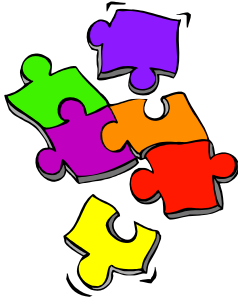


## Chapter 1:



# Who are Children with Special Needs?

The *School Act* specifies that school boards are responsible for determining if a child is in need of a special education program.

Children with special needs, including those with mild, moderate and severe needs, and those who are gifted and talented, require specialized learning opportunities in order to receive an education that is appropriate for their learning needs. School boards must provide programming for all school-age children, including children with special needs, who live in their district.

## Characteristics

When determining whether or not a child is in need of special education programming, one or more of the following characteristics are considered:

- learning—how a child processes information, acquires new information and makes links between concepts
- intellect—the ability to reason and understand information and concepts
- communication—how a child uses language to communicate and make sense of the world
- physical characteristics—gross and fine motor coordination, medical conditions, or any physical handicapping conditions, such as visual or hearing impairments
- school behaviour—how a child responds to the environment and other people, age-appropriate behaviour and independent skills, ability to adapt to new situations.

The prime consideration is how these characteristics affect an individual child's learning and functioning in the classroom. A diagnosis of an exceptionality or specific disability does not provide enough information to determine programming. For example, two children could be diagnosed with a similar condition, but each child could have very different learning needs. One child might function quite independently and need only minor accommodations to be successful, while the other child might require a very structured program.

## Where to start

If your child is having difficulty learning, the first step is to talk to the classroom teacher to determine what might be causing these difficulties and decide if there are any small changes that can be made that would improve the situation.

Teachers can use a number of informal methods to identify learning needs, including:

- talking with your child
- observing your child in the classroom
- analyzing your child's class work
- doing an informal reading or math inventory
- administering screening tests.

Many districts have school-based teams that might include special education teachers, counsellors, administrators and regular classroom teachers who are knowledgeable about learning difficulties and learning strategies. Teachers may consult with the team to develop strategies to address the learning needs of individual students.

If it is apparent that school-based strategies aren't enough, the teacher, in consultation with parents, will make a referral for a **specialized assessment**. Written informed parental consent is

## Informed consent

means that parents:

- have all information relevant to the activity for which consent is sought
- understand and agree, in writing, to the carrying out of the activity for which their consent is sought
- understand that the granting of consent is voluntary and may be withdrawn at anytime.

For more information see:

*Standards for Special Education* (2003)  
[www.learning.gov.ab.ca/k\\_12/specialneeds/SpecialEd\\_stds2003.pdf](http://www.learning.gov.ab.ca/k_12/specialneeds/SpecialEd_stds2003.pdf)

required before any specialized assessment, such as psycho-educational, speech-language, or IQ testing, begins. **Informed consent** means that parents have a clear understanding of the activity that they are granting consent for. Parents have the right to refuse consent for any proposed specialized assessment. If this happens, the school must document the reasons for the refusal and actions taken to resolve concerns. Each school authority has different assessment procedures, so talk to your child's teacher or the school principal about what will take place and how long it will take. Alberta Learning's *Standards for Special Education* recommends that specialized assessments (including the written report) be completed within eight weeks, unless there are extenuating circumstances.

When the school refers a child for specialized assessment, this does not necessarily mean a child has a special need. It may simply be an indicator that the child is having difficulties learning at a particular time and may require short-term support.

Assessment could be needed at any point in a child's schooling. For children who do have special needs, early identification and intervention is the optimal approach, but special needs may be lifelong and may change depending on the environment, the coping strategies your child develops and many other factors.

## What does assessment include?

A variety of assessments may be used to determine a child's intellectual, social, emotional, physical, sensory, communication and/or behavioural development. Your child's development could be assessed in one area or in various combinations, depending on your child's needs.

An assessment has three general purposes:

- to find out if your child has a special learning need
- to identify your child's strengths and needs

For more information see:

- *Standards for Psycho-educational Assessment* (1994)  
Order #281163  
Price \$4.30
- *Promising Assessment Models and Practices* (1994)  
Order #281155  
Price \$4.10

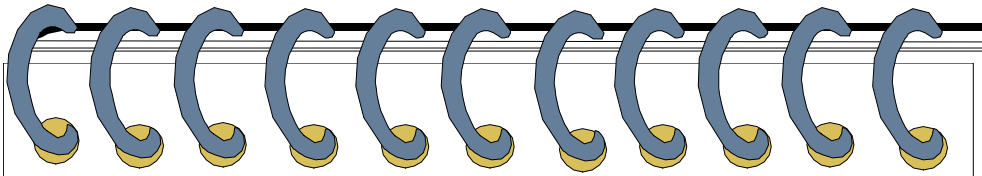
Available from the Learning Resources Centre (LRC).  
Order online at:  
[www.lrc.learning.gov.ab.ca/](http://www.lrc.learning.gov.ab.ca/)

- to identify appropriate programming and services that will meet your child's individual needs.

There are a number of ways parents can be involved in the assessment process. You can gather information that may be useful in the assessment process. This information could include medical reports, recent behavioural changes and observations about your child's learning needs, such as how he or she behaves and learns in other settings. A number of assessment procedures include forms for parents to complete. These forms ensure the data reflects parents' perspectives. For example, you may be asked to rank specific behaviours of your child on a scale from 1 to 10 or identify key strengths and needs.

When assessment results and additional information have been compiled, the school will contact you and arrange for a meeting to explain the results, discuss the recommendations and get your input on any related decisions.

The following chapters in this handbook offer information and strategies to consider as you participate in decisions about your child's education, and work to support your child's school success.



# Parent Notebook

Areas my child is doing well in:

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Signs that indicate my child may be struggling in school and may need more support:

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Information I could share about my child's learning needs:

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**Sample questions I might discuss with my child's teachers about identification and assessment:**

- ◆ How is my child doing in school this year? Do you have any special concerns about his or her learning or behaviour?
- ◆ How does the school identify children who may have special learning needs?
- ◆ How can I participate in an assessment of my child's learning needs?

