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**"Educate each child according to his ability."**  
(Proverbs 22:6)

### **Special Education Within Our Religious Schools**

A religious education is the birthright of every Jewish child: "*And all thy children shall be taught of the Lord*" (Isaiah 54:13). The challenge before us is how to address the special needs of some members of "the people of the Book" when some of them cannot hold the Book, see the Book, or read the Book. Children with mental or physical impairments, learning disabilities or emotional disorders have been receiving special education in the public schools since the mid- 1970's. The parents of those children believe the same accommodations should be available within our Jewish day schools and weekend religious schools. Every Jewish child should be able to experience the study of our literature, our prayers, our history, our rituals and our language. While not every child may achieve the same skill level as some of the others, each child will acquire a sense of acceptance, a sense of belonging to their Jewish community.

It would be impractical and non-productive to suddenly enroll children with significant vision or hearing loss, profound mental retardation or physical impairments in any school without adequate preparation. But, with the combined efforts of the teaching staff and the families, supported by the commitment of the school board and synagogue leadership, it is not an impossible task.

Several things should happen to develop special education services within a school. First, the school board should **survey the congregation (or the community at large)** to ascertain how many children with special needs are interested in a Jewish education and what they will need in order to benefit from school. Once the surveys are reviewed, the next step is to **meet with the parents of these children and set goals** for their Jewish education. For children with specific learning difficulties, they may need modified teaching styles, adapted homework and testing, and one-on-one tutoring for specific areas of study. For children with sensory deficits or mobility impairment, they may need additions to the classroom (such as a sign language interpreter or braille materials) or changes to the environment (such as a rearrangement of desks to accommodate a wheelchair or relocating a particular class to the first floor instead of the second floor during the year that child in a wheelchair is in that grade). And for those children who have severe developmental delays (which might include Down Syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy, etc.), the goals may be to surround this child with the sights and sounds, tastes and smells of their Judaism and to make them feel comfortable and welcome among their peers.

Once the goals for these students are set, the school should **advertise for a special education teacher** to develop curriculum guides, modify existing educational programs for inclusion of special learners and/or teach a self-contained class for those unable to benefit from regular classes. Finding a Jewish special education teacher should not be difficult. Potential teachers might be a speech, occupational or physical therapist; a special education teacher or a school counselor; or a psychologist or a regular education teacher who has had success with mainstreaming a child with special needs in his/her public school classroom. To assist the teacher, it is helpful to **train post-bar/bat mitzvah students as "special needs madrikhim."**

Preparing these teens to act as an extra set of hands for children with vision impairment or mobility problems, to re-organize tasks or re-phrase directions for children with learning disabilities or communication disorders and to facilitate the social interaction of both disabled and able-bodied students provides the necessary assistance in the classroom as well as giving teens an unforgettable lesson in "gemilut chasidim" (deeds of loving kindness).

Another important element to make special education programs a success in your school is the manner in which you prepare the staff, students and parents.

**Holding a disability awareness and sensitivity workshop** for a few hours on a Sunday afternoon will educate those who are unfamiliar with disabilities or uncertain about what to expect with the inclusion of special needs students. They will gain empathy through simulations of various disabling conditions and experience examples of how to address these needs through creative responses. It would be a good idea to encourage the Board of Directors to attend such an event, too.

No one is asking school directors to "re-invent the wheel" in developing special education services. Two excellent instruction manuals are available to guide schools through the process.

HANDBOOK FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS  
Bureau of Jewish Education,  
Attn: Flora Kupferman  
639 14th Avenue  
San Francisco, CA 94118  
(415) 751-6983 ext. 122

THE RESOURCE PROGRAM GUIDE  
FOR A CONGREGATIONAL SCHOOL  
Bureau of Jewish Education of Greater Washington, DC  
Attn: Sara R. Simon, Director of Special Needs  
11710 Hunters Lane  
Rockville, MD 20852  
(301) 984-4455





