

Law firm advocates on behalf of families

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Many parents of students with special needs, including students with an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis, struggle to obtain the necessary educational services for their child. When parents are unable to navigate the special education process at their child's school or within their school district, they often reach out to Hansen & Cleary LLC for assistance.

Attorneys Jennifer Hansen and Lara Cleary have devoted their careers to working with families struggling to navigate their schools on behalf of their children. "Four years ago, we opened our Northbrook office to specifically advocate for children who need special education services or who need additional educational services, including a possible change of placement," Cleary said.

Jennifer Hansen's parents were educators and worked in schools with children with disabilities. She grew up

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around people with special needs and pursued a law degree focused on helping people. Cleary began her career as a special-education teacher in the Chicago Public Schools. She then attended law school to practice education law and assist individuals with special needs.

In 2005, Hansen and Cleary began practicing law together. They launched Hansen & Cleary in 2017. Their practice has been busy ever since.

Hansen & Cleary's clients come from all around the Chicago area. "When we designed our practice," Cleary said, "we knew we wanted to offer calm, organized, best practices to our clients."

Parents may already have extra pressures when parenting a child with special needs. Hansen & Cleary's advocacy can help to ensure their children are obtaining appropriate services in school. "We work as collaboratively as possible with school districts to support our clients and advocate for their children's needs," Hansen said.

"More than anything we want to help people in any way we can," Hansen added. "We are compassionate but we are tough and willing to advocate for our clients in ways in which they can take comfort."

Hansen & Cleary welcomes inquiries from parents of students with all special needs, including those on the autism spectrum.

"We want people to think of us when they need help and feel stressed. We can help and that's a good feeling when people look to us for expertise," Cleary said.



COURTESY OF HANSEN & CLEARY LLC

Lara Cleary, left, and Jennifer Hansen are attorneys who work with families to obtain educational services.

Even after the pandemic and all the upheavals recede, Hansen & Cleary will be here

for families as a legal resource that is close to home and in the neighborhood.

Recognize the symptoms of autism

Metro Creative Services

Autism is a complex bio-neurological developmental disability that is complicated even further by the various ways people exhibit its symptoms. No two children with autism behave in the same way, so symptoms that are identifiable in one youngster will not necessarily be present in another.

Learning the various ways autism can manifest itself can be a good first step toward understanding the condition.

The National Autism Association notes that autism is a spectrum disorder, which means it can range from very mild to very severe cases. But the organization Autism Speaks notes that many people with autism have sensory issues that typically involve over- or under-sensitivities to sounds, lights, touch, tastes, smells, pain and other stimuli.

Autism Speaks also advises people with autism may experience social communication challenges and exhibit repetitive behaviors.

Social communication challenges

Difficulty with verbal and nonverbal communication affects both children and adults with autism. Treatment, especially when it begins in early childhood, can help people with autism overcome some of these difficulties, which include:

- Understanding, using spoken language appropriately
- Understanding or appropriately using gestures
- Making eye contact
- Understanding or appropriately using tone of voice

Autism Speaks also notes that additional social challenges may indicate the presence of autism. Such challenges can include difficulty with:

- Recognizing emotions and intentions in others
- Recognizing one's own emotions
- Seeking emotional comfort from others
- Feeling overwhelmed in social situations
- Gauging personal space

Restricted and repetitive behaviors

Behaviors associated with autism vary greatly across the spectrum. Someone with mild autism may not exhibit any such behaviors, while they may be instantly recognizable in others elsewhere on the spectrum. Autism Speaks notes that these behaviors may include:

- Repetitive body movements, such as rocking, flapping, spinning, or running back and forth
- A need for unvarying routine and a resistance to change. For example, someone with autism may need the same daily schedule and may need to eat the same meal menu and wear the same clothes each day.

Autism is a complicated disorder that is often recognizable in young children by the time they reach their third birthdays. Parents who suspect their child might have autism can discuss their concerns with their child's pediatricians.

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