

When Your Child Learns *Differently*

A Family Approach for Navigating
Special Education Services
With Love and High Expectations

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Introduction

“Did you see Ann’s post on Facebook?” my husband Chris asked as I came downstairs after tucking in our daughter.

Ann and I had been close friends in college. However, since graduation, we’d only stayed in touch casually. We followed each other’s journeys over social media, celebrating new jobs, the births and adoptions of our kiddos, and each other’s birthdays. We hadn’t seen each other in years. I picked up my phone and scrolled to her post. It was a call for help.

Ann and her husband were just starting to navigate special education services with their son. She was feeling a huge range of complicated emotions, including worry and isolation. It was a staggeringly honest post that was both smart and courageous, two qualities I’d admired in Ann during those years in college. I reached out.

“Hi, friend.” I typed. “Sending love. We’ve also been through the IEP [Individualized Education Program] process as parents. I’m not sure if you knew, but I worked as a special education teacher for many years. How can I help?”

She responded instantly, and we chatted about her son and the meetings her family was having with specialists. Their son was 3 years old, and they’d been working closely to address his needs since he was an infant.

At one point, I texted her the following:

Early intervention and therapy are powerful! It is a long road, but this is absolutely the best time to grow. Depending on the services you all are getting, you may have to advocate to get your son everything he needs. And you and your partner know better than anyone else

what those needs are. If the IEP team is not making you feel that way, then let's think through how to make sure you are being heard.

I don't know what the early childhood program looks like in your district; however, his school program should help make sure he (and you) feel supported and included. You likely already use social scripts and social stories with him; these can be very helpful in new (and everyday) situations.

Enough on the practical stuff—let's talk personal. Everything you are feeling is valid. It is a hard process. Your son is loved, and you are truly his most important and knowledgeable advocate.

Ann and I talked a little longer about advocacy, social stories, and feelings. We agreed that parenting is hard. I sent her a few heart emojis because sometimes those pink and red shapes offer the best approximation of what you are trying to tell a friend over text. Finally, we said goodnight.

Afterward Chris told me, "You know, Ann's right. There's not enough information out there for parents. You should write a book for families on how to navigate this process."

This is that book.

How to Use This Book

I am assuming (always dangerous) that if you picked up this book, you care for an exceptional child who learns differently. If that is true, I wrote this book specifically for you! If that is not true, something drew you to open these pages and start reading. Maybe you're getting to know a new family in your neighborhood, and they have a child with disabilities. Maybe you're an educator and more children with IEPs keep appearing on your rosters. Maybe you're interested in educational issues or civil rights. Maybe *you* always learned differently and wonder if this book will help you make sense of some of your own experiences in school. Whatever the reason, I encourage you to trust your instincts and keep reading. The more people we can bring to the conversation around inclusion, the better for everyone.

When Your Child Learns Differently can be read cover to cover, in sections, or by individual chapters. In its entirety, it will give you a wealth of knowledge about special education services spanning from early childhood to postsecondary planning. You'll have some ideas of what to expect from the initial referral through your child's last annual IEP. Perhaps you have a specific topic or question that drew you to this text. If so, you might want to start with one of the four parts of this book. Finally, the chapters were written so that they can be read independently to meet your family's immediate needs. The following pages include a Reader's Guide with more information about each chapter, part, and some notes on when this information may be most useful to you.

A Reader's Guide		
Part I: Navigating Services With Hope and Knowledge		
Chapter	Purpose	Read This When . . .
1	This chapter introduces the big ideas, experiences, and perspectives that have shaped my advice for caring for children who learn differently.	The first chapter is always a good place to start. In this chapter, I share how I learned about special education, both as a teacher and a parent.
2	This chapter provides a foundational guide to important policies and terms to help you navigate the special education and identification processes.	If you are new to special education, starting the evaluation process, or preparing for your initial IEP meeting, this chapter will help you make sense of important terms and policies. The charts are also helpful resources to refer back to as needed.
3	The IEP meeting is an important touchpoint in your child's education. This chapter helps you know what to expect at an IEP meeting and gives you strategies for making your child's IEP more effective.	It can be intimidating to walk into an IEP meeting. Read this chapter to increase your confidence and knowledge before IEP meetings.
Part II: Advocating With Love		
Chapter	Purpose	Read This When . . .
4	Advocacy is central to both parenting and special education. This chapter gives you tools to use a strengths-based approach to navigate and advocate for your child's unique needs.	There will be times when you will need to intervene on behalf of your child. This chapter will give you language and tools to advocate across a variety of settings to make sure your child is included, receiving the services they need, and treated in ways that are accepting and appropriate.
5	In this chapter, we'll explore the critical positive difference that being "raised on love" makes in child development. We'll also cover tough and important topics ranging from what inclusion looks like in early-elementary classrooms to what life might look like after high school. The central theme of this chapter (and the book, for that matter) is that love is the most important factor in helping children succeed.	In a world with a lot of pressure to be like everyone else, what do school and life look like for children who learn differently? How can we support the social-emotional learning of children with disabilities and create more equitable learning environments? Read this chapter when you are wrestling with these questions or need a reminder about the importance of love in raising children who learn differently.

A Reader's Guide		
Part III: Operationalizing High Expectations		
Chapter	Purpose	Read This When . . .
6	We don't know what is possible until we try it. This is particularly true when it comes to high expectations for children who learn differently. This chapter explores how to operationalize high expectations with specific extended sections on reading and math.	Are you wondering what high expectations look like for children with disabilities? This chapter offers key considerations for how to nurture ambition and support reading and math development for students who learn differently and at a different pace than their peers.
7	What is exceptionality? What does it mean to learn differently? This chapter celebrates individuals who learn differently and also offers specific information to help children who are navigating multiple identities. Learn more about neurodiversity, representation, disproportionality, and special populations, including twice-exceptional students and English language learners.	Oftentimes the way that disability is framed feels incongruent with the way we see our children. Read this chapter for ideas on reframing disability from a strengths-based perspective. Continue reading for a nuanced discussion of the ways that multiple identities can intersect with ability/disability.
Part IV: Giving Yourself Grace		
Chapter	Purpose	Read This When . . .
8	All of the feelings and experiences you have while raising a child who learns differently are valid. This chapter, told with both candor and optimism, offers a frank discussion about navigating the great adventures of parenting exceptional children while also taking care of yourself.	Read and revisit this chapter whenever you could use a little extra support or a reminder that you are not alone. In fact, if this is the reminder you most needed when you picked up this book, read this chapter first, then start at the beginning, and work your way back again.