

By Abbie Mood

I knew [my daughter] had speech delays," recalls Corona mom Dawn Fikse. "She wasn't using a large variety of words. In a Mommy and Me class, she was not playing with the toys like other children. [Instead] she would run from one table to the next."

What should parents do when they suspect their child has special needs? Parents and experts agree it is key to make sure young children get the services and support they need.

Have your child assessed

"My pediatrician would always dismiss my concerns," says Fikse, "but my sister noticed [my daughter's] speech delays as well and told me to call [the Regional Center]." The Regional Center arranged for specialists to do an assessment of her daughter at home (see box, p.9). They found her daughter had significant speech delays and possibly Sensory Integration Disorder (diffi-

culty processing input from their senses) and was eligible for special needs services.

Now "she is getting the detailed attention she needs," says Fikse, in a school district-run preschool program with additional support from specialists. When her daughter was 3 years old, the school district also coordinated an Individualized Education Plan (IEP, see box, p. 9) which helped her track what specialists were working on with her daughter. "I can see which goals we have been working on for a while [and] want to try a new approach with," adds Fikse.

Parents can ask questions at any point during an assessment or IEP, adds Maria Gutierrez, a mom also in Corona. She requested an interpreter at IEP meetings and that documents be translated into Spanish.

Find care that helps your child thrive

When deciding on a preschool program for her daughter, Fikse says she looked for "genuine concern from the teacher [and] how easy is it to communicate. I always felt comfortable calling the teacher [at my daughter's program] and voicing any concerns."

Parents should ask teachers about their background and training, the other students in the class, and whether their child will be challenged enough, adds Nancy Muratella whose son has speech delays and other special needs.

Joining a parent co-op was a "great experience" for Cindy Arstein-Kerslake, a mom in San Marcos and now Coordinator of Map to Inclusive Child Care. Her daughter, Sara, has a developmental disability and the co-op helped Sara get to know other children in the neighborhood. "The parents who helped with the co-op consulted with me about [how] Sara could be included. They changed her diaper, carried her [on] field trips that required lots of walking," adds Arstein-Kerslake.

Some parents care for their child at home when it becomes too impossible to juggle work, their child's care, appointments with specialists, and follow-up activities with their child. Jennifer Kossler, a mom in Corona, quit her job because that made it easier "to be involved and really help my son," but the family cut back on expenses to make it work.

You have the right to...

- ❖ Have your child assessed (in his or her native language or mode of communication) if you suspect he or she has special needs.
- ❖ Ask for an independent assessment if you disagree with the school district's assessment.
- ❖ Request an IEP meeting—or IFSP meeting, if your child is under age 3—at any time to discuss concerns or progress (see box, p. 9).
- ❖ Have an interpreter at IEP meetings.
- ❖ Participate in any decision-making meeting about your child's special education program.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, visit www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/fp



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Follow up at home

"We really depended on the teacher's guidance to help us at home," says Muratella. When Muratella asked for advice on helping her son learn to play and share with other children, the teacher suggested walking him through how to introduce himself and ask if he can join in play. The teacher also passed on tips about positive reinforcement and redirecting negative behavior. This helped Muratella shift her parenting strategy so her son could develop more confidence—and not feel like he was always being told "No! Slow down! Stop!" she adds.

"Our big goal right now has been for [my daughter] to write her name," adds Fikse. "The teacher is always telling me activities [for her] to do at home for practice. [My daughter] can now write the first three letters of her name 'Del'—until recently, she could barely draw a circle."

Advocate for your child

"You are your child's advocate," says Fikse. "Make sure your child is getting the services you think they need." She recalls when her daughter needed a therapy assessment and the teacher contacted her because it was not being done. The teacher told Fikse that her daughter's therapist was not responding to the teacher's calls or emails and asked Fikse to get involved. Fikse contacted the Program Specialist who coordinates her child's care about the problem and "we finally saw answers," she adds.

Talk with the teacher about any questions or concerns, advises Arstein-Kerslake. "When you've built a relationship, people are willing to work with you. Don't be afraid to ask or be firm with your requests. Demand your rights if nothing else works," she adds (see box, p. 8).

"Families [need to] link up with information and support as early as possible," adds Nina Boyle of Support for

Children with Disabilities. "There are people to talk with [families] about their concerns and [help them find] out what is available for their child in the community."

Support agencies can also help families with concerns, including discrimination. Staff at Support for Children with Disabilities hears from families that their children of color are being disproportionately referred for special education, says Boyle. "We also hear from families that they feel their child was not identified earlier due to a language barrier. Support agencies can work with parents about how to effectively communicate with professionals working with them and their child," she adds.

For more information

- ❖ **Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP):** provides in-home support for children with special needs under age 3, coordinated by Regional Centers. www.dds.ca.gov/RC/RCSvs.cfm

- ❖ **Individualized Education Plan (IEP):** provides support for children with special needs age 3 and older, coordinated by school districts. Parents, teachers, and specialists meet at least once a year about how the child is doing, goals for the year, and the free supports and accommodations provided by the school district.

But not all children qualify for an IEP—children must be US citizens and in an early childhood program run by the school district. Other early childhood programs do not provide an IEP, but they must make "reasonable accommodations" for children and may refer families to services in the community. www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/lp

Support organizations

- ❖ **Regional Centers** offer advice and free services for families of children with special needs. They can also connect families with other special needs organizations in their area. Regional Centers are part of the California Department of Developmental Services, 916-654-1690, www.dds.ca.gov/RC/RCList.cfm

- ❖ **California Map to Inclusive Child Care** provides resources about choosing care, 760-682-0271, www.cainclusivechildcare.org/camap

