

# Educational Provisions for Children with Special Needs – A Parents' Perspective

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## INTRODUCTION

Children with developmental concerns including Learning difficulty, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Cerebral Palsy, Global Developmental Delay, Trisomy 21 and other developmental conditions account for approximately 90% of the referrals to the Community Paediatric Clinics within the South West Regional Health Authority.

In Community Paediatrics, we aim to link with multidisciplinary support services towards achieving the best quality of life for children with disability and special needs. We regularly write reports for schools and Student Support Services to assist children's appropriate placement in educational facilities. Major concerns highlighted by parents have been difficulty accessing appropriate school placements, accessing teacher aides and accessing therapies including speech and occupational therapy.

## METHODOLOGY

Data was collected prospectively over a four week period using a feedback questionnaire completed by parents of children with special needs. The questionnaire was administered for all review cases between the ages of 3 and 19 years. The data was analyzed using Microsoft Excel.

## RESULTS

115 questionnaires were completed. **75%** of children were male and **25%** female.

- **61%** of children were attending public schools, whereas, **39%** attended private schools
- **39%** of children had been assessed by Student Support Services but only **19%** had teacher aides.
- **20%** of children more than 5yrs old were receiving concessions.
- **9%** had psych-educational assessments. Of these, 7% were done privately and 2% through Student Support Services.

