

Spring Is Better When We Show Up for Each Other

Spring is a season of fresh starts—and for many of us, that means finding new energy, new hope, and new connections. At **Families Helping Families of Southwest Louisiana**, we aren't just an organization serving families. We are families of people with disabilities, walking this journey right alongside you.

We know how busy and exhausting life can be. We know some days it feels easier to stay home than to attend a meeting or event. But we also know how powerful it is to be in a room—virtual or in person—with people who truly understand. People who live it every day. People who don't need explanations.

Our events, meetings, and support opportunities are about sharing real experiences, learning from one another, and reminding ourselves that we don't have to do this alone.

Come as you are. Bring your questions, your worries, your wins, or just yourself. There's always a place for you here.

This spring, we hope you'll join us—because when families come together, we all grow stronger. Keep reading for all of the upcoming training, support and other opportunities for you to join us!



FHF SWLA Mission:

Our mission is to enable and empower individuals with disabilities and their families by providing information, referral, education, training, peer support, and advocacy skills.

Like Us On Facebook

Want to keep up to date with FHF of SWLA?

Like our Facebook page!! You will receive event information and other bulletins about what is going on in the SWLA region!

www.facebook.com/fhfwla/

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EARTH DAY



WED, APR 22, 2026

*Good
Friday*



FHF office will be closed
Fri, Apr 3, 2026 in
Observance of
Good Friday



Early Steps would like to invite you to participate in the
**State Interagency Coordinating Council (SICC) and the
Regional Interagency Coordinating Council (RICC)**

to discuss early intervention strategies for the state of Louisiana and the Southwest Louisiana Region. All family members are invited to attend, including providers and other early intervention personnel. Our mission is to: -Provide a way to participate in the SICC and RICC to represent regional issues.

The SICC meeting will be held on:

Thursday, May 14, 2026

1:00 p.m.- 2:30 p.m. via Zoom

&

The RICC meeting will be held on:

Wednesday, June 17, 2026

1:30 p.m.- 3:00 p.m. via Zoom

Please contact Patrick Juneau for Zoom information
at (337) 359-8748 or email: Patrick.Juneau@LA.GOV

Thank you in advance for your participation. If you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to contact me.

A Day In OUR SHOES

Tried & Tested 4 Step Advocacy Strategy= Real Results

Here's the high-trust model that actually works now—and how I'll help you learn it and use it.

Inside Don't IEP Alone Academy, I teach you the same simple step-by-step plan I've used for my own child's IEP... to help thousands of parents get real results...even in hostile school districts.

Together, we'll set up just 4 simple steps using your child's files and information—easy to follow, easy to maintain, and powerful enough to keep working even when the school pushes back.

1. **Your IEP Data & Documentation, Untangled** — A clear, step-by-step review process that helps you understand what's actually in your child's records... and what's missing. This is how you stop relying on "trust" and start relying on facts.
2. **Your Parent Voice Power Letter** — A proven template and framework to write parent concerns that get results. No more getting brushed off or ignored, this is how you make your voice matter on paper.
3. **Your IDEA Leverage Tools + Parents Rights** — Learn how to use the IEP process and built-in protections to your advantage—so you're not just participating, you're influencing outcomes.
4. **Your IEP Meeting + Follow-Up Strategy** — Go into your next IEP meeting with confidence, and leave with a plan. You'll also know exactly what to do after the meeting to make sure the IEP is implemented.

Together, these four steps create your IEP Advocacy System: a repeatable, reliable process that becomes the foundation of how you show up at the IEP table. It builds trust, keeps schools accountable, and gets your child the support they need...not just once, but every single year.



INCLUSIVE PROM FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH
DISABILITIES 15 & OLDER

ENCHANTED *Evening*

Attire: Formal Wear or Sunday Best

*Join us for Enchanted Evening, an inclusive
prom where teens and adults of all abilities can
enjoy music, dancing, and a magical night.*

*Sensory-friendly tent open to those who
may need a break.*

Friday, May 1, 2026

6:30 PM - 8:30 PM



Lake Charles Event Center
Buccaneer Room

Link to Register:

<https://tinyurl.com/EEIP52026>

www.fhfswla.org - 337.436.2570



IDEA and Parental Rights

A Parent's Guide to IEP Extended School Year (ESY)

If your child has an IEP, you undoubtedly are surrounded by special education acronyms all the time. One of the more frequently used acronyms is ESY. ESY means Extended School Year.



Parents, please don't wait until the end of the school year to address IEP concerns — teams are busy NOW, and it will be harder to find time that works for you both.

Submitted by: Beryl Cook

How do I create an online account to renew Medicaid?

Go to the Medicaid self-service portal on your computer or mobile device.

1. At the bottom right corner of the page, click on "I would like to create an account".
2. You will be taken to the "Before You Create an Account" screen. This will tell you what you need to get started, including:
 - You will need an email address and access to that email. To finish creating your account, we must send an email to you to be sure we have the right contact for your account. That is the last step to create your account.
 - You will be asked to create a user ID, password, and a six-digit PIN. Be sure to save the user ID, password, and PIN in a safe place. You will need them later. DO NOT use your email address as your User ID.
3. Click "Next" at the bottom right corner of the screen to move to the "Create an Account" screen.

There are three (3) steps you must fill out to create an account:

Step 1: Personal Information– you will need to enter your name and email address.

Step 2: Your Account Credentials – this is where you pick out your User ID, password, and PIN. Remember, your User ID cannot be your email address.

Step 3: The Security Check – enter the letters or numbers from the image to prove you are not a robot.

