**EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF
STUDENTS' SPECIAL NEEDS**

A Guidebook for Catholic School Teachers

Second Edition

**Archdiocese of St. Louis
Catholic Education Office**

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EARLY IDENTIFICATION OF STUDENTS' SPECIAL NEEDS

Catholic Schools and Special Needs

Catholic schools are an extension of the mission Jesus Christ gave to his Church when He told his apostles to "Go forth and teach all nations". Therefore, Catholic schools are called to teach all children and youth whose families seek a Catholic education for them to the greatest extent possible within the school's human and financial resources.

Yet, many children and young people today have difficulty learning. In some cases, the difficulty relates directly to the cognitive or motor processes involved in learning, using language, or sustaining attention. In other cases, the difficulty relates to emotional, physical, social, or behavioral factors that affect students' ability to succeed in school.

In all cases, lack of success in learning keeps students from achieving their full potential and causes frustration and worry in the lives of students, their families, and their teachers. Unfortunately, many students' difficulties with learning in the school setting affect their sense of personal efficacy and their outlook on their ability to learn throughout their entire life. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to identify and address special needs that may exist as early as possible in a student's academic life.

The Importance of Teachers

The extent to which Catholic education achieves its mission depends primarily on teachers. Teachers have the closest contact with students, and their contact with students involves the core of Catholic schools' mission: religious formation and academic achievement.

Teachers have the opportunity to observe students first hand, on a daily basis, over an extended period of time. Teachers have information -- about students' academic strengths and weaknesses, their approaches to the task of learning, and their patterns of success or failure -- that no one else has. Therefore, teachers are of primary importance in identifying the students who may have some type of special need. In many cases, students who have special needs will be helped only if a teacher expresses concern and provides information.

The Information in this Booklet

Because teachers are key in helping students and their families get the necessary assistance when a special need may be present, this booklet contains information to help you:

- determine when a special need may be present;
- document information about what the student does or does not do that raises concern;
- communicate the concern to the student's family in collaboration with your principal or another appropriate staff member.

When Should I Be Concerned about the Possibility of a Special Need?

Concern about a special need arises when:

- a student displays a **pattern of atypical behavior(s)** in one or more areas (physical, motor, cognitive, attentional, language, speech, social, emotional, and/or behavioral).

  [On pages 4 through 7 of this booklet you will find a chart listing specific behaviors for each of these areas that <u>may</u> indicate the presence of a special need.]

A **pattern** of atypical behavior is characterized by:

- **frequency,**
- **intensity, and**
- **duration.**

A behavior is __atypical__ when it is unlike that of the vast majority of other students of the same age level, grade level, and developmental level. Rely upon your knowledge and experience of the typical development of students at the age level you work with.

What Specific Behaviors Are Signs that a Special Need Might Exist?

Please review the chart on pages 4-7 of this booklet. While you are being encouraged to act first by expressing concern to your principal and then with your principal to the student's family when you have reason to think a special need __may__ exist, it is also important to avoid jumping to conclusions. All students may exhibit many of these atypical behaviors at one time or another. It is the **frequency, intensity, and duration** of the behaviors that raise the possibility of a special need.

It is also important to refrain from "diagnosing" that a student has a learning disability, attention deficit disorder, etc. The teacher's role is to let the principal or learning consultant and the family know what you have observed and to help the principal or learning consultant encourage the family to take the necessary steps to have the student evaluated by a professional diagnostician. The goal of an evaluation is to understand the student's special need and to obtain recommendations for steps that can be taken to address and meet the student's need.

How Can I Keep Track of the Behaviors I Observe and the Strategies I Have Tried to Address the Difficulty Without It Taking a Lot of Time and Effort?

Behaviors can be documented in a variety of ways including logs, work samples, and checklists.
- Logs are notations of the date and time the behavior was observed and a brief description of what was said or done.
- Work samples are copies of students' assignments, tests, etc. that demonstrate difficulty with a particular skill.
- Checklists are lists of behaviors that seem to be problematic for a particular child you are observing with spaces in which you can note the frequency with which they occur.

