Parenting is tough enough. But, if your child has special needs, you can really feel lost. Many parents say they wish they had a roadmap to spur them into early action, make the hard calls, and round up the right resources. It's a long trail, but many parents before you have walked this path. These seven trail marks can help you determine what lies ahead.

1. **Identifying a Need**
   School-readiness starts in infancy, so don't delay: if you notice something that concerns you, say something! Early action is crucial—even if school is years away. If your child is birth to 3, contact your local department of health. If your child is age 3 or older, contact your school special education department.
   
   **GOAL:** Reach out to a professional to ask about getting a screening.

2. **Scheduling an Observation**
   Your school will set up an appointment to screen your child, which may include observation, interaction, and info gathering. Based on the results of the screen, your child may or may not be referred for a full evaluation.
   
   **GOAL:** Conduct a screening to determine if an evaluation is necessary.

3. **Getting an Evaluation**
   A comprehensive evaluation will help you understand what your child needs and how to advocate for them. Evaluations for children suspected of having special needs, are performed by speech-language pathologists (SLPs), school psychologists, or other child development professionals. Search for your state's IDEA-mandated early intervention program.
   
   **GOAL:** Learn about the available school-based services for which your child qualifies.

4. **Planning**
   With qualifying evaluation results in hand, you and your child's school support team work together to outline an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). For planning and service delivery, your child's support team includes you, plus teachers, therapists, specialists, and/or other experts. An IEP includes:
   - Age-appropriate goals
   - Specialized instruction and accommodations
   - Related services such as speech-language therapy, occupational therapy, or behavioral support
   
   **GOAL:** Achieve team consensus on how to best deliver qualifying IEP services to your child.

5. **Starting Services**
   Nationwide, 13% of students receive special education and related services; half of these receive speech-language therapy for issues such as autism, stuttering, and other communication-related disorders.
   
   **GOAL:** Start making progress toward the goals specified in your child's IEP.

6. **Progress Tracking**
   Progress toward IEP goals should be tracked regularly and reported to parents/caregivers at the same rate as typical peers, which usually means report card time. Going forward, an annual IEP meeting is held to review student progress and set new goals. Parents may request additional IEP meetings as necessary.
   
   **GOAL:** Track your child's progress, and use the information gathered to make decisions about services at IEP meetings.

7. **Re-evaluate**
   IDEA mandates that students are re-evaluated every three years, at a minimum, in an evaluation called a "triennial." Each year, 6-7% of students in special ed complete ALL their goals, are re-evaluated, and returned to general
   
   **GOAL:** Use the updated evaluation to re-assess the services for which your child qualifies and ensure IEP goals and services are aligned.