

**Special Needs and the Foreign Service: Common Misconceptions**  
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Having a child with special learning, physical or psychological needs is a challenging, frustrating and potentially rewarding experience for any family. All of these emotions may be multiplied exponentially when a family is internationally mobile. It is not only necessary for the employee parent to find an appropriate position every few years, but also identify locations where the educational and medical needs of all family members can be addressed.

At one time, it was not possible to consider a career in the Foreign Service if the family included a special needs child. That practice has changed, but there remains concern about the complexity of choosing assignments that provide needed educational and medical resources, especially if the time to identify appropriate bids is limited. There are, within the Department of State, a number of offices and a myriad of professionals ready to assist and support families from civilian Foreign Affairs agencies headed overseas. At times, however, the sheer question of where to start can seem overwhelming, and there is a lot of misinformation that can lead families in the wrong direction.

Some common misconceptions held by internationally mobile families include:

1. The Americans with Disabilities Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requirements apply to all American or international schools no matter where they are.

In the period prior to the mid-twentieth century children and young people with physical or mental disabilities were simply allowed to fall by the wayside in regular schools or, if the disability was severe, they were placed in schools or institutions where the care was custodial at best. The activist spirit of the 1960's and the advocacy by disabled veterans returning from Vietnam turned all this around. Federal laws were enacted requiring that in the US those with challenges have physical access to buildings, jobs and transportation and that an appropriate and free public education in the least restrictive environment be available to all children of school age.

This legislation has never applied to private schools anywhere and definitely not to public or private educational authorities outside of the United States. Most of the schools our children attend overseas are independent schools with boards of directors that establish policy for those schools. Even though many of these schools get relatively small grants through the Office of Overseas Schools and other divisions in the Department of State, they are not obligated to adhere to the US federal mandates on special needs.

That said, there have been numerous programs and initiatives designed to encourage the schools that serve our families to provide services. These programs include special grants

for the salaries of specialists, summer workshops for faculty and administrators, consultants for in-service training, the development of targeted training materials such as the publications *Transitioning Overseas with a Special Needs Child* and *Making the Difference: Differentiation in International Schools* and more . The Office of Overseas Schools puts out a list, updated yearly, of several hundred schools around the world that provide special services.

2. None of the various offices in Washington involved with identifying special needs and evaluating services at Foreign Service posts talk to each other.

There are several offices in the Department of State staffed by professionals with a mandate to assist families with special needs children and they all have each other on speed dial. Families who know or suspect that their child has special needs must first contact the Employee Consultation Service (ECS) which is part of the Medical Division. Families abroad should contact their Regional Medical Officer. One of several highly experienced social workers will be assigned to continuing coordination of the case including assessment, educational planning and clearances. If the child has been in Special Education in the US and has a current Individual Education Plan (IEP) the next move is identifying posts where the specified accommodations are available. If the child needs to be evaluated, ECS will organize the assessment here or abroad. ECS works with the Office of Allowances to authorize the funding of the accommodations specified in the IEP.

If the employee parent is due to be assigned overseas, the search for appropriate educational and medical services should begin early. The employee should work with his or her Career Development Officer to generate a short list of assignment possibilities. Parents can then follow up with ECS and the Office of Overseas Schools (OS) to determine which posts have schools that can provide the specified accommodations. The Overseas Briefing Center at the Foreign Service Institute and the FS Special Needs Listserve are also good sources of information. If boarding school is a possibility the Education and Youth Officer in the Family Liaison Office (FLO) is an excellent referral resource. All of these offices have user friendly websites and can also be contact by phone, e-mail or in person.

Once the research is complete, the final step is to contact the school and post directly to make sure that the school has space available and indeed has the services required. In some cases, schools may want detailed test reports to be e-mailed or faxed to assure a good fit.

