

13 Ways a PTA Can Help a Student with Special Needs

February 11, 2015 By [Karen Wang](#)

For a few years, I couldn't attend any of the PTA's evening meetings due to sleep issues at home, and my fussy baby prevented me from volunteering for most activities. As my little one grew bigger, I was able to attend a few meetings and help with a few initiatives. Then I began to see the potential benefit of the PTA for my older son, who is a special education student. This year I am serving as the PTA president at my older son's middle school.

If you think the PTA can't or won't help your special education student, **you are wrong!** These are some of the programs that the PTA has sponsored at schools across the USA. All that's missing is the right volunteer for the job, and that would be you.

1. Parent to Parent Support

When my son had his first IEP, I was asked if I wanted to be contacted by a member of the school's Parent to Parent Support Team. Parents with years of IEP experience call parents who are new to the system, and answer their questions. This program does not cost anything, and it creates a sense of community for new parents who may be feeling isolated.

2. Buddy Bench

Recess is one of the most difficult periods of the day for students with special needs. Elementary students came up with the idea of a [Buddy Bench](#), where anyone who needs a friend can go and feel welcome.

3. Modified events

A school carnival does not have to be noisy and chaotic. Activities can be modified to be more accessible to students sensitive to noise, and physical barriers can be reduced...but usually someone has to speak up and request the modifications. At my son's middle school, we distribute maps of carnival activities to each family, and we spread the attractions across the school so that there are some quiet areas and other areas for sensory integration activities.

4. Awareness Days

Right now, the PTA board at my son's school is working on an autism awareness event for World Autism Awareness Day, because of the significant number of students with autism at the school. All students will be encouraged to wear shirts with the school logo on April 2, and each grade level will earn "spirit points" for wearing the school logo. The grade with the most spirit points will receive special privileges from the principal during recess. In addition, we will have

penny wars between the classes, and the money raised will be used to purchase materials to build a therapy item for students with autism, such as a squeeze chair or Buddy Walker.

5. Tutoring

The PTA often recruits volunteers to work as tutors after school or to assist with reading and math drills during school hours. At my son's school, the PTA pays a stipend to teachers who help with homework after school three days per week.

6. Reflections Art Contest

Every autumn, the PTA sponsors the nationwide [Reflections art competition](#) for K-12 students in the fields of literature, dance, music composition, film, photography and visual arts. Students with disabilities may enter the contest at their grade level or in the Special Artist category. Two of my son's photographs recently won at the local level this year and have advanced to the state competition.

7. Teacher grants

Most PTAs offer classroom mini-grants, and special education teachers are welcome to apply. Sensory integration items such as a ball chair, swing or sand table are popular requests.

8. Outside grants

Last year I found a local grant opportunity, and applied for it on behalf of my son's school social worker, who facilitates a large peer-to-peer support program. The grant was awarded to her – an extra \$1,000 that she was not expecting in her budget! Because the PTA is a registered non-profit, its board members are eligible to apply for grants from most foundations.

9. Special Education Committee

Yes, the PTA is famous for committees and subcommittees. Some schools such as [Clover Hill Elementary](#) in Virginia have a special education committee that raises its own funds to provide community and support to the families of special education students.

10. Special Education PTA

A school district may choose to form a [Special Education Parent Teacher Association \(SEPTA\)](#) for the purpose of advocating for families of students in special education. A SEPTA has a budget and mission that is separate from other local PTA units, so it's in a position to benefit special education students directly and exclusively. Talk to your local PTA Council about creating a SEPTA if you think this would be a good match for your school district.

11. List of national resources

The National PTA offers a [free special education toolkit](#) that features a list of national organizations that advocate for students in special education. The toolkit also suggests [ideas](#) for including families of special education students in more school activities.

12. Connect for Respect

The National PTA has developed an anti-bullying initiative, [Connect for Respect](#), that is designed to be adaptable for students of all abilities. The program is student-led and is intended as a creative team effort.

13. Healthy Lifestyles

The National PTA's [Healthy Lifestyles](#) program promotes nutrition, exercise and energy balance. American children are increasingly at risk for obesity and inactivity, and the risk is even higher for students in special education. The National PTA has coordinated best practices for student health and made recommendations through the program material.

The National PTA's motto is, "Every Child. One Voice." That includes your child and your voice. If you think the PTA should be doing something that is not described here, go to a meeting and advocate for your student. That's how every one of these ideas got started!

Karen Wang is a contributing author to the anthology "My Baby Rides the Short Bus: The Unabashedly Human Experience of Raising Kids With Disabilities"