4. Click the "Create an Account" button.



5. After clicking "Create an Account," you will get an email from Medicaid at the email address you entered in the personal information step. The email will ask you to click a link to finish creating your account. Click the link and finish your account setup.

Join the ADHD Club

From the New York Times bestselling authors of *ADHD Is Awesome* comes an empowering and joyful book that invites young readers to join the ADHD Club—a celebration of creativity, resilience, and the endless possibilities that come with thinking differently!

Welcome to the ADHD Club!

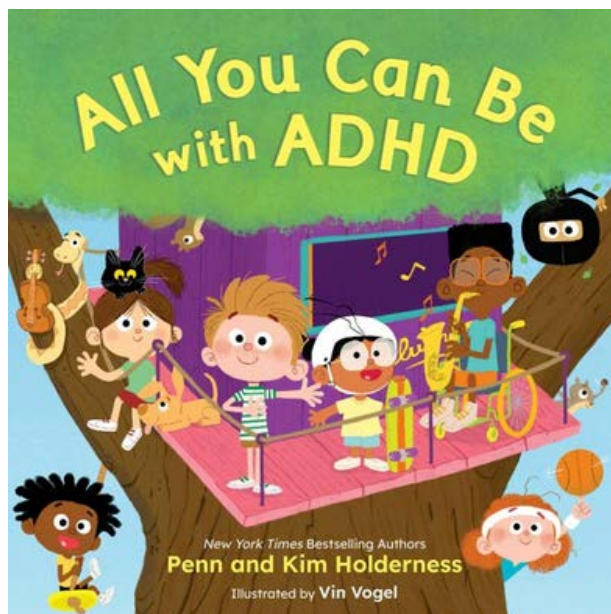
If your brain's like ours, then you may be different. You may be fantastic, you may be vociferant! If your brain's like ours, you might struggle with concentration. But only because you're finding some true inspiration! If your brain's like ours, you'll soon see . . . you're not alone with your ADHD.

Written in playful rhyme and filled with humor, this story will help young readers who have been diagnosed with ADHD (or who have someone they care about with ADHD) feel seen, understood, and empowered to embrace their pretty cool brains.

About the Author

Penn and Kim Holderness are the New York Times bestselling authors of *All You Can Be with ADHD* and *ADHD is Awesome*, social media creators, award-winning podcasters, game creators, and winners of *The Amazing Race*. Their viral videos have garnered over three billion views and have been featured on *Good Morning America*, the *Today* show, Fox News Channel, and CNN. Penn and Kim live in Raleigh, North Carolina, with their children, Lola and PC, and their dog, Sunny. They invite you to visit them online at theholdernessfamily.com.

Vin Vogel is the bestselling illustrator of *All You Can Be with ADHD*. He is known for creating the Yeti series and has illustrated over sixty books for young readers in various countries. After living in New York City, he returned to Rio de Janeiro, where he lives with his cats, surrounded by books, plants, and surfboards. He invites you to visit him at vinvogel.com.



High Schooler Makes Braille Keyboards For Under \$10. Here's How

by Vashti Harris, NJ.com/TNS | February 20, 2026

PRINCETON, N.J. — Three years ago, Umang Sharma could be found on his bedroom floor disassembling a computer keyboard to learn about the mechanisms that makes the device function.

This act of deconstruction came after Sharma, then a Princeton Day School freshman, stumbled across an ad for a Braille keyboard priced at \$7,000.

"I couldn't accept that accessibility tools were priced out of reach for so many people," said Sharma, now a 17-year-old senior who plans to study engineering and computing in college. "I thought, 'if the core need is being able to type independently, why should that cost thousands of dollars?'"

After taking apart his first keyboard and watching several YouTube videos, Sharma created his first prototype, continued to retest variations for over a year, and figured out how to recreate the device for under \$10 each.

"Instead of building an entirely custom electronic device, I start with a standard keyboard base, often discarded or donated, and I focus my engineering on the accessibility layer that matters most, which is tactile, readable, durable Braille keycaps," said Sharma, who launched the nonprofit Jdable in 2022 to design affordable devices to help improve the lives of people with disabilities.

Sharma said he's able to keep costs low by designing the keyboard's Braille keycaps himself and using 3D-printing as well as inexpensive materials to create them in bulk. We take the keyboard base first, that are often donated or discarded. Then, we design the keycaps ahead of time in Computer-Aided Design software so the Braille dots, spacing, and fit are consistent," he said.

By using 3D printing, Sharma said his company is able to create its Braille keycaps by using a combination of PETG, a thermoplastic for toughness, and another rubber-like thermoplastic called TPU for a grippier feel, plus a resin for definition.

After assembling the keyboard by hand, Sharma said that he or one of over 50 student volunteers attaches each key individually using a strong adhesive and tests each keyboard for clarity, durability, and comfort.

"We also iterate based on feedback, including from team members who are visually impaired, to improve comfort and usability," said Sharma.

By also developing a standardized method for building the keyboards, Sharma said helps ensure the device can be rebuilt using different keyboard models.

From an early age, Sharma said he always liked building and fixing things.

"When I was five years old, my first invention was a small holder to keep my dad from constantly losing his glasses, and that mindset stuck with me," he said.

This mentality drove Sharma to create his earliest Braille keyboard prototype and conduct numerous retests to improve its comfortability and durability.

He also visited a school for students who are blind and visually impaired in India, where he realized that, "accessibility is about daily reality, not a demo. It made me committed

to building tools that don't just work once, but keep working in the real world."

A regular keyboard, Sharma explained, is designed primarily for sighted users who rely on printed letters.