3. All the information available in Washington is outdated.

All of the offices mentioned above have good sources of information on schools and services and are working continually to improve the quantity and accessibility of that information. The Office of Overseas Schools is staffed with five experienced

international educators, Regional Education Officers (REOs), who spend much of the year traveling abroad and visiting schools. In addition to the OS-assisted schools, they visit other schools used by US families and any facility that might provide a quality special needs program. The office also collects information from schools directly through questionnaires and through Community Liaison Office Coordinators (CLOs). At times OS sends consultants to a certain country or region to evaluate the special needs resources. The information gathered is available at any time from the office or from the REO responsible for that area. REOs can be contacted by e-mail even when they are on the road. ECS also has extensive information on resources at various posts. The Overseas Briefing Center part of the Transition Center at the Foreign Service Institute has a range of material including some with comments from individuals serving at posts in Personal Post Insights.

That said, sometimes things change quickly. A therapist may move away or a school may eliminate a program. That is the reason for the requirement that a family make real time contact with the school before an assignment is confirmed.

4. If a school abroad can meet my child's educational needs they will also be able to provide other services such as speech therapy or occupational therapy.

Parents accustomed to the one-stop-shopping of US public school divisions are often dismayed to find that international schools, even large schools with special education programs, do not provide services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy or psychological testing and counseling. Sometimes it is because these services are not typically found in an educational setting in the host country or because the number of students requiring these specialized services is too small to make it cost effective. Parents may need to work with the Regional Medical Officer (RMO), the CLO or other embassy personnel to identify service providers.

5. All students with the same diagnosis should be able to be served at the same school or post.

Most of those with special needs children are aware that there is a wide degree of variation within the same diagnostic spectrum. The autistic spectrum, for example ranges from girls with Rett Syndrome, who are non-verbal and often wheelchair bound, to highly gift young people with Asperger's Syndrome, and everything in between. A learning disability may be auditory or visual, mild or severe. Determining a good fit requires an IEP for that particular child with the required accommodations spelled out very clearly and in detail. Word of mouth that a certain community worked for a child with the same diagnosis as your son or daughter is not good enough.

6. Gifted services are handled just like any other special needs case.

Young people with intellectual gifts and talents are not covered in the US by the same federal legislation as students who are challenged. Many US school divisions do provide services for students identified as intellectually gifted. If a student has been identified as

gifted by his or her school or a special program in the US and is subsequently enrolled in an overseas school without a gifted program, an allowance for enrichment activities is available. If an international school or parent believes that a student may be gifted and in need of services, assessment by a major university can be arranged through the Office of Overseas Schools. The Regional Education Officers will assist families with arrangements.

#### 7. Boarding options are limited for special needs students

The Education and Youth Officer in the Family Liaison Office is the primary resource for boarding school information for a student with or without special needs. There are many excellent schools that provide every level of academic and psychological support available in the United States and abroad. Some college preparatory schools have structured study skills options that may be enough support for a student with a mild learning disability or Attention Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). There are other schools specifically dedicated to the education and treatment of young people with more severe challenges such as Pervasive Developmental Delay or serious psychiatric conditions. If a student needs a highly specialized placement or one on short notice, the Education and Youth Officer may refer the family to one of several specialized consultants in the Washington area or around the world. Organizations such as the National Association of Therapeutic Schools and Programs (NATSAP) or The Association of Boarding Schools (TABS) may be helpful.

The Transition Center at the Foreign Service Institute held a full day workshop for parents on May 29, 2008, which included representatives of all the offices charged with supporting families with special needs children. The Family Liaison Office continues to advocate for assignment and allowance policies that give families maximum flexibility. The Office of Allowances revisits the legislative and regulatory guidelines constantly to assist families and posts with the technical and financial aspects of special education accommodations. The Office of Overseas Schools sponsors several summer workshops for teachers and administrators specifically focused on serving special needs students and continually develops materials, consults with schools and researches options around the world. The Employee Consultation Service reviews every case yearly to be sure that each child is moving toward maximizing his or her potential. This network of professionals and the informal information sharing among parents in our community will continue to make the path smoother for special needs families.

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