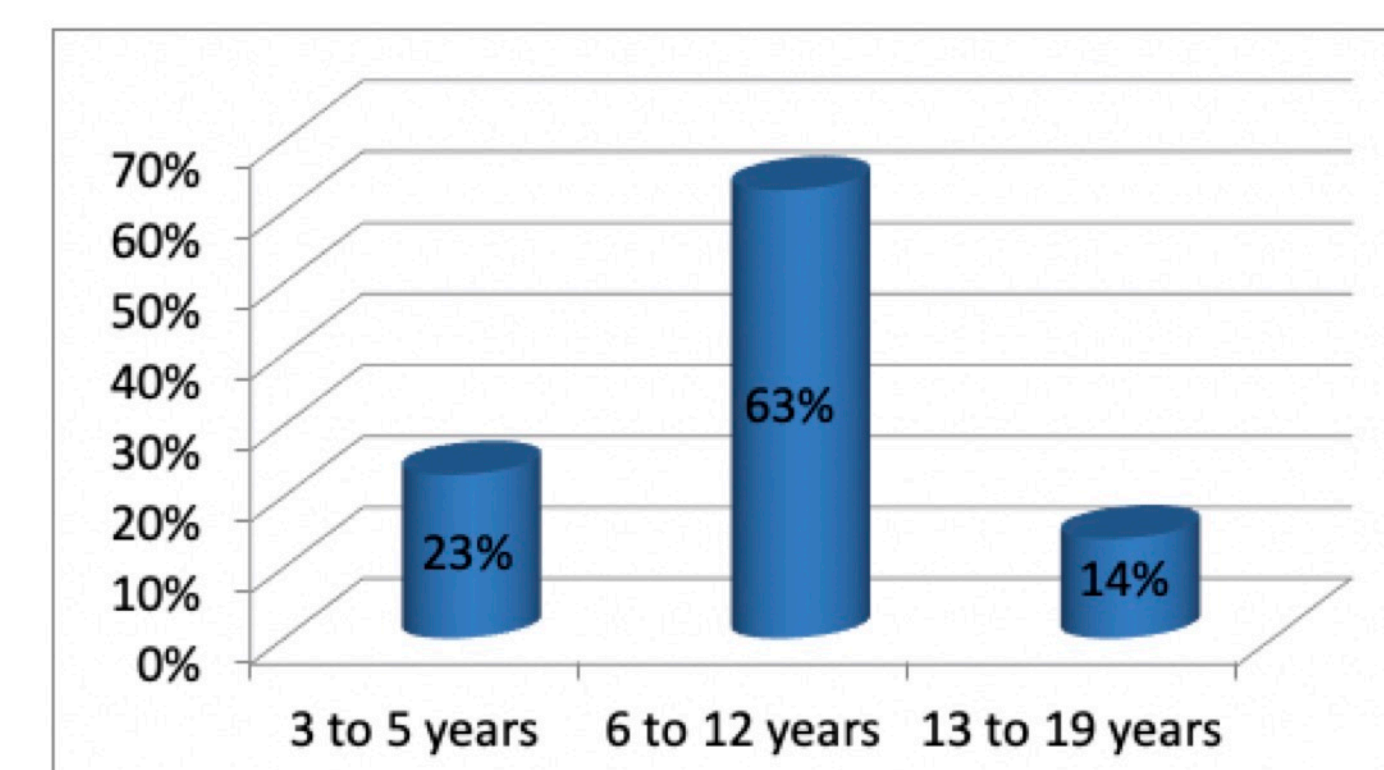


Fig 1: Bar chart showing the age distribution of children in the study

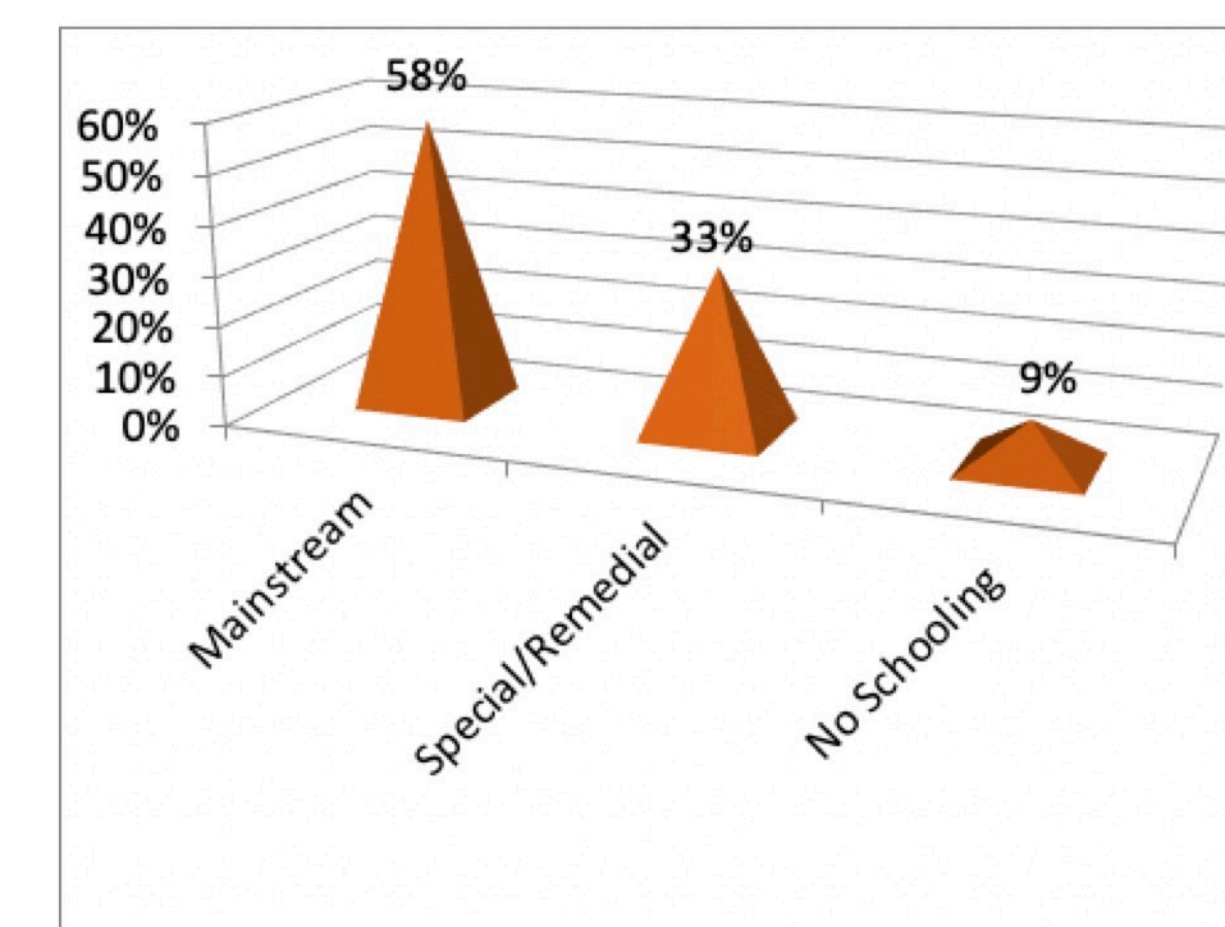


Fig 2: Chart showing the type of schools accessed by special needs children

- **5%** of children benefitted from peer mentoring at school.
- **70%** had speech delay but only **46%** accessed speech therapy.
- **49%** had fine-motor skills delay and **36%** self care skills delay but only **17%** accessed occupational therapy.
- **68%** of parents had an income less than \$6000 per month but only **26%** received the special child grant.

