

Autism Parenting Magazine

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Should I Send My Child to a Special Education School?

By Kevin GERSH



As soon as children receive an autism diagnosis, their parents grow concerned about what the future might look like for them. Will their child be able to function independently within the community? Will he/she be recognized for his/her talents or overshadowed by a label? Will he/she ever be able to live on his/her own?

This leads many parents on a search for the “perfect” school for their child. Some go for the traditional public-school setting, hoping the inclusive classroom set-up will allow for more interaction with neurotypical students, along with federally mandated special education accommodations. Some choose smaller

private schools, hoping that, with lower numbers, their children will receive more one-on-one attention.

But specialized schools are becoming increasingly more prevalent to satisfy the growing numbers of autism diagnoses. These schools are typically staffed with teachers who are fully trained and experienced with students on the spectrum and offer a range of therapies throughout the school day. Though this means the student will only attend class with other students on the spectrum, the benefits often outweigh the concerns.

Students have ended up at a specialized school for a multitude of reasons. The resources and accommo-



far too diverse and unique to fit any kind of label and effective teaching means getting to know what works with each student.

If a child received services after school or outside the building, there can be a disconnect in communication between therapist and teacher. The parents, in many cases, end up needing to advocate for their child continuously. An advantage to a more specialized school is that everything is housed in one place and occurs during the school day. Speech, occupational therapy, applied behavioral analysis, and any other services a child needs are done in proximity to or within the classroom, allowing for clear communication among all those involved.

dations offered at a prior school may not have been enough, the label of “special ed” may have become too much to deal with or too isolating, or maybe the student was consistently excluded by neurotypical classmates. Whatever the reason, these students and their families ended up selecting a school specializing in education for students on the spectrum.

Listed below are some of the ways I believe attending a specialized school could benefit your child:

Your child is surrounded by experienced and knowledgeable staff

Special education teachers are some of the most compassionate, hard-working people in education. In a public school, many are stretched thin. They are in charge of educating and looking out for a number of students with a vast array of challenges. As a result, many do not have the specialization, the time, or the resources to focus on the needs of a student with autism.

At specialized schools, however, students are surrounded by adults who understand them. These teachers are familiar with learning behaviors and equipped with techniques known to create a positive and productive learning environment. They know to stay away from more traditional direct instruction, instead meeting the children where they are and providing hands-on, catered lessons. They know students will need breaks, possibly by listening to music or taking a walk. They also know their students are

Your child gets to interact with the community

A common hesitation in sending a child to a school where all of his/her peers will be on the spectrum is the fear that the child will not learn to be a part of and interact with the greater community. In the traditional public-school classroom, if a school follows the inclusive model, a child will get countless interactions with neurotypical students. Though this may allow for some negative interactions, the experience of building these social skills in a real, daily environment is beneficial.

However, when it comes to interacting with the “real world”, specialized schools often have the upper hand. Public schools tend to allow one or two field trips a year, to avoid taking time away from the classroom. Specialized schools, including Gersh Academy, emphasize getting involved in the community and engaging in experiences beyond the school’s walls. For students on the spectrum, this kind of education—one that focuses on life skills and social skills—is essential for future independence.

Many specialized schools, like Gersh Academy, also offer vocational training. Students learn future job skills throughout their middle school and high school years, culminating in placement at local businesses in order to put their skills into practice. At Gersh Academy, students regularly participate in on- and off-site events, such as trips to museums and restaurants, rides on public transit, and dances and holiday celebrations, to strengthen their communication skills.

“ Teachers specifically trained to teach students on the spectrum can work with the students on many of the skills they need, instead of just academics. Communication and social skills are right up there with math and reading. ”

Your child gets the tools he/she needs, when he/she needs them

At specialized schools, teachers have the freedom to build lessons around each student's needs at that specific time—that might mean meeting an academic standard, with scaffolding along the way, or it might mean spending time on making eye contact or improving focus.

Teachers specifically trained to teach students on the spectrum can work with the students on many of the skills they need, instead of just academics. Communication and social skills are right up there with math and reading. Speech therapy and self-regulation techniques can be taught alongside the core subjects, or even take place instead of them some days. The freedom these teachers have allows them to prioritize what each student needs, rather than what the school or state mandates.

Your child will feel at home...and so will you

With rising efforts to add more inclusive classrooms and place special education students in “least restrictive environments”, more and more students are spending time with neurotypical peers and experiencing a more traditional education. While this can be extremely helpful and enjoyable, some students in these situations unintentionally wind up feeling even more excluded and isolated.

In a public-school setting, students on the spectrum might be pulled to the side to sit away from their peers and with the special education push-in teacher. If these students are pulled aside enough, they can start to feel separated from their classroom community. If they are placed in a special education classroom, they can feel even more estranged from their peers.

In specialized schools, students are able to go to an entire building of people who understand them.

Both adults and students are automatically more patient and knowledgeable of what they are going or have been through. For parents, this is a welcome relief and a respite from constantly explaining their children's actions.

Conclusion

It's always difficult to know which type of school will serve each child's needs the best. With the abilities, interests, motivations, and communication skills of children on a spectrum being on a literal spectrum, there is no “one size fits all” answer. However, with all of their individualized offerings, included services, immense knowledge, and everlasting understanding, specialized schools are worth considering.

Kevin Gersh, Founder/CEO/Chief Autism Officer of Gersh Autism, was raised in a time when ADHD, dyslexia, and similar disabilities were not diagnosed. These children were labeled difficult, lazy, and trouble. Kevin was one of them. The challenges he faced in his childhood would set him on a life-long path to help children.

Nearly 30 years ago, Kevin opened his first school, focused on creating a customized environment for children with special needs. Today his organization operates programs across the US and Puerto Rico: K-21 Schools, Therapeutic Programs, Day Camps, Post-Secondary, Vocational Training, Job Placement, Residential, and a Driving School.

Kevin has dedicated himself to making a difference in the lives of children. His experience and professional commitment continue to provide opportunities, inspiration, and guidance for every child to reach his/her full potential, regardless of the challenges he/she faces.

To learn more, visit: www.gershautism.com