

The programs and services your child is entitled to at school.

Using IEPs and/or Section 504 to get your child's school accommodations/services put in place.

By Ginny Foos

Did you know that your dwarf child is entitled to certain programs and or adaptive equipment through your public schools? Adaptive Physical Education, or APE is one of the most common services our kids are given. It is a supplement to the regular PE class, not a replacement. In other words, your child still participates in his or her class's PE program but is pulled out at another time for APE. Ideally, the teacher is a credentialed APE instructor, meaning he or she has had specific training in adapting PE activities for kids with unique challenges. With this background, the APE teacher is able to act as a consultant with the regular PE teacher, offering suggestions about how to adapt particular games and exercises. Our son Alex has chosen to receive APE as he enjoys the one on one instruction and it allows him a sense of success.

If there is any documented hearing loss, and subsequent speech delay then your child is also entitled to speech therapy at the school site. This is also usually a "pull-out" program, where the child is pulled out of his or her regular classroom for 20-30 minutes a week for one on one or small group therapy. The only draw back to "pull-out" services is you never know when your child will be pulled out – it could happen during an important part of the regular classroom instruction.

Both of these programs fall under the Individual Educational Program, or I.E.P., a formal document that is drawn up through the Special Education Department within your school district. Our dwarf children qualify under the "Orthopedically Handicapped" section. Even if APE is the only service you want for your child, they are still entitled to the legal protection of an I.E.P.

After you request an I.E.P., your school district has 15 days in which to respond in writing. If the decision is made to proceed with an assessment, an initial meeting is scheduled with the appropriate specialists, often called the Student Study Team. Background information and pre-existing data is reviewed. At that time, or at a subsequent meeting, a formal assessment plan is agreed upon and signed. This form lists the tests by name, the test's purpose and test administrator. Once the assessment plan is signed, the district has 50 working days in which to complete the process and hold an IEP meeting. This annual meeting should include the main classroom teacher, speech, A.P.E., possibly the school principal and any other professionals working with your child. Goals will be documented and strategies discussed. The following year those "goals" will hopefully be checked off as having been "met" and a new set of goals will be created.

Some families don't feel the need for these educational services, but are interested in the school purchasing adaptive equipment, such as stools and special chairs. Funding for such equipment falls under the "Low Incidence Fund," and is assured through a 504 plan. Section 504, or the Rehabilitation Act, applies to all people who "have a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more major life functions."

You should request a 504 plan through your school's principal. Although there are no specified timelines for 504 plans (unlike I.E.P's), you should receive a response within ten working days.

You have the right to "an impartial hearing" if you feel that the process has not resulted in a satisfactory conclusion.

If your child's disability interferes with their ability to learn, then an I.E.P. is appropriate. If it doesn't impair learning, an IEP is not necessary. If modifications are necessary to "level the playing field" for learning, then a Section 504 is appropriate. The key question is: how does the uniqueness of the particular person's stature affect learning? Or does it at all? Of course, the conditions of dwarfism may change as a child matures and therefore, the eligibility for services can be subject to change.

We have 504 plans for all three of our children, which has resulted in the district purchasing two different chairs for them. For table work they use a Stokke Tripp Trapp chair. Originally designed in Scandinavia, this wooden chair is adjustable and able to grow with them. Because it is not "babyish" it will be used all the way from Kindergarten to High School. You can view and purchase it on www.adaptivemall.com. A cheaper version of the same design is found at www.onestepahead.com. where it is marketed under the name Euro Highchair.

The other chair our kids have in class is called a "backjack". Because sitting on the floor is commonplace in Kindergarten and early Elementary grades, we wanted them to have some sort of back support. They also cart this along when they go to assemblies in the multi-purpose room. Many mail order catalogues carry variations of the same design, so do a search online. I recently saw one at www.equipmentshop.com

Physical changes to the school campus can also be made. In our district the Maintenance Department was involved with building semi-permanent stools beside each water fountain. In each bathroom a stool was built to the side of one of the toilets and sinks so it was not cumbersome for the rest of the population. One of the towel dispensers was also lowered.

Should you decide the 504 Plan is all your child needs then your main contact will probably be the school principal. In our district we actually have a 'Full Inclusion Specialist' whose job it is to identify what accommodations need to be made and to manage the implementation and purchase of them.

Every spring when our Full Inclusion Specialist calls to prepare for the following school year, I am reminded just how lucky we are to live in our school district. A strong and diverse tax structure has allowed our district to basically get us whatever we need to accommodate our kids. While your district's "low incidence fund" may not be as solid, don't let them turn their back on your child.

The two most important people to get on your team are your principal and his or her secretary (for follow-up). Not only is the principal the main liaison between you and the district's resources, but he or she also is able to select the best classroom teacher for your child. Pleasanton mothers are notorious for marching in and stating exactly which teacher they want for their kid the next year. A better approach is to write a letter highlighting qualities of your "ideal" teacher. I have always requested someone who will be extra aware of our child's needs. For example, when planning a field trip, I want my kids' teachers to think ahead – will Alex be able

to walk that distance? Perhaps I need to allow a little more time. What is the most appropriate way to get him down to the theatre, which is only a mile from the school and is normally walked? Maybe I should ask him?

Don't forget. You are your child's biggest advocate. Armed with knowledge, and of course, a smile, you will be able to help your child have a more successful experience in school.