



Save the Children.

Family Guide to Special Education in the United States



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Section 1: Introduction

Introduction

Purpose of This Resource

This guide is designed to help families navigate early intervention and special education services for their children. It explains important terms, walks you through each step of the process and shares practical tips to help you prepare for meetings and speak up for your child's needs.

Our goal is to help you feel confident, informed and empowered as you navigate this journey. It's important to remember that early intervention and special education services exist to help your child learn, participate and be included. Accessing these services doesn't mean something is "wrong" with your child. Every child learns and develops in their own way and at their own pace, and some children benefit from additional support.

Below are explanations for the three main disability-related systems for children:

Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP)	The written plan that guides services for a child who is younger than 3 . An IFSP is written after the child is evaluated and found eligible for early intervention services. ¹
Individualized Education plan (IEP)	The written plan developed to make sure a child who is older than 3 and has a disability identified under the law receives specialized instruction and related services in learning settings.
Section 504 Plan	A formal plan in the school setting for a child who's having trouble in school and needs simple accommodations that are documented for clarity. The plan can adjust how your child is taught, for example, adding frequent breaks or audiobooks. They can also determine a plan for a child with a health-related concern, such as keeping epi pens in a teacher's desk and in the student's backpack. Section 504 plans may be helpful for children who don't need special education but who do need support to learn in school. For more information on the differences between IEPs and Section 504 Plans, visit Understood's website: The difference between IEPs and Section 504 plans

¹Office of Head Start. (n.d.). Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSPs) tips. Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center.

Your Role in This Process

Parents play a vital role in the special education process, serving as advocates, collaborators and decision-makers. Your insights into your child's strengths, needs and daily experiences are essential in shaping effective educational plans.

★ An advocate for your CHILD

You play an important role in making sure your child gets the support and opportunities they deserve to learn and grow. This guide will help you speak up for your child's rights and needs with confidence.

It's important to let your child be part of this process, as well. Children themselves will have the best insights into their strengths, needs and daily experiences. These plans should be something done with your child, not to them.

★ An advocate for YOURSELF

In the process of getting your child special education services, there will be different meetings to attend, forms to sign and big decisions to make. Knowledge will be your greatest tool. Always ask questions if something isn't clear, speak up if you disagree and offer suggestions where there are opportunities.

★ An integral part of a TEAM

Although the process may feel isolating at times, you are not alone. A team of teachers, specialists, case managers² and other professionals share a common goal: supporting your child in receiving the education they deserve. Professionals often bring extensive experience and insights into what may be effective, along with ideas worth trying. Approach meetings and discussions with an open mind, while remaining focused on the shared goal of helping your child receive the education they deserve.

²A case manager coordinates meetings, manages paperwork and ensures your child's IEP or Section 504 plan is followed. They're your main point of contact and may be a special education teacher or another school staff member; in Early Intervention, this role is often called a Service Coordinator. Ask the school administration to confirm your case manager.

Clarifying Common Misconceptions

Myths are widely held beliefs that are not true. This table addresses some of the most common ones about early intervention, special education and disabilities.

 Myth	 Fact
Special education is only for children who can't keep up with their peers.	Special education is for children who learn or experience the world in ways that may not be addressed by a general education teacher. Special education helps ensure each child receives the teaching and support that fits them best.
Special education means my child will learn in a separate room.	Children with disabilities have the right to learn in an environment with their classmates without disabilities as much as possible. This is called the least restrictive environment (LRE).³ Schools must give the supports and services needed to help make that happen.
When a child receives special education, it means they're bad at learning.	Children have different strengths and learning styles. Special education services ensure a child gets the kind of teaching and support that helps them learn best.

³**Least restrictive environment (LRE)** means children with disabilities have the right to learn alongside children without disabilities as much as possible. Schools must provide the supports, services and accommodations a child needs to participate in general education classrooms before considering a more separate setting. A separate class or program should only be used if a child cannot make progress in the general education or inclusion classroom with the right supports in place.



 Myth	 Fact
Special education is expensive and my child's school might not be able to afford it.	Special education and early intervention services are free under federal law. Schools are required to give children the services listed in their IEPs, IFPS and Section 504s. In some communities, families may still need to advocate to make sure these services are provided. Families may also choose to pay for additional services if they feel their child needs them.
Parents and children themselves have little to no say in the process.	Parents and the child have a major say! You (and your child, once they can begin attending meetings) ultimately decide what services your child receives. Your voice matters.
Special