"A Braille keyboard adds a tactile system so a user who is blind or visually impaired can locate keys confidently through touch and type more independently," he said.

There are different categories of Braille keyboards, like braille notetakers or refreshable braille display systems with complex moving parts that Sharma said can cost over \$6,000.

"What we build at Jdable is a practical, low-cost input solution, a familiar QWERTY layout made accessible through tactile Braille keycaps that support learning, schoolwork, and everyday computer use on a standard setup," said Sharma.

Today, Sharma and his team of student volunteers have distributed over 100 affordable Braille keyboards through his nonprofit.

Sharma said those keyboards have been given to nearly 1,000 students who are blind or visually impaired in the U.S., India, Finland, and the United Arab Emirates.

He said the nonprofit has been sustained by grants totaling \$490,000 from companies like Google and Microsoft, while also receiving around \$10,000 in donations from individual contributors.

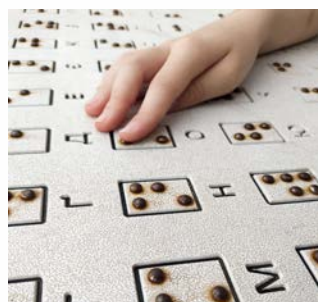
Ankith Namireddy, 17, fellow Princeton Day School 12th grader, began helping Sharma in 2024 and manages the nonprofit's finances, which includes applying for grants and securing funding.

"I chose to help because I saw that the problem he was addressing was severely overlooked," said Namireddy, who plans to attend college and major in business/finance. "I believed we could genuinely make an impact on this community. I have always wanted to help people, and being able to do that while still pursuing finance made everything align perfectly."

The funding, Sharma said, also covers the nonprofit's expenses, ranging from the costs of materials to hosting user feedback sessions.

"It is the most rewarding project I have ever worked on. It isn't about creating a really cool invention but about independence, giving someone the ability to type ... and not have to wait for someone else to do it for you," Sharma said.

"I have learned that accessibility isn't just charity," he added, "but developing infrastructure for dignity."



**THE GOVERNOR'S ADVISORY
COUNCIL ON DISABILITY AFFAIRS
& SPLIT SECOND FOUNDATION**

Present the Second Annual

**Disability
Awareness Day**

at the Capitol

May 4, 2026

LOUISIANA STATE CAPITOL | 900 N THIRD STREET, BATON ROUGE, LA 70802

SPLIT SECOND
FOUNDATION



GOVERNOR'S ADVISORY COUNCIL
ON DISABILITY AFFAIRS
OFFICE OF GOV. JEFF LANDRY

Social Emotional Developmental Delay – Let's Talk About It!

A social-emotional developmental delay is often overlooked and manifests as struggles with transitions, demands, and emotional regulation. In special education, addressing these needs involves tailored goals, related services like counseling, and accommodations such as visual schedules. Parents are crucial in promoting emotional intelligence through open communication and seeking early intervention. Children can navigate these challenges and thrive with proactive support from home and school.

Social Emotional Developmental Delay in Public Schools: Navigating Challenges

When your child enters the public school system, it can be scary—even for a parent whose children have been in a “structured setting” since they were six years old and eight weeks old. As a mental health professional, I've always worked in foster care, school settings, and early childhood development settings. I thought I had prepared for the challenges of public school, but I had not.

I have two children in these “structured” yet caring settings where the teachers had the time to address their sensory needs. Then they entered a setting where transitions weren't a choice, not working wasn't a choice, and attempting to understand their perspective wasn't always feasible. Enter a social-emotional developmental delay.

What is Social Emotional Developmental Delay?

Parents and caregivers can observe a social-emotional developmental delay when a child does not reach expected milestones at various ages, such as three, six, or nine months. It also occurs when a child does not reach the expected social milestones (i.e., smiling, playing, interacting with others, expressing oneself, and developing strong self-esteem).

How Can This Be Presented in the School Setting?

When a child enters the school setting, this can look like:

- Struggling with transitions
- Struggling with demands
- Displaying signs of dysregulation during requests (i.e., yelling, screaming, throwing, crying, attempting to elope)

When my children entered the school setting, the above is what occurred. I know you're thinking, “Had this not been a struggle before?” It had, but not to this extent, why? In their previous setting, they got more support and understanding due to having less strict requirements (i.e., academics and stricter schedules) and more choices (i.e., if you don't want to do this, you don't have to). Another factor was that they didn't learn the skills to navigate this strict schedule because it was not something parents had seen them endure.

What Does Social Emotional Developmental Delay Look Like in Special Education?

Both of my children would eventually receive special education services; one is Autistic, and one has a speech delay. We noted the impact of social-emotional developmental delay on them and began to look at how special education can help.

Special education can address social-emotional developmental delay in the following ways:

- Category of Eligibility: If your child is eligible for special education services, the eligibility category is Developmental Delay. Sometimes, Social Emotional Developmental Delay or Global Developmental Delay is listed.

- Goals: Requesting goals in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that address:
 - o Self-advocacy: Requesting breaks, wants, and needs.
 - o Interoception: Recognition of where they feel feelings.
- o Problem-solving: Identifying problems that are triggers and how to cope and solve those problems.
 - o Social emotional: Labeling feelings and emotions.
- Related Services: Requesting related services like counseling, psychological, or social work services allows teaching the abovementioned skills. These services facilitate group interaction and conversation about coping skills and problem-solving.
- Speech Services: Can address pragmatic skills and social interactions.
- Accommodations: These include requesting a check-in with a trusted person, using a visual schedule or visual timer to prepare for transitions, taking extra time when transitioning, and scheduling breaks.

