



Special Connections

A newsletter connecting our Special Kids, Families and Schools

The Special Needs Family in The Lone Star State

by Steven C. Rhatigan, C.E.P, ChLAP

The reality of the lives of those families charged with the care of a child or sibling with a disabling condition is best described as a “daily marathon”, essentially head down and flat out forward. It allows little time for anything but the tasks at hand and no time for reflection or preparation. This is not a conducive environment for planning for the future. But plan they must, for the other reality of life is that we all face a future that has a beginning and, most assuredly, an end.

In this writer’s twenty five years of special needs planning experiences, insights have developed into the psychological makeup of these remarkable families whose daily lives revolve around the care of their loved one with special needs. From the start of the day until its end, they are concerned with the care, support and protection of this person and everything else is secondary. The extent of the care varies as each situation and need are unique, but it is always essential to the well being of that person. Whatever the level of care, it always brings the caregiver back to asking one simple question, “**What will happen to my child when I am no longer able to provide the daily support that they need?**” The enormity of that question, and its answers, provide the platform for this article. The art and science of special needs estate and financial planning is complex, covering all the usual aspects of generalized planning but with its own unique language and a myriad of additional questions that must be addressed if the plan is to be effective. This complexity, along with the

natural emotional aspects, cause many to do inadequate planning or even not plan at all. In this case, the old adage “What you don’t know can’t hurt you” is patently false. It can and will.

In the lives of most people who do some form of future planning, it is approached as an event. They pull together the required information, get with some type of planner and generate a plan. Now satisfied that they have completed their requirement it is filed away and soon forgotten, all the while having a sense of security because of the effort. **Special Needs Life Planning**, when managed properly, is different. It is a process and a system,

with defined procedures to ensure that all the complexities are adequately addressed. And, it is dynamic by nature. Just as the life of a person with special needs will have detours that require attention, so must their life plan. It must be constantly reviewed, revised and strengthened to keep it viable. To accomplish this daunting task requires an additional commitment of time and energy from the caregiver plus the help of experienced planning professionals.

The first step in the process is the Care Plan. This is a historical accounting of the level of physical and financial support that is required on a daily basis to maintain a safe environment. Each

person, regardless of labels, is unique. The supports may be minimal or extreme, as in 24/7. Whatever they are, it is the starting point and foundation to the development of the plan. It is also the measuring stick for every other decision in the plan, **from choices of successor caregivers, guardians, trustees, potential residential placements and finances.** It is a big puzzle which requires attention to detail if it is to be effective.

The time to start your plan is now. The importance of the project, as difficult as it is, cannot be left to others to make.

Steve Rhatigan [Stemark & Associates (stemark.com) Office (281) 364-7211] has been in the financial and estate planning profession since 1975. In the early 80’s he began working with the special needs community. He is a Chartered Lifetime Assistance Planner and a Certified Estate Planner. He speaks nationally to professional groups and parent support groups to educate them on the unique planning needs of this population. He also works closely with many school districts to support their unique place in the lives of their special needs students. He has served as president of **The Mental Health Association of Houston** and is currently serving a three-year term on the **TX Dept. Metal Health & Mental Retardation Advisory Board.**

Cy-Fair ISD

Should you have any questions regarding your child and/or special education services, you may contact the Diagnostician or High School Support Specialist at your child's campus.

There may be times when you need to contact the district's special education office.

The contact information is as follows:

Jane Flinn, Director of Special Education
10300 Jones Road, Houston TX 77065
Phone: 281-897-6416
Fax: 281-897-6403
Email: jane.flinn@cfisd.net -or-

Nadine Fidler, Assistant Superintendent
Phone: 281-897-6416
Fax: 281-897-6403
Email: nadine.fidler@cfisd.net

ChildFind

The Cy-Fair ISD provides support services for students with disabilities residing within the district. Through Child Find efforts, eligible children, birth to 21, may be identified for needed services. Anyone who has a child or knows of a child who may qualify for services should call the Special Education Department (281-897-6400) or the child's home campus for information.

Education Service Center

The state of Texas is divided into 20 regions served by Education Service Centers. Our Education Service Center is Region 4 and is located in Houston. Region 4 has staff trained in special education who may be a resource to parents. The telephone number of the special education department at Region 4 is 713-462-7708.

The next issue in February will have an article by Rick Lavoie on Self Esteem

Encouraging Words From IDEA 2004

By Ginger Sewell

IDEA 2004 encourages educators and parents to have high expectations for all children including those challenged by disabilities. When making educational placement decisions in ARD meetings we, as parents, must consider the value to our students of being with age appropriate peers as well as exposure to the general education curriculum. The intent of IDEA 2004 is that appropriate placements allow our students to meet their developmental goals and to the "maximum extent possible" the challenging expectations that have been established for all children so that they may lead as productive and independent lives as possible.

Ginger Sewell is the parent of a young adult with a disability and a former Director of Special Education. Currently an educational consultant, she is the recipient of both the Parent of the Year and Professional of the Year awards from the Learning Disabilities Association

New IDEA Offers Changes in LD Eligibility Criteria

Peggy Shippen, PhD
Auburn University

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act signed by President Bush in December of 2004 proposes an alternative model to identify learning disabilities (LD). States are now permitted a choice to use the traditional model of identifying LD, a discrepancy between ability and achievement, or the new model, Response to Intervention (RTI). The RTI model does not consider a student's IQ. This model focuses on whether a student *achieves* a set level of performance, determined by each state individually, after receiving "scientifically based" intervention.

Supporters of the RTI model suggest that identifying a discrepancy between IQ and achievement generally is not possible before the age of nine; therefore the RTI model will prevent the "wait to fail" phenomenon of the past. Opponents of the RTI model point out that IDEA 2004 does not provide a definition of scientifically based intervention, nor does it propose guidelines needed to determine how long a student must be exposed to an intervention before a lack of progress becomes an identified LD. As the pendulum of the field continues to swing, parents, teachers, schools, and universities will clearly be impacted by this new eligibility option. How the use of the RTI model develops over time will be interesting to see.