

Dear Parents,

Our daughter Elizabeth is in the kindergarten class at Swanson. Your child may talk about the girl who doesn't talk or do the same things they do. That's Elizabeth.

The reason I am writing this is so you can know a little about her for your own information and so you can answer some of your child's questions.

Elizabeth was born with a generic disorder that left her with multiple disabilities. She is generally very healthy, but the disorder resulted in delays in development.

Elizabeth has been getting educational services from District 66 since she was about 6 months old. When she was 20 months old, she started classes at Sunset. She has since been to Westbrook, Oakdale, and back to Sunset. These have all been "special" classes where there have been mostly other children with disabilities. During this time, we have used regular child care and preschool as well.

We wanted to stop bouncing around schools and have both of our children go to school in our own neighborhood with all the other kids. I want to stress that we did not want to just show up at Swanson (the local kindergarten) on the first day of school to drop Elizabeth off. All during the spring and summer, I have spent countless hours on the phone and in meetings with everyone involved to plan how Elizabeth would be able to participate in the Swanson kindergarten program.

You know how scary it is to have your child encounter challenging new environments. However, I have seen Elizabeth rise to challenges before and surprise us all. She has learned so much! In addition, District 66 staff have spent a lot of time in making sure that there is enough support in the classroom when Elizabeth is there so the program is not affected adversely.

I also want to stress that we don't expect the kindergarten staff to "fix" Elizabeth and teach her all the things the other kids are learning (I wish we could pull off such a miracle). Rather, Elizabeth is in the class to get to know other children, to learn how they behave and play, and to learn how to communicate more easily with them. Otherwise, she has her own education plan. The other children will, in turn, learn so many things from her. Kids her age are much more perceptive than we give them credit for. They have few preconceived notions and they ask good questions.

I tell 5-year-olds her brain doesn't always work very well so she has trouble talking, walking, and learning how to use toys. Even though she doesn't always answer when you talk to her, she does understand a lot of what is said to her. And she will make choices about what she wants to do. In fact, she can be very determined.

Please don't tell your child that Elizabeth is "retarded". That term only labels her in a negative way by describing one characteristic. She is a bright, happy child who is very determined to explore her world. She swims and swings and plays in sandboxes. She hates television, but loves books. She has many friends and is learning a simple sign language that the other kids enjoy using.

Obviously, I have a lot to tell people about Elizabeth. If you have read this far, I hope you have found it interesting. Please call me any time if you have any questions or just want to visit.

Yours truly,
Susan Christensen,
Nebraska

Rosenkoetter, S. E., Hains, A. H., & Fowler, S. A. (1994). Bridging early services for children with special needs and their families: A practical guide for transition planning. Baltimore, Maryland: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company.