How Parents Can Promote Social and Emotional Development

Outside of special education services, there are various strategies parents can use to promote social-emotional development:

1. Talk to your children about how to label feelings and emotions, where they feel them, and how to communicate them.
2. Use videos and books to read to them about those feelings, how to communicate them, and their wants and needs safely.
3. Request a special education evaluation in writing to observe these transitions and demands being placed, as well as the dysregulation that can appear.

Overcoming Developmental Delays

Hearing that your child has a developmental delay can be scary. Still, you can address and work on developmental delays, especially by employing early intervention and starting to preemptively address emotions and feelings at home. Then, as they get older, continue those conversations and support them. Once they enter the school setting, having a supportive school team also helps.



"If there is no struggle, there is no progress."

- Frederick Douglass



THE SENSORY BRAIN:

*Understanding
How We Process
the World*

APRIL 20, 2026

1 PM - 2:30 PM

Join us for an exciting webinar that will unlock the mysteries of sensory integration and go beyond traditional views, diving into the various sensory systems. We hope that this webinar will leave you with a deeper, more compassionate understanding of how the sensory brain works and how to help children with disabilities thrive in a sensory-rich world.

Guest Speaker:

Vonda Flue, M.O.T./L.O.T.R.
Occupational Therapist

Link to Register:

<https://tinyurl.com/SB042026>

For More Information, contact China Guillory at:

(337) 436-2570 ♦ 1-800-894-6558

info@fhfswla.org



Virtual Family Support Group for Parents & Caregivers

Monday, April 27, 2026 from 12 PM to 1 PM

Being part of a family with a member who has a disability can bring unique joys and challenges. This group offers a safe, supportive space where parents and caregivers can connect, share experiences, and encourage one another. Join us to talk about the stresses, celebrate the wins, and build friendships with others who truly understand.

Link to Register:

<https://tinyurl.com/VFSG042726>



FREEDOM day

JUNE TEENTH

FHF will be closed
Friday, June 19, 2026,
to celebrate
Juneteenth Day

Why Medicaid Patients Nationwide Struggle To Find Doctors

by Kristine de Leon, OregonLive.com/TNS | February 17, 2026

When people on Medicaid look for a doctor, the search often starts with a long list of names that makes health care seem within reach.

But for many patients, that list often turns into a string of dead ends. Phone calls go unanswered. Offices say they aren't taking new Medicaid patients. Or the earliest appointment is months away. Eventually, people give up.

A new national study led by Oregon Health & Science University researchers helps explain why.

The study, published this month in the journal Health Affairs, found that nearly a third of roughly 400,000 physicians enrolled in the safety net program did not see a single Medicaid patient in a given year.

Researchers call them "ghost" providers — doctors who appear on paper but don't show up in patients' real experience of getting care, a gap driven by how Medicaid measures participation and how provider networks work.

"It's not just administrative friction, it's a psychological issue and an access issue," said Dr. Jane Zhu, the study's senior author and an associate professor of medicine at OHSU. "From a patient perspective, this is adding real burdens."

In many cases, doctors stay enrolled because their hospital or clinic requires it, even when their practices are full of patients with private insurance, according to the study's authors.

Others enroll early in their careers and later stop accepting Medicaid patients without formally unenrolling, the researchers said.

The authors said the gap between being listed as a Medicaid provider and actually seeing patients has "critical implications for access," because low participation can make it harder for patients to get timely care.

Medicaid is the nation's largest public insurance program, covering more than 75 million people, including low-income families, children, and people with disabilities. States and Medicaid health plans often rely on provider enrollment data to judge whether patients have adequate access to care.

But Zhu said that access measures can be misleading. Provider directories often reflect which doctors are authorized to take Medicaid, not which ones are actually seeing patients, she said — making networks appear larger than they are.

"Enrollment files just tell you if they're eligible to participate ... but it doesn't say anything about whether their panels are closed, if there are staffing shortages, or if they have availability to see patients," she said.

To examine that disconnect, researchers analyzed federal Medicaid enrollment records alongside billing claims from 2019 through 2021. They focused on five specialties commonly used by Medicaid patients: primary care, psychiatry, cardiology, dermatology, and ophthalmology.

Across those specialties, the authors found that "Medicaid enrollment did not consistently translate into active participation."

Researchers found that about 28% of enrolled physicians did not treat any Medicaid patients in those areas, while another 10% saw fewer than 10 patients. Meanwhile, a third of the overall group of Medicaid-enrolled physicians in the study treated more than 150 Medicaid patients, meaning much of the care was handled by a small share of providers. Zhu said that when a small group of physicians carries most of the load, a clinic closure or a doctor leaving can quickly leave patients scrambling to find a new provider.

The problem was especially stark in mental health care.

Researchers found that over 40% of psychiatrists enrolled in Medicaid did not see a single Medicaid patient in the year studied.

Even psychiatrists who did participate in Medicaid saw very few patients. The typical psychiatrist treated only three Medicaid patients per year.



That's troubling, Zhu said, because Medicaid covers a disproportionate share of people with serious mental illness. KFF, a health policy research organization, estimates that nearly 40% of nonelderly adults on Medicaid have a mental health or substance use condition. Federal data shows that about half of Medicaid enrollees with mental health needs say they aren't getting the care they need.

The authors wrote that low Medicaid participation among psychiatrists likely reflects a mix of "low reimbursement rates, administrative burdens associated with Medicaid billing, high provider turnover, and factors related to the social and medical complexities of Medicaid enrollees."