There is no one right or correct method for documenting your concern. Any format that works for you will be very helpful in conveying information about your concern if it enables you to keep track of:

- the **frequency, intensity, and duration** of behaviors that raise concern, and
- the strategies you have already tried to address the behavior

What Should I Do if I am Concerned About a Particular Student?

The first step is to approach your principal or another appropriate person on your school's staff such as a learning consultant, counselor, or assistant principal. Describe the students' behaviors that are causing your concern. Determine whether the family should be contacted at this point and, if so, who will make the contact.

The principal or other appropriate person should meet with the family along with the teacher. The student's teacher needs to be involved in the meeting since only the teacher has the first hand information about the behaviors of concern. However, the teacher alone should not initiate discussion about the possibility of a special need with the student's family. The principal, learning consultant, etc., will be able to support the teacher and the family and to make suggestions for appropriate referrals to qualified professionals if necessary

to determine whether a special need exists and to obtain recommendations about strategies for addressing the need in the school setting.

Suggestions for the Teacher for Having a Successful Conference with the Student's Family

- Prepare well for the meeting. [A form to assist with planning and documenting the meeting can be found on page 8 of this booklet.]
- Review your documentation about the student's strengths and the areas that raise concern and about the strategies you have already tried to address your concern, and bring your documentation to the meeting.
- Clarify what you want to communicate and what you want to achieve.
- Explain as clearly as possible the details of what you have observed about the student and what you have done to address the behaviors that cause you to be concerned.
- Use examples, work samples, etc. to illustrate what you have observed.
- Take purposeful steps to put parents at ease. Compliment parents on their efforts to provide for their child's bests interest. Express respect for parents' ideas, observations, priorities, concerns, etc.
- Discuss the student's strengths as well as the areas about which you are concerned.
- Make suggestions for what can be done at home to build on the student's strength and address the student's problem areas.
- Realize that it may take several tries to achieve understanding.
- Consider parents' possible reactions (denial, blame, guilt, anger, grief, fear that results may mean needing to leave the school, etc.)

Suggestions for the Principal or Learning Consultant for Having a Successful Conference with the Student's Family

- Prepare well for the meeting. [A form to assist with planning and documenting the meeting can be found on page 8 of this booklet.]
- Discuss a plan of action with the family.
- Be clear about what the next steps are and identify who will take each step and how continuing communication will occur.
- Describe what the evaluation process is likely to entail.
- Make appropriate referrals to agencies or professionals, including vision and hearing screening.
- Appropriately balance realism with reassurance, support, and encouragement.
- Ask the parents to sign a release form to enable two way communication between the school and any agencies/professionals that are involved in making any diagnosis and recommendations (The Special Needs Resources Manual published by the Catholic Education Office contains a copy of the recommended release form.)
- Commit to examining the recommendations that accompany the evaluation report and conferring again with the parents to discuss what the school can realistically implement.
- Set a follow up meeting time.
- Make a record of the conference and the key points that were discussed. [A form to assist with planning and documenting the meeting can be found on page 8 of this booklet.]

BEHAVIORS THAT MAY INDICATE
THE PRESENCE OF A SPECIAL NEED

When considering the possibility that a special need might exist, it is important to look for a <u>pattern</u> of problematic behaviors in one or more of the following areas. It is especially important to take into account the <u>frequency</u> of the behaviors, the <u>intensity</u> of the behaviors (i. .e., the seriousness of the behaviors), and the <u>duration</u> of the behaviors (i.e., whether the behaviors persist over a period of time rather than being occasional or isolated occurrences). It is also important to consider the specific background of the student, e.g., cultural differences, previous experiences, etc., that may contribute to the behaviors being observed.

There is no magic number of behavioral signs or problematic categories that leads automatically to the conclusion that concern is warranted and that a special need is present. Rather, it is necessary for educators to use and to trust their knowledge of child development and their previous experiences with numerous children to determine whether a concern exists.

