What Is a Surrogate Parent?

A surrogate parent is a person who is appointed to act in the interests of an **exceptional student** who does not have a parent who can make educational decisions. The surrogate parent works with the school to plan the child's **special education** services.

A surrogate parent does not take care of the child at home, like an adoptive parent or a foster parent does. A surrogate parent is not financially responsible for the child. A surrogate parent is more like a "school parent"—involved only in planning and making decisions about the child's special education.

What Is Special Education?

In Florida, special education is called **exceptional student education**, or **ESE**. It includes all the specially designed instruction, materials, and services provided to a student who has special learning needs to help the student make progress in school. Students who are eligible for ESE services are called **exceptional students**. They include students with **disabilities** and also students who are **gifted**.

Why Would a Child Need a Surrogate Parent?

There are many important decisions to be made about the education of exceptional students, particularly students with disabilities. It takes a **team** of people to make these decisions and to plan for the child's ESE services. In fact, there are several steps in the ESE process where a parent's participation or consent is vital and is even required by law. So, if the child's own parent is unknown or cannot be located, or if the child is a ward of the State, the child must have a surrogate parent.

The student may be a girl or a boy, anywhere from 3 to 21 years old. The student may have a learning disability, a physical impairment, a vision or hearing impairment, or other special learning needs, such as giftedness. The student may live in a group foster home, a juvenile justice facility, or another setting. Though each of these students is unique, they all need a surrogate parent to work with the school to meet their educational needs.

Surrogate parents are important members of the ESE team. They help our community meet the needs of exceptional students and fulfill our legal obligations.

What Does a Surrogate Parent Actually Do?

You may wonder what you would actually do as a surrogate parent. A surrogate parent does all the things that a parent would do as part of the ESE process, such as:

- Becoming familiar with the child's abilities, disabilities, needs, services, and goals (This may include **observing** and talking with the child in school, **gathering** information from written records, and **talking** with teachers.)
- Going to **meetings** and helping the team plan and make **decisions** about the child's education
- Signing papers giving **consent** for special education services
- Asking the school to **change** the child's special education services
- Attending **training** sessions

Remember, a surrogate parent does not take care of the child or support the child financially.

Use your skills, build relationships—and see the results in your own community and in the life of a child!

Do I Need to Be an Expert?

You do not need to be an expert on education. The keys to being an effective surrogate parent are:

- √ Caring and wanting to do a good job
- √ Focusing on the child's needs, abilities, and goals
- √ Being willing to be part of a team
- √ Being willing to gather information from written records and from teachers and other people who work with the child
- √ Listening and asking questions
- √ Making positive suggestions
- √ Being flexible and trying to find several ways to reach a goal or solve a problem

How Much Time Will It Take?

It is hard to predict how much time you might spend on surrogate parent duties. For example, some school meetings are short; however, meetings can get complicated if team members disagree about important issues. It is important to know that there are many people in the school and the school district who will be available to help you become an effective surrogate parent.

How Can I Join the Team?

Surrogate parents must:

- Be a citizen of the United States
- Be a resident of the state of Florida
- Be at least 18 years old
- Not work for the local school board or any agency involved in the education or care of the child
- Have no interest that conflicts with the interest of the child
- Be willing to participate in training

If you meet these requirements and want to become part of the ESE team, please fill out a surrogate parent application soon! The application will include a place for you to list references. The school district completes a background check on all surrogate parent applicants.

To learn more or to apply to be a surrogate parent, contact the local school board office and ask for the ESE office.

Florida Department of Education
Bureau of Exceptional Education
and Student Services

ESE 312846C

Get in the Game!

Become a Surrogate Parent for an Exceptional Student in Our Community