The researchers said doctors aren't trying to mislead patients. The problem, they said, is a system that counts those enrolled in Medicaid, not those available to provide care. The study used a national Medicaid claims database and excluded Oregon, South Dakota, and Arkansas because of reporting inconsistencies in the states' federal data, Zhu said. But a 2022 Oregon-specific study by her team found similar patterns, especially in mental health care, suggesting the problem is not unique to the state.

Ultimately, Zhu said, states and federal officials need to rethink how they measure access to care — relying less on provider lists and more on data that reflect whether patients are getting care.

She said a clearer picture of real-world access could help public dollars be spent in ways that meaningfully help Medicaid patients get the care they've been promised.



How Summer Is a Good Time to Prepare for Next Year's IEP

When the school year ends, many families feel both relief and exhaustion. After months of homework, therapy visits, meetings, and busy mornings, summer can feel like a much-needed break. For families raising children with disabilities, that break is especially important. Summer gives families time to rest, reconnect, and enjoy a slower pace.

Summer can also be a good time to quietly get ready for the next school year.

Preparing for the next Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting does not have to be stressful. It can be simple. In fact, summer can be one of the best times to think about what worked well this year and what your child may need next.

With fewer daily duties, parents can take small steps that help the next school year go more smoothly.

The key is to keep things simple.

Below are a few ideas to help you use the summer months to get ready for next year's IEP while still enjoying the summer.

Start With a Simple Reflection

Before the details of the school year fade, take a few minutes to think about how things went for your child.

You do not need to write a long report. A short list or a few notes can help later when the next IEP meeting comes around.

You might ask yourself:

- What progress did my child make this year?
- Which supports or services helped the most?
- Were there any challenges that kept happening?
- Did communication with the school work well?
- Were there goals that seemed too easy or too hard?

Your thoughts as a parent are important. You see parts of your child's learning and behavior that the school team may not see.

Writing down your thoughts now can help you speak more clearly about your child's needs later. Keep a Small Summer Learning Journal.

Summer activities can show a lot about how a child learns and grows. Many parents find it helpful to keep simple notes during the summer.

You might write down things like:

- New skills your child practices
- Activities your child enjoys
- Situations that cause stress or frustration
- Improvements in communication
- Social time with siblings, cousins, or friends

You do not need to write every day. Even a few notes during the summer can give helpful examples when talking about goals or supports at the next IEP meeting.

For example, maybe your child learns to help cook, follow a routine, or handle small amounts of money during summer outings. These real-life skills can help guide future IEP goals.

Practice Life Skills That Support School Success

Summer is a great time to practice skills that help children succeed in school and in everyday life.

Many important skills are not learned from worksheets or tests. They grow through real experiences.

Here are a few skills families can practice during the summer:

- Following simple routines
- Keeping track of personal items
- Communicating needs and choices
- Taking turns and sharing
- Helping with small chores at home
- Solving simple problems

For older students, summer can also be a time to build independence skills such as:

- Working a daily schedule
- Using helpful technology tools

These experiences can help parents see what supports or accommodations may help their child at school.

Organize Your IEP Documents

If your paperwork drawer or folder feels a little messy, summer is a great time to organize it.

Keeping your child's records in one place can make future meetings much easier.

You might organize:

- Your child's most recent
- Evaluation reports
- Progress reports from school
- Emails or notes from teachers or therapists
- Notes from past meetings
- Medical or therapy information

Some parents like using a binder with tabs. Others prefer digital folders on their computer or phone. Choose the system that works best for you.

When everything is in one place, it is easier to find the information you need.

Think About Future Goals

IEP goals should help your child grow in ways that matter in daily life.

Summer is a good time to think about what skills may help your child most in the coming year.

You might ask yourself:

What skills would help my child be more independent?

What areas still feel difficult?

What would I love to see my child do this year?

For younger children, goals may focus on communication, behavior supports, or early learning skills.

For older students, goals might include self-advocacy, organization, social skills, or preparation for jobs and independent living.

You do not need to write formal goal statements. Just thinking about these areas can help guide the conversation at your next IEP meeting.

Stay Connected With Your Support Network

Summer can also be a good time to connect with other parents and organizations that support families of children with disabilities.

Talking with others who understand the journey can be positive. It can also help you come up with new ideas.

You might:

Attend a parent support group

Join a community event

Participate in a virtual training or webinar

Reach out to a local resource center

These activities can remind parents that they are not alone and that help is available.

A Simple Summer IEP Preparation Checklist

If you like checklists, here is an easy way to prepare for the next school year without feeling overwhelmed.

Summer IEP Preparation Checklist

- ☐ Think about how the past school year went
 - ☐ Write down a few notes about your child's progress
 - ☐ Keep simple notes about summer learning experiences
 - ☐ Practice daily living and independence skills
 - ☐ Organize important school and IEP documents
 - ☐ Think about areas where your child may need new supports or goals
 - ☐ Connect with parent support groups or advocacy organizations
- Even completing a few of these steps can make a big difference.

Remember: You Are an Important Member of the IEP Team

One of the most important things to remember is that parents are key members of the IEP team.

Your experiences, observations, and hopes for your child matter. When you feel prepared, it becomes easier to speak up for what your child needs.

Preparing for an IEP does not have to happen all at once. Small steps during the summer can help you feel more organized and confident when the school year begins again.

Most importantly, remember to enjoy the season.

Take time for family moments, quiet evenings, and activities that bring joy. Children learn and grow in many ways during the summer. Those experiences are just as valuable as what happens in the classroom.

When the next school year begins, you may be glad you took a few simple steps to prepare—while still leaving plenty of time for rest, fun, and summer memories.



