

## Roles of Specialists in Relation to Preschool and School-Age Children

By Melanie Frederick, M.S., CCC-SLP

If your child qualifies for special education services, you may wonder, "How do I know which professional can help my child?" Below are descriptions of the duties of these specialists in relation to preschool and school-age children.



1. **Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP)** - An SLP works on developing a child's understanding of and ability to express language. In addition, this person helps if a child has problems with saying particular sounds. SLPs also assist those who stutter, have voice or eating/feeding disorders, and have auditory processing (listening) difficulties. An SLP works very closely with a learning or reading specialist to develop the child's phonological awareness skills to support reading. Many SLPs perform hearing screenings on early elementary students and make appropriate referrals to an audiologist. In addition, SLPs aid students who use alternative forms of communication because they cannot talk or have unintelligible speech.
2. **Learning Specialist** - The Learning Specialist (also referred to as a Special Educator) is a professional skilled in understanding the different ways students learn. If a student has difficulties with reading, writing, or math, the Learning Specialist will help the classroom teacher modify the presentation of information in the classroom, in order to create a successful environment for the student. Learning Specialists have special skills in teaching children how to read and write.
3. **Occupational Therapist (OT)** - The OT professional works with a student so that he/she can become independent in daily activities. Students with learning and developmental disabilities often require the services of an OT. These activities include eating, playing, and interacting with others. OTs also provide activities that improve a child's mental and physical development. Providing specialized equipment that allows the student to hold a pencil in order to write notes in class is one example of how the OT helps a student with a physical disability.
4. **Physical Therapist (PT)** - The PT is a professional specially trained to work on motor (physical movement) and neuromuscular difficulties. When a child experiences difficulty performing everyday activities, the PT finds ways to accommodate the child's physical difficulties so that the task may be completed. PTs help children regain movement, function, and independence in daily activities. A PT often works with individuals who have been severely injured to help increase their range of movement.

5. **Behavior Specialist** - A Behavior Specialist helps children who have emotional or behavioral challenges. These difficulties can be due to a traumatic brain injury, depression, impulsiveness, or hyperactivity. When these problems affect a student's ability to function in school and maintain relationships with teachers and peers, a Behavior Specialist may intervene.

6. **School Psychologist** - The School Psychologist is professionally trained in psychology, education, mental health, child development, learning styles/processes, and effective teaching. He/she works on creating connections between the school and home environment. School psychologists also administer cognitive and achievement tests to children in order to help determine eligibility for special education services. School Psychologists provide training in social skills, provide crisis management, and promote healthy school environments.



There are many services available to students that need special assistance. Knowing what services exist and how to access these services is key in helping your child succeed academically and socially. If you suspect that your child has difficulties in any of the areas that the above professionals address, start by discussing these concerns with the classroom teacher. It takes an entire team of professionals to provide both regular and special education services. Your child will receive the best education possible when all educational professionals work together.

#### Resources

American Occupational Therapy Association, Inc. [www.aota.org](http://www.aota.org)

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association [www.asha.org](http://www.asha.org)

Council for Exceptional Children [www.cec.sped.org](http://www.cec.sped.org)

National Association of School Psychologists [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)

Physical Therapy.com [www.physicaltherapy.com](http://www.physicaltherapy.com)

Willamette ESD [www.wesd.org](http://www.wesd.org)