

Special Needs

Isn't every child special? We think so, but what do we mean when we say "kids with special needs"?

When looking to adopt a child from foster care, the term "special needs" can be scary. "Special needs" is a broad term used to describe children or youth in foster care and may be used to help determine financial assistance for adoption.

Foster children that qualify as "special needs" may involve factors such as, ethnic or racial background, age, may be part of a sibling group, medical, physical, or emotional disability based on birth family history. Risk of physical, mental, or emotional disabilities. Or any condition that makes it more difficult to find an adoptive family.

Traditionally, children with special needs have been considered harder to place for adoption than other children, but experience has shown that many children with special needs can be placed successfully with families who want them.

Take time to decide if you have the emotional, physical, mental, and financial resources to be a successful parent. It will be helpful to make a self assessment before deciding to adopt, considering such questions as:

- *How many children can I take?
- *How much contact with the birth relatives would I be comfortable with?
- *Do I have enough support from family and friends to help me when I need it?
- *Is my lifestyle flexible enough to handle a child with special needs?
- *What disabilities, or mental, emotional, physical, behavioral challenges can I handle?

Pick any two families of children with special needs, and they may seem to have little in common. A family dealing with developmental delays will have different concerns than one dealing with chronic illness, which will have different concerns than one dealing with mental illness or learning problems or behavioral challenges. This Parenting Special Needs site devotes sections to the following specific issues: medical, behavioral, developmental, learning, and mental health.

Medical Issues:

Medical issues for children include serious conditions like cancer and heart defects, muscular dystrophy and cystic fibrosis; chronic conditions like asthma and diabetes; congenital conditions like cerebral palsy and dwarfism; and health threats like food allergies and obesity. Children with medical issues may require numerous tests, long hospital stays, expensive equipment, and accommodations for disabilities. Their families have to deal with frequent crises, uncertainty, and worry.

Behavior Issues:

Children with behavior issues don't respond to traditional discipline. With diagnoses like ADHD, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, Dysfunction of Sensory Integration, and Tourette Syndrome, they require specialized strategies that are tailored to their specific abilities and disabilities. If those strategies are not developed and used, kids with behavior issues throw their families into chaos and are seriously at risk for school problems. Their parents need to be flexible and creative.

Developmental Issues:

Developmental disabilities are some of the most devastating for a family to deal with, changing visions of the future and providing immediate difficulties in caring for and educating a child. Diagnoses like autism, Down syndrome and mental retardation often cause children to be removed from the mainstream, and parents must be fierce advocates to make sure their children receive the services, therapy, schooling, and inclusion they need and deserve.

Learning Issues:

Children with learning disabilities like dyslexia and Central Auditory Processing Disorder struggle with schoolwork regardless of their intellectual abilities. They require specialized learning strategies to meet their potential and avoid self-esteem problems and behavioral difficulties. Parents of learning-challenged kids need to be persistent both in working with their reluctant learners and with the schools that must provide the help these children need.

Mental Health Issues:

A child's problems with anxiety or depression can sneak up on parents; problems with attachment may smack them right in the face. Living with a child with mental health issues can put family members on a roller coaster of mood swings and crises and defiance. Parents have to find the right professionals to help, and make hard decisions about therapy, medications, and hospitalization. The consequences of missed clues and wrong guesses can be significant.

Although every special-needs child is different and every family is unique, there are some common concerns that link parents of challenged kids, including getting appropriate care and accommodations; promoting acceptance in the extended family, school and community; planning for an uncertain future; and adjusting routines and expectations. Parents of children with special needs are often more flexible, compassionate, stubborn and resilient than other parents. They have to be.

Children who are adopted from foster care may qualify for adoption assistance, which is paid to adoptive families to help them defray expenses related to their child's need for ongoing therapies or treatments or to cover certain one-time expenses. There are two major funding sources of adoption assistance or subsidies: the Federal Title IV-E program under the Social Security Act, and State programs, which vary from State to State.

Many new parents don't take the time to learn about adoption assistance issues because they don't understand how expensive raising children with special needs can become. Every single American considering the adoption of a waiting US child should take a moment to call this number at some time during the homestudy process: 800-470-6665. This is the Adoption Subsidy Hotline of NACAC, the non-profit North American Council on Adoptable Children. NACAC sends out thousands of information packets each year, at no charge; they publish and disseminate financial assistance information that can be difficult to obtain, called state subsidy profiles; and they publish a newsletter with updates on federal legislation affecting special needs adoption medical and financial adoption assistance. A must read.

If you decide to open your home and heart to a special needs child, be prepared emotionally and physically for the task. Learn all you can about the child's disability/ies so that you will have the proper knowledge with which to deal with them.