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WHEELCHAIR DRIVE

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WHEELS FOR THE WORLD

DONATE

We are collecting *manual* wheelchairs
in ALL conditions to help provide mobility
to those in need all around the world!

One Day Only Drop Off:

Saturday, April 11, 2026

10 am - 2 pm

Harvest Community Center in Morganfield

4590 CORBINA ROAD
LAKE CHARLES, LA 70607

Contact: firstpresbyterianlakecharles@gmail.com

Joni and Friends Louisiana 225.334.8454 louisiana@joniandfriends.org



The Benefits of Gardening for People with Learning Disabilities

Published by Elanor Dean on 07/05/2024

Gardening is a rewarding and therapeutic activity; it can provide physical, mental, and emotional benefits for people of all abilities.

Engaging in gardening creates a connection with the ever-changing seasons throughout the year. Whether you're acquiring the skill of weaving willows for winter wreaths, delicately sowing seeds during blossoming spring, or simply enjoying nature's vibrant display of colors in the summer, gardening offers a unique and rewarding experience for each individual. In this blog, we will explore why we think gardening is beneficial for people with learning disabilities.

Exercise and physical health.

Gardening is an excellent form of physical exercise for people with learning disabilities. Whilst it might not seem as intense as other activities like swimming or running, it still encourages you to move your body.

Did you know that completing tasks in the garden, such as pulling weeds or watering plants, can elevate your heart rate and keep your body active?

One of the greatest things about gardening is that it can be easily adapted to suit your needs. Whether that is gardening at your own pace, utilizing modified gardening equipment, or using a raised flower bed for easier access.

Sensory benefits.

Gardening offers a safe space for you to explore your creative side, you can design your garden exactly how you would like it whether it is your own garden, a shared courtyard, a windowsill, or a community garden, you can incorporate a variety of plants and flowers with different colors, textures, scents and sounds that bring you joy and a therapeutic sensory experience.

Engaging with our gardens awakens every part of our bodies and minds, from the scents of fresh herbs to the delicious taste of our homegrown fruit and vegetables.

Well-being.

Gardening is a mindful activity that requires you to focus and be in the moment. Research shows that gardening can reduce stress, depression, and anxiety while promoting a sense of purpose. For people with disabilities, gardening offers a therapeutic safe space where you can think positively while having a little time in nature. Spending time outdoors and breathing fresh air can raise levels of oxygen in your brain, which boosts your levels of serotonin and improves your mood.

Gardening encourages us to be gentle and calm, which is soothing in this fast-paced world.

Learning new skills.

Gardening offers many opportunities for learning and development. It allows you to learn about how to look after your garden, the different fruits and vegetables, and understanding the patterns in nature and the joy that comes from being outside. Always remember, no matter your abilities, gardening can be fun and accessible for all.





SPRING

BREAK

Allen Parish - April 3-10, 2026
Beauregard Parish - April 3-10, 2026
Calcasieu Parish - April 3-10, 2026
Cameron Parish - April 6-9, 2026
Jeff Davis Parish - April 3-10, 2026



May is Mental Health Awareness Month

Mental Health Awareness Month, observed every May since 1949, fights stigma, provides support, and educates the public about mental illness. The 2026 theme from Mental Health America is "More Good Days, Together," focusing on community connection, while NAMI's theme highlights "In Every Story, There's Strength". It promotes wellness through advocacy and resources.

Key Goals and Benefits

- Reducing Stigma: Open conversations help decrease the shame associated with mental health conditions.
- Early Intervention: Educating the public encourages people to seek help early.
- Resource Sharing: Highlighting tools like 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline and local services.
- Building Community: Fostering a supportive environment to reduce isolation.



Q: I'm red and small,
and I have a heart of
stone. What am I?



For answer to riddle, see last page!

FHF will be closed,
Monday, May 25, 2026
to celebrate
Memorial Day





Disability Assessment & Coordination Entity

disability-access-solutions.com

info@disability-access-solutions.com

Helpline: 337.331.2534

Emergency preparation made simple!

We know that preparing for the “what ifs” can be overwhelming, but we don’t want it to stop you from getting you and your family ready. We have broken down some important steps into quarterly tasks to make it easier to do.

In Louisiana, we should prepare for more than just hurricanes! As you complete these tasks, consider the different types of emergencies you may face.

Quarter 1: January through March

- Create an emergency plan.

An emergency plan helps people and their families make decisions about:

- whether to stay or go,
- transportation, and
- shelter

Quarter 2: April through June

- Create a go bag/stay kit.

A go bag/stay kit is a collection of supplies that each person needs to maintain their health and safety if they shelter-in-place or evacuate.

- Everyone’s go bag/stay kit will look different.

Quarter 3: July through September

- Create a communication plan.

A communication plan ensures that people can keep in touch with each other during an emergency.