Physical	Motor
• holding objects closer or farther away than normal or in unusual positions • squinting or straining to see or read • complaining that words or images seem to "jump around" on the page • reading less accurately after reading for a period of time • not responding to sounds from sources that are out of sight • not responding to sounds of normal loudness • turning head toward sounds he/she wants to hear • being overly sleepy, lethargic, and/or lacking in energy • repeated rocking, foot tapping, etc • restless movement, fidgeting, squirming, etc. • walking on one's toes or other unusual gaits or postures	• difficulty with throwing, catching, climbing, running, hopping, skipping, or balancing • general lack of coordination • general awkwardness or clumsiness and/or frequent falls and collisions • difficulty with buttons, shoelaces, zippers, etc • difficulty with using scissors, eating utensils, art materials, etc. • difficulty with gripping a pencil, pen, or other small objects • difficulty with drawing, tracing, forming letters, etc. • difficulty with drawing intersecting lines and/or difficulty with actions that require crossing the midline of the body • difficulty copying from a model • unusually illegible writing, sloppy work, ripped or torn work, extensive erasures, etc.

Cognitive	Attentional
• problems with learning letters, numbers, days, colors, shapes, time, directional and positional terms, and concepts such as before/after, more/less, etc.	• being easily distracted
• difficulty with naming letters rapidly	• daydreaming, "spacing out"
• difficulty with making sound/letter associations	• often losing track or forgetting in daily activities
• inordinate confusion of symbols	• difficulty sustaining attention in tasks and in play
• transposition of numbers and/or sequences	• difficulty concentrating and/or focusing
• unusual difficulty with abstract thinking	• excessive instances of not listening
• difficulty with placing items in appropriate classifications	• not following directions and/or not responding when spoken to directly
• inordinate problems with summarizing and/or with open-ended questions	• oversensitivity or undersensitivity to sensory input (visual, tactile, auditory, etc.)
• unusual lack of background knowledge for one's age	• inordinate delay in beginning tasks or assignments
• learning at an unusually slow pace, especially developing new skills to the automatic level	• often losing items and/or being without items needed for tasks
• achievement significantly below age mates	• problems completing tasks
	• avoidance of and/or aversion to tasks requiring sustained effort
• poor memory, especially cumulative memory	• excessive restlessness, fidgeting, and/or squirming
• problems with ready recall of facts and/or procedures	• inability to remain quiet verbally and/or still physically
• unusual difficulty with details	• excessive difficulty remaining seated
• inordinate amount of careless errors	• running, climbing, etc., at inappropriate times
• unusual difficulty with following routines	• being easily excited
• unusual difficulty organizing tasks and/or activities	• impulsive responses, acting without thinking
• problems with procedures, multi-step tasks, and/or tasks requiring sequencing	• difficulty waiting one's turn
• problems making and carrying out plans related to completing projects or unstructured assignments, etc.	• excessive talking, talking out, interrupting, beginning to answer before questions are completed
• problems making choices from among options or alternatives	• shifting from activity to activity without purpose or completion
• inordinate problems with time management	• demanding immediate attention
	• difficulty self-monitoring one's own behavior
	• inappropriately grabbing things from others or removing them from their storage place

Oral and Written Language	Speech and Articulation
- inappropriate use of incomplete sentences - inappropriate grammar or usage for one's ages (e.g., "I seen it, her did it", etc.) - using gestures more than words to express oneself - frequent difficulty with finding the right word when speaking - difficulty following oral directions and/or comprehending or remembering information communicated orally compared to written and/or visual directions or information - frequent requests for information to be repeated - inappropriate responses to direct questions (i.e., answer is off topic, unrelated to question) - frequent imitation of what other students are doing in order to follow directions - problems with phonological skills such as rhyming, identifying similar sounds, discriminating between different sounds, recognizing connections between letters and sounds - difficulty naming common objects - frequent confusion of basic words - slow growth in vocabulary - inability to decode age-appropriate words by recognizing their component parts and/or sounds - reading at an unusually slow pace - reading words but not understanding their meaning - difficulty retelling age-appropriate stories - making of consistent reading and spelling errors such as reversals, inversions, transpositions, and substitutions - avoidance of and aversion to tasks involving reading and writing	- problems with pronunciation of common words - speech that is unusually hard to understand - getting stuck or hesitating on certain sounds or syllables so that the flow of speech is interrupted - speaking with an abnormal pitch, tone, volume, and/or pace - unusual voice quality characteristics such as raspiness, hoarseness, etc. **Social** - problems interpreting non-verbal cues including body language and facial expressions - not making eye contact with others - isolating oneself from peers - gravitating toward people outside peer group (i.e., preferring to be with much younger or much older children or with adults) - lack of spontaneous sharing of interests, achievements, enjoyment, etc., to an unusual degree - lack of emotional reciprocity - lack of acceptance by peer group - problems making and keeping friends - being easily led by peers and/or unusually gullible - lack of knowledge of social rules and conventions (e.g., taking turns) - problems with playing fair and playing within the rules of a game - being unusually uncooperative - inappropriate displays of affection or unusual aversion to being touched - precocious or inappropriate sexual behavior, verbalization, or involvement

