

What is the Montana Special Needs Scholarship?

The Best Beginnings Scholarship program helps low-income families in Montana pay for child care while parents are employed outside the home or in educational programs. The **Special Needs Scholarship** is one part of this program that allows for payment directly related to the special needs of an individual child in the context of their child care setting. This payment may take the form of a higher monthly child care scholarship payment to a child care provider or it may be a one-time payment to pay for additional toys, equipment or specialized training for staff.

Remember that the American with Disabilities Act specifies that child care providers have a responsibility to make *reasonable accommodations* to include children with disabilities, developmental delays, and other special needs. The Special Needs scholarship only helps pay for costs of identified accommodations which would otherwise place an "undue" (extraordinary) financial burden on the provider. The amount of each scholarship is different, based entirely on the individual needs of the child.

Steps in the Process

- Once you indicate that your child has special needs on the Best Beginnings Scholarship application, the Early Childhood Specialist at your local child care resource and referral program will contact you for more details and clarification about what those special needs mean for your child.
- The next step is for the Early Childhood Specialist to make a program visit to the child care setting you have chosen for your child.
- After the program visit is completed, a meeting will be scheduled to gather information from you, the child care provider, and any other person you would like to be involved. At this meeting, the Special Needs Rating Scale will be completed. This scale determines the type and intensity of care your child requires.
- Together, as a team, you will then develop an Individual Child Care Plan for your child.
- Current (within a calendar year) and relevant documentation from an appropriate professional will be required to support the determined scholarship rating before final approval can be made by the state.

If your child does not qualify for the Special Needs Scholarship, you and your child care provider can still receive assistance from your local child care resource and referral program. This might include such things as additional training or completion of a behavior action plan and follow up visits by the Early Childhood Specialist to support the provider in caring for your child in the best possible way.

Feel free to contact the Early Childhood Specialist in your local child care resource and referral program or:

Karen Martin
Montana Inclusion Coordinator
Child Care plus+: The Center on Inclusion in Early Childhood
Rural Institute on Disabilities
University of Montana
634 Eddy Avenue
Missoula, MT 59812
(800) 235-4122 or karen.martin@ruralinstitute.umt.edu

Especially for Families: Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Can the Special Needs Scholarship apply to children over the age of 13?

A: Yes, children with disabilities are eligible for Best Beginning Scholarships until age 18. Even if your child does not qualify for the higher, Special Needs Scholarship, he or she is still entitled to child care assistance at the regular rate, beyond the typical cut-off age of 13.

Q: Does a child for whom English is a second language qualify?

A: Yes, when the rating scale establishes that the language barrier is creating a need for significant extra support for the child. In almost all such cases, it will be temporary.

Q: Does the Child Care Plan have to be redone when there is a change in provider?

A: Yes, the situation should be re-evaluated because a change in setting could mean a significant change in the kind of support needed for the child. If the Rating Scale is re-done and there is no significant change, the Child Care Plan that already exists can stay in place. Document the assessment of the new placement. In general, the Child Care Plan stays with the child, not the provider.

Q: I have chosen a Legally Unregistered Provider (LUP) to care for my child. Is the process still the same?

A: Yes, the same procedures already described are used to establish eligibility when the child is in this type of placement.

Q: What is the role of early intervention specialists, therapists, physicians, public health nurses, and others who work with young children with special needs and their families?

A: **Collaboration** is a key element in the eligibility process. Any professional providing support to your child can and should assist in the development of both the Rating Scale and the Child Care Plan. For example: an early intervention specialist or family support specialist may help describe adaptations needed; a special educator may assist by providing a copy of the child's IEP and activity suggestions to give to the child care provider; a therapist may be identified on the list of resources as someone who might provide technical assistance to help the child care provider learn range of motion exercises.

Q: Are all families of young children with disabilities eligible for this program?

A: Unfortunately, not all families with young children with special needs are eligible for the Best Beginning Scholarship program. Eligibility is limited to families whose income falls below a certain percentage of the federal poverty guidelines. However, even if your child does not qualify for child care assistance, the Early Childhood Specialist in your local child care resource and referral program can still provide useful resources and help complete an Individual Child Care Plan to support your child's placement. In addition, technical assistance is available to providers when the need is established.

Q: Do all children with disabilities qualify for the Special Needs Scholarship if the family meets the financial eligibility requirements?

A: The Special Needs Scholarship is designed to assure that children special needs receive high quality child care. The subsidy amount is directly linked to the child's needs. Not all children with special needs require significant modifications to participate in child care routines and activities. For example, a child with an identified speech delay might require the provider to adjust the way she asks the child to indicate choices or to listen carefully because the child has difficulty producing sounds clearly. A young child with Down Syndrome may require a little more time than other children to process requests and complete tasks. These are examples of **reasonable accommodations** which would be expected of the child care provider with no additional financial compensation.

Interestingly, some children who do not have an identified disability or medical diagnosis will qualify for the Special Needs Scholarship because they require significant modifications and adaptations. In particular, children with behavior challenges may be difficult to include in group settings and can require significant changes to the child care environment and routines.

Q: Do children have to have a diagnosed disability to qualify for the Special Needs Scholarship?

A: No, a diagnosis is not required. However, **relevant, appropriate supporting documentation of necessary modifications is required**. That documentation may take many forms, such as documentation from a social worker, therapist, physician, early interventionist, or school psychologist, and must have been completed within the last 12 months.