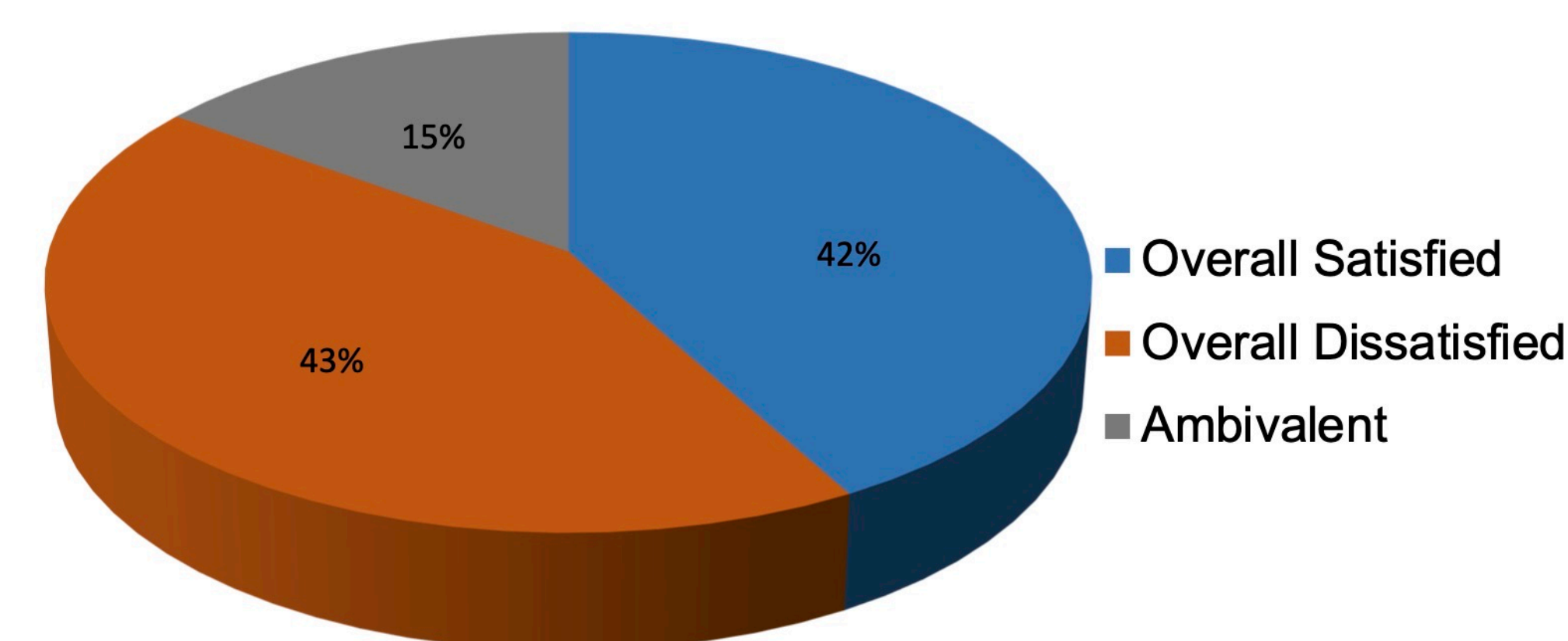


Fig 3: Pie chart showing parent satisfaction with educational supports

### Parental Recommendations to improve educational supports for special needs children:

- **Better access to teacher aide support**
- **Greater inclusivity to mainstream schools**
- **More availability of public special/remedial schools**
- **Access to therapies in the public system**
- **Better access to grants from Social Welfare**

## DISCUSSION

Developmental disabilities or disorders are conditions which either a child is born with or begins in early childhood and, tends to persist throughout life. These conditions affect the child's ability to achieve their developmental potential<sup>1</sup>. Developmental disabilities occurs across all ethnicities, races and socioeconomic groups and its' estimated prevalence in 3 to 17 year olds in the United States is about 17%<sup>2</sup>.

The term 'special needs' is often used in place of developmental disability or disorder. 'Special needs' is attributed to a person who has either a learning difficulty, a physical disability, or emotional and behavioural difficulty which causes that individual to require additional or specialised services or accommodations<sup>3</sup>. Even though these children are a more vulnerable population, they are often overlooked in mainstream programmes and services. More often than not, special needs children do not receive supports to meet their needs and rights<sup>4</sup>. The United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities are documents that both highlight how children with disabilities have the same rights as typically developing children with respect to education, health care, and nutrition, among others<sup>5,6</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear that children with special needs require much more supports within the education system. There is need for more special education teachers and teacher aides. Access to concessions and psych-educational assessments must be improved. Peer mentoring should be promoted in the education system. Therapy services and grants under Social Welfare should be more accessible within the public system.

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