Emotional	Emotional (Continued)
- quick and drastic mood changes or noticeable and dramatic personality change - frequent pouting and/or sulking - being overly serious and/or sad - frequent expressions of helplessness or hopelessness - expressions of being alienated or detached from people - dramatic loss of interest in friends, activities, play, etc. - frequent negative talk about one's worth, ability, etc. - excessive grouchiness, irritability, or agitation - being excessively tense, jumpy, nervous, or easily startled - crying often, easily, and/or uncontrollably - expressions of feeling out of control - inordinate preoccupation with death and dying, violence, etc. - any, even one, expression of suicidal thoughts - expressing concern about making mistakes, incurring criticism or correction, causing disappointment, etc. to an unusual degree - expressions of intense, disproportionate guilt - overly ruminating on one event (e.g., hurt feelings, embarrassment, painful memories, etc.) - being overly fearful (e.g., of losing things, of dirt/germs, of certain places or things, etc.) - exhibiting unusual difficulty being apart from parents or other significant adults - unusual problems trusting others - difficulty adjusting to new environments and/or aversion to trying new activities - excessive worrying about things that might happen, including catastrophes, disasters, etc. - excessive worrying about what others will think - physical symptoms apparently related to worry, fear, and/or stress	- easily becoming frustrated or angry - reacting out of proportion to the situation - unusual aversion to physical contact or unusual craving of affection - being overly preoccupied about body image, cleanliness, etc. - expressing delusions and/or hallucinations - upsetting repetitive thoughts that cannot be stopped - inordinate fixation on or preoccupation with one idea, topic, etc. - preoccupations with repetitive behaviors such as counting, checking, washing, arranging, collecting, touching, etc. - involuntary movements (blinking, twitching, tapping, facial contortions, shaking, biting, picking, etc.) - involuntary sounds (unintelligible sounds, obscenities, repetitive syllables, snorts, grunts, etc.) **Behavioral** - exhibiting an unusual degree of passivity or submissiveness - disturbing other students to an unusual degree - frequently acting or speaking in an impudent, sassy, and/or disrespectful manner - using inappropriate language - making inappropriate noises - teasing, picking on, harassing, and/or bullying other students - acting in an explosive and/or unpredictable manner - outbursts of temper - acting or speaking in a quarrelsome, argumentative, defiant, and/or stubborn manner - defying legitimate authority - drawing or writing about violent acts, drug/alcohol use, etc. - possessing/using drugs/alcohol and/or drug paraphernalia - vandalizing, destroying, or stealing property

• ignoring the consequences of one's actions	• making a threat of violence
• engaging in risky, dangerous, "daredevil"-type behaviors	• acting in an aggressive, violent, and/or destructive manner toward self, other persons, or animals
• denying responsibility and/or blaming others for one's actions	
• lying for attention or favors or to avoid consequences	

PARENT MEETING FORM

Student's Name: _____ **Date:** _____

People attending meeting:

    _____   _____

    _____   _____

    _____   _____

    _____   _____

Topics to be discussed and information to be communicated:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____

Actions agreed to be taken after this meeting:

	Action:	Person(s) Responsible:	Timeline
1.	_____	_____	_____
2.	_____	_____	_____
3.	_____	_____	_____
4.	_____	_____	_____

Follow-up meeting date: _____

Comments:

_____

_____

_____

_____