

Evaluating Placements for Children with Autism

Introduction

Hello and welcome to “Evaluating Placements” brought to you by the Pacific Autism Center for Education’s Porchlight Education Series.

Today, we are going to talk about how to evaluate special needs placement options for your child.

When it comes to picking the right educational institution for your child with autism, it is likely that you will need to consider and balance several options. The factors that will likely influence your decision may include tangible factors, such as what you may see and observe while visiting a school and meeting with educators, as well as non-tangible factors such as the APA scores for a school. Let’s take a closer look at some of the factors that can help you make a decision about the right placement for your child.

Evaluation Criteria

School Support

While your local school district is the first place to consider for a special education program, there are a number of possibilities for supplemental or alternative program support both within and outside the school district. With the primary goal of identifying the Least Restrictive Environment or least number of supports, the school district may have inclusive classroom options, general special day classes or specialized curriculum design specifically for autism students. In addition, there may be additional individual aide or resource supports to help with the program. Alternative placements might also be a consideration at non-public schools or Charter school. NPS schools and district aligned charter schools are required to meet the same department of education requirements as public schools. Private schools are typically independently

funded and they are not required to meet these same guidelines.

Charter schools may also be an option for some families, and a school district may choose to place a child in a Non-Public School (NPS) school. NPS schools are required to meet CDE standards and obtain recertification every year. If you choose a private school without going through your school district, you will most likely need to pay for part or all of your child’s education, depending on your state laws.

Feedback from Parents

As you begin to research a particular school, talk with other parents whose children attend that school. How do they feel about the school? Are they satisfied with the school’s policies, teachers, facilities, curriculum and assessments etc.? Would they recommend the school to others? What are their biggest concerns or areas of dissatisfaction? You can ask the school to connect you with a few parents whose children are enrolled at the school. Speaking with other parents can give you a feel for what people like or don’t like about the school.

The Physical Environment

It is important to visit the school and request a tour of the facilities. If it is a public school and they do not schedule tours, you can ask them about an open house. While touring the school, notice whether the environment is suitable for your child. Look at the type of sensory experience your child will have at this school. Are the colors in the environment calming? Is the space organized with learning materials stored discretely? Is the school safe without any potential hazards, such as an open swimming pool or an open playing field? This

is the environment your child will spend a lot of their time in, so make sure you are comfortable with it.

The Staff

Take some time to speak with the staff, including the director of the program as well as the therapists who will interact with your child. How engaged do they seem? Are you comfortable with their knowledge and their engagement with other children? Do they prompt the children too much or too little? All of these observations can be clues to how they will interact with your child, and you should feel comfortable with them. Also, do not neglect to ask about credentials. It is essential that each therapist or teacher have experience working with special needs students, and they also have the right credentials, including behavior training. You can also ask them if they will work with your in-home providers to create a more seamless set of interactions with your child. Ask about how they work through behavioral issues and what types of consequences your child will face if they do not comply.

Communication Strategies

Ask about how the school communicates with parents. Do they keep a daily log of your child's activities and progress? You can ask to see a sample of their record keeping logs. Also ask about how they communicate any behavioral issues or difficulties that they may experience with your child to you. You should also inquire about how frequently your child's teacher will communicate with you, and how accessible they are if you need to speak with them.

Assessments

Having clear goals for your child is an important part of their education. Talk to the staff about how they assess progress. How often do they assess children? How do they update caregivers? How do they measure success and do they have a long term plan for

each child? Discuss exit criteria and whether they have had students that have moved from the special needs program to a standard education program and what the determining factors are for that.

Curriculum

Ask about what their curriculum focuses on most. Does it include adequate socialization opportunities for children? Will your child get to interact with other children or will they interact strictly with staff? Ask to see the bell schedule or the activity schedule. This will give you an understanding of how your child will be spending their time. If you have concerns about certain aspects of the curriculum, you should discuss this with the program director. A program should focus not only on building vocabulary but should also focus on teaching a child how to generalize learned skills and vocabulary in a functional way.

Educational Standards

All schools have compliance requirements that they must meet. When you visit a school, consider whether the school seems to just be meeting compliance standards, or whether they are doing more than what is expected. Does the environment seem nurturing, and do you believe your child will grow in that environment. An example of this is student to teacher ratios. If a school meets the compliance requirement for this ratio, but you observe that the teachers are disengaged and on their cellphones rather than interacting with the children, this may indicate that the school focuses on compliance rather than on exceeding these standards.

Conclusion

Evaluating the right placement for your child will require you to prioritize the factors that are most important to you. Ask yourself “Will my child flourish here?” Do remember that sometimes you may have to settle for a placement that meets your most important criteria rather than all of your criteria. It is a good idea to start looking at schools as early as possible and visit a few different schools before picking the one you are most comfortable with. We hope you have found this information helpful. For additional modules, please visit the porchlight website.