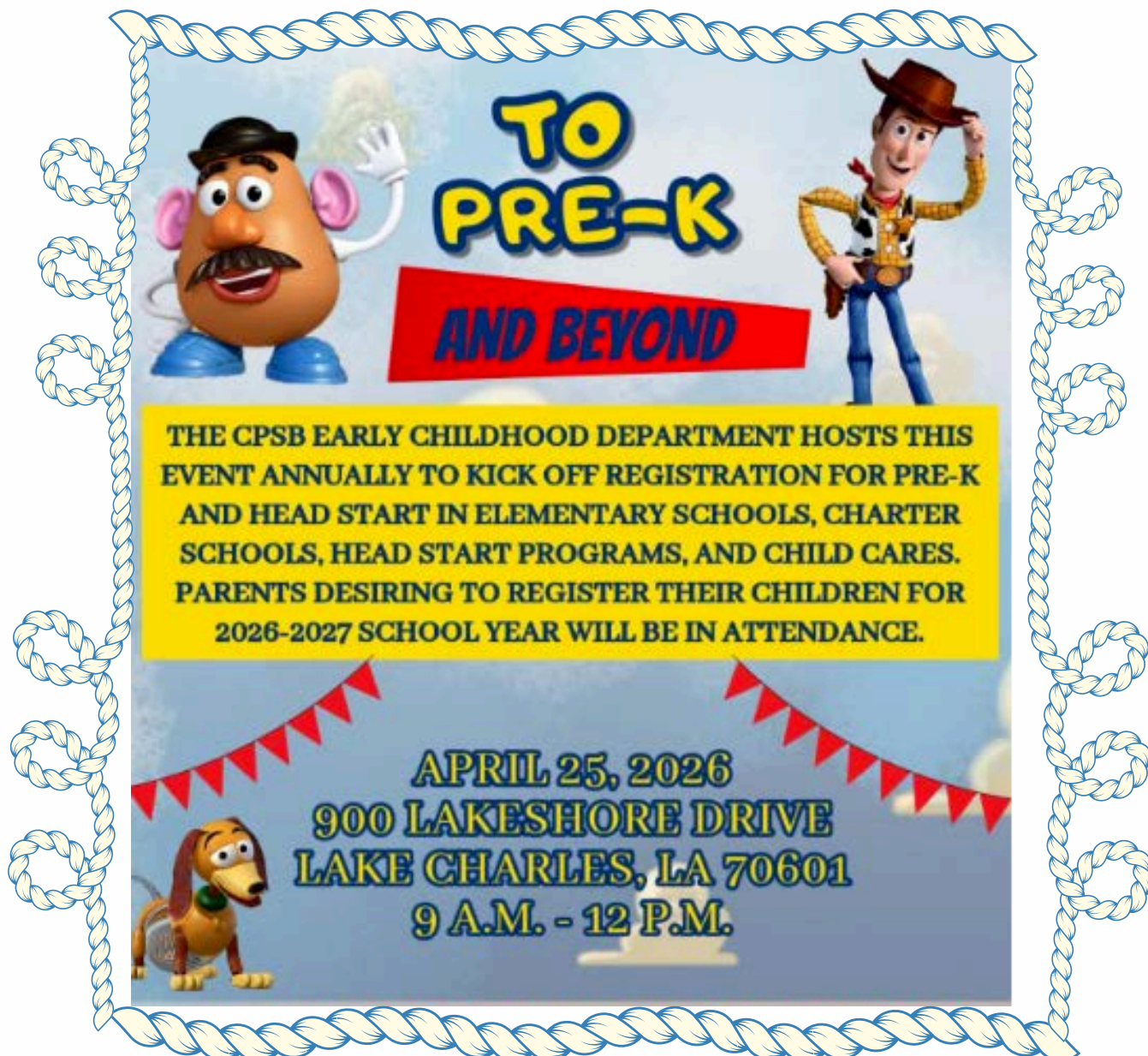
Quarter 4: October through December

- Review emergency plans and check supplies for expiration dates.

It’s important to review and change your plan if it doesn’t work or your situation changes.

Things you can do all year to prepare:

- Save cash for use during evacuation.
- Get involved in your community preparedness activities or training.
- Stay informed of all weather activities.



Legislative
session will conclude by
June 1, 2026



The 2026 World Autism Awareness Day (April 2, 2026) theme, set by the United Nations, is "Autism and Humanity – **Every Life Has Value,**" focusing on affirming the dignity, rights, and inclusion of autistic people.

Key 2026 Themes & Focus Areas:

- **United Nations:** "Autism and Humanity – Every Life Has Value," aiming to move beyond limitations and honor the potential of all autistic individuals.
- **"Celebrate Differences":** This theme focuses on recognizing unique strengths in homes, schools, and workplaces, shifting from mere awareness to active acceptance.
- **#TrueColours:** A movement encouraging people to wear and share colors, promoting true belonging, purpose, and community.

Autism Speaks: Focusing on the future with "Let's Redefine Possible," emphasizing advocacy and support for all ages and support levels.

FAMILIES HELPING FAMILIES OF
SOUTHWEST LOUISIANA PRESENTS



LIFE ACADEMY

& MCNEESE PRIME

POSTSECONDARY
OPTIONS FOR STUDENTS
WITH DISABILITIES



April 28, 2026

1:00 - 2:00 PM

Open To:

**Parents &
Professionals**

Discover the postsecondary opportunities available for students with cognitive disabilities through the LIFE Academy & McNeese Prime Programs. This session will provide families, educators, & students with an overview of each program, including available supports, campus experiences, & pathways that promote independence, skill development, & successful transition into adulthood. Join us to learn how these programs can open doors to meaningful education and future readiness.



LIFE Academy
Learning Is For Everyone

PRIME
Preparing for Real Independence & Motivating for Excellence



REGISTER TODAY: [HTTPS://TINYURL.COM/POSTSECOND42826](https://tinyurl.com/postsecond42826)



For More Information, Contact Davelyn Patrick
337-436-2570 | info@fhfswla.org



Family Connections: Coffee with a Purpose

A Support & Information Session for
Parents and Families of Children with Disabilities
Wednesday, April 15, 2026 @ 10:00 AM



Join FHFSWLA staff for coffee & conversation. We will be sharing resources and answering any questions you may have about all things disability related.

