leading to frustration, low self-esteem, and behavior problems.





SELECTING A PLACEMENT

Most children with a disability have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). This document describes your child's goals and objectives, and details the individualized services, supports, and accommodations your child needs. These services might include specialized instruction, supports and modifications, and related services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, and physical therapy. State and Federal law requires that the IEP must be "appropriate" to your child's needs and must provide "meaningful educational benefit."

As part of the IEP process, you and your school district will decide not only what services your child needs, but where those services will be delivered. This is called "placement." Placement should be determined only after the IEP is completed and the needs of your child have been explained. Services must be provided to you at no cost and offered in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).

FEDERAL LAW

By law, school districts must offer a full range of placement options, including a specialized school. The law requires your Child Study Team (CST) to consider these options in order of how restrictive they are. For example, the closer the program is to your home, and the more it is similar to a general education classroom, the less restrictive it is considered. Just because a program is less restrictive than another does not make it appropriate. The decision must be made on an individual basis. A school district cannot decide to send all students with a particular disability to a certain classroom, program, or school.

PLACEMENT OPTIONS

General Education Classroom

With or without supports and accommodations, a general education classroom can offer opportunities for integration with typically developing children (those who do not have disabilities). Often, however, they cannot provide intensive specialized services.

Local Public Programs Designed Specifically for Students with Disabilities

Many local school districts provide special education services. These may happen in a general education classroom or a self-contained classroom, where your child may learn for all or part of the school day.

Schools Designed Specifically for Students with Disabilities

New Jersey is home to more than 150 high quality, state-approved special education schools that partner with your local school district to serve students whose needs cannot be met in the local district. These schools, referred to as private schools or out-of-district schools, offer programs that are more intensive and comprehensive than non-specialized programs. While many of these schools offer opportunities for learning alongside typically developing children, most are 'self-contained,' meaning that the entire classroom — or the entire school building — serves only children with disabilities.

WHY CONSIDER A SPECIALIZED SCHOOL?

These schools can often offer a high degree of expertise and specialization, intensive services, and year-round instruction and support. Many also offer more related services, family support, and parent education than less specialized programs. Most have been providing services to children with disabilities for decades and have a track record of success.

WHAT ABOUT TUITION?

Children are placed in specialized out-of-district schools by your school district. Tuition and transportation are paid by the school district, never the parents.



