

5 ways to plan a secure future for your child with special needs



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Having a child with special needs places a huge burden on a family -- not only in the everyday activities of living but in planning for the future. If you're fortunate enough to have "too much" money -- or if you don't take care in the way you bequeath it -- you can jeopardize your child's eligibility for government services that cannot be replaced by private purchases. The problems compound as parents age and try to plan for the future.

Mary Anne Ehlert is an expert in this situation. A certified financial planner, she helped her parents design appropriate programs to aid her own handicapped sister. Then, 17 years ago, she founded Protected Tomorrows, a special-needs consulting, planning and advocacy firm.

Here is Ehlert's advice on five important things to keep in mind if your family is trying to provide for a child with a disability.

1. Make sure you qualify for government benefits. Many government programs come with restrictions as to the assets and income available to the disabled family member-- now and when a child becomes an adult. Planning should keep these limits in mind, and requires careful provisions for any bequests or inheritances.
2. Use a special-needs trust. A correctly drawn third-party special-needs trust in your estate can help fund future supplemental needs over and above what the government will provide. The special-needs trust allows you and your extended family to provide for your child in a way that will not disqualify them. It's critical to work with an attorney who has unique expertise in this area.
3. You may need to become your adult child's guardian. You may need to file for guardianship for your child when he or she turns 18 or 21, depending on the age of majority in your state of residence. Do not assume that your child will be able to manage all of his or her affairs at that point. If he or she cannot, you may have to become your child's guardian in order to continue to provide the care they need.
4. Prepare a written future care plan. This identifies the goals and dreams you have for the safe and fulfilled life of your family member. It should include the kinds of resources that will be necessary for a quality of life as well as a life full of recreation and education. Creating this plan will help you plan your own financial future as well. Share

it with family members now and engage them in the process.

5. Document the details of life. Prepare a document for future caregivers outlining all of the detailed care needs of your child. Include medical history, friends and caregivers, desired programs and services, and school and recreation programs, as well as the everyday habits and routines that help keep your child safe and able to function in a complicated world.

You can seek individual help with financial planning at Ehlert's website, ProtectedTomorrows.com, or by calling 866-544-6333. You can also use the site's online Future Planning System, share experiences with other members, purchase the "My Special Life" workbook, which will help you chronicle your child's life as recommended above, and search Ehlert's network of qualified advocates around the country to assist you.

Mary Anne Ehlert's motto is: Provide a person with the means to live a fuller life and you give more meaning to yours. Surely, that's a Savage Truth.

(Terry Savage is a registered investment adviser and the author of four best-selling books, including "The Savage Truth on Money." Terry responds to questions on her blog at TerrySavage.com.)

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