**Monthly meeting held @ Coffee:30 Cafe
located at 3420 Ryan Street, Lake Charles, LA 70605**

Link to Register: <https://tinyurl.com/CWP041526>

Scan Me



DO YOU KNOW WHAT RELATED SERVICES YOUR CHILD RECEIVES?

Children with exceptionalities may be eligible for special education and related services. If they qualify for an Individualized Education Program, they must contain a statement of the special education, related services and supplementary aids and services to be provided to the child. Participants will learn several critical elements used to determine what related services a student needs.

**Maryury Templet/Karen Scallan,
FHF of GNO**

**Myllinda Elliot, Wallace Johnson,
FHF of SWLA**

Thursday, April 16, 2026

11:00 AM - 12:00 PM



REGISTER
NOW
<https://tinyurl.com/041626RelatedServices>



Building Independence Together: Employment Opportunities for Individuals with Disabilities in Louisiana

For many families across Louisiana, one of the biggest questions is: What does the future look like for my loved one with a disability? Employment is a key part of that answer. Meaningful work offers more than a paycheck—it builds confidence, independence, and a sense of purpose. The good news is that Louisiana continues to expand resources and opportunities to help individuals with disabilities succeed in the workforce.

When individuals with disabilities have the opportunity to work, the benefits extend beyond the individual to the entire family. Earning income and developing job skills increase independence, while being part of a team builds confidence and self-esteem. Employment also creates stronger social connections and a greater sense of belonging. Many families share that these experiences bring a new level of pride and hope for the future.

Louisiana Supports

[Families Helping Families \(FHF\)](#) is a trusted, family-driven one-stop hub transforming the lives of individuals with any disabilities or special healthcare needs of all ages — empowering families through lived experience to navigate systems, access vital resources, and achieve lasting independence through one-on-one guidance, information, referral, peer support, education, training, and advocacy. FHF is a statewide network of nine independent nonprofit organizations that partner with local and state agencies to ensure families across Louisiana can find the help they need. Some of these partnerships include the Louisiana Developmental Disabilities Council, the Louisiana Department of Health – Bureau of Family Health, the Louisiana Department of Education, and local Human Service Authorities, among others. Families Helping Families helps your loved one build independence by connecting them to job resources early—especially during the high school transition years—when it can make the biggest difference.

What This Means for Your Family

Families play an essential role in supporting this journey. Encouraging independence, exploring career interests early, and connecting with resources such as FHF, LRS, and inclusive college programs can help build a strong foundation for success. Every step forward—no matter how little—is progress worth celebrating. It's important to remember that each employment journey is unique, and success looks different for everyone.

Looking Ahead with Hope

Employment is more than a goal—it's a pathway to independence, dignity, and belonging. With the right supports, individuals with disabilities in Louisiana can thrive at work and in their communities. And families don't have to navigate this path alone. Your local Families Helping Families center is ready to support you every step of the way—it's who we are. It's what we do.

*Team Work
MAKES THE
Dream Work*





IEP Lunch & Learn Workshop

Free Workshop for Families of Children with Disabilities

Thursday, April 23, 2026 | 12 PM - 1 PM

324 West Hale Street, Lake Charles LA 70601

Learn how to understand your child's IEP and understand special education rights and services needed to become an empowered advocate for your student's educational success.

You have the option of attending in person or virtually!

Register to attend in Person for Light Lunch & Door Prize Drawing!

Link for Virtual Registration:

<https://tinyurl.com/IEPLVR042326>

Link for In Person Registration:

<https://tinyurl.com/IEPLIP042326>

For more information contact (337) 436-2570 or
info@fhfswla.org



Louisiana Behavioral Health Day at the Capitol

Louisiana Behavioral Health Day hosted by the Louisiana Mental Health Association and the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention - Louisiana, will bring together passionate volunteers to advocate for state policy changes that work to prevent suicide and support behavioral health.

Event Details

Event Date: April 27th

Rally and Speakers: 9:00 am

Community Resource Fair: 10:00 am - 12:00pm

Event Location: AZ Young Park, North Third Street, Baton Rouge, LA

Event Contact: Meghan Goldbeck, mgoldbeck@afsp.org

Stephanie Francis, sfrancis@louisianamha.org

Register for legislative meetings by April 25th

**Wear White
to Shine a light on
Behavioral Health!**

REGISTER NOW

Families Helping Families of Southwest Louisiana

MAILING ADDRESS: P O BOX 1627, LAKE CHARLES, LA 70602
OFFICE ADDRESS: 324 W. HALE ST., LAKE CHARLES, LA 70601
(337) 436-2570 • 1-800-894-6558 • (337) 436-2578 FAX

EMAIL: INFO@FHFSWLA.ORG

WEBSITE: [HTTPS://WWW.FHFSWLA.ORG](https://WWW.FHFSWLA.ORG)

FACEBOOK: <https://www.facebook.com/fhfswla>

**Families Helping Families
It's Who We Are!
It's What We DO!**

Riddle Answer: A cherry.

Invest in Families Helping Families of Southwest Louisiana.

FHFSWLA is a 501 (c)3 nonprofit agency that relies on donations to meet the needs of our agency's mission and vision. By donating to FHFSWLA you are investing in the lives of people with disabilities and their families. If passion paid, we would be the richest nonprofit in SWLA. Unfortunately, passion alone does not fully support our organization.

Please consider making a contribution so families who are touched by disability can be assured this one of a kind, family directed resource center is always here when they need us.

Contributions can be made to:
Families Helping Families of Southwest Louisiana
P O Box 1627
Lake Charles, LA 70602

FHF is funded in part by a contract from the Louisiana Developmental Disabilities Council.