Extra school services offered to your child? Just say yes!



When I was in first and second grade, I took “special gym.”

I attended a public school in a small New Jersey town. The school building was about 100 years old, and the “special services” that my school offered were speech, reading help, and special gym.

I remember being THRILLED that I was selected to take special gym, because instead of just *one* day a week of bouncing balls and running races and turning somersaults during the school day, I got to go *twice* a week. I remember how upbeat and energetic the gym teacher was, and how much fun she made these exercises. I do not recall such words as “physical therapy” or “occupational therapy.” In fact, I did not realize the true point of the extra gym days until many years later, when I was in college and reminiscing about elementary school and caught myself mid-sentence:

“Well, when I was in first grade, I took special gym… hey… WAIT a MINUTE….!”

That’s when I realized that I had been flagged with a coordination challenge. Unbeknownst to me, in school I went to physical therapy weekly.

Now that first-quarter parent teacher conferences are over, you may be surprised that your child has been offered special services by the school. Teachers spend hours a day with our kids and are experts in the age group that they teach. Not all kids are good at learning all subjects and not all are equally sociable or equally physically adept. When teachers ask a parent’s permission to supply extra help, parents should not take this request as an affront or attack on their parenting. Rather, it is an opportunity to help kids succeed.

I was never suspicious about my inclusion in special gym. No one made fun of me for being in the class, and in fact many were jealous. Kids in early grades may be aware that some of their classmates come and go during the day, but they do not distinguish between kids pulled out for a gifted program from kids pulled out for remedial education. As an adult, I appreciate that my teachers made me feel good about being included in the special gym club.

I have a magnet on my car now that says, simply, “13.1,” which is the number of miles that I ran to complete the Trenton Half-Marathon this past October. Special gym did not hold me back—it propelled me forward. I had no idea that my participation in special gym was emotionally charged for my mom until after I called my dad to tell him my race time (2 hours, 11.5 minutes). Only then did he tell me how crushed my mom had been about my inclusion in special gym. I am grateful that she hid that from me.

My message: Let your kids get extra help in school, allow them to be pulled out of a class they are failing and placed into

an environment where they can learn and overcome challenges. Allow yourself to mourn the loss of the child you may have pictured. But know this: young children do not have enough life experience to independently think of themselves as failures in the early school years. They look to adults who are important to them for how to respond to challenges and frustration. Encourage them with the positive message that they will receive extra attention and extra time to work at reading or math or physical skills or speech skills. Who knows? They may become the kid who applies to medical school or runs a marathon (or a half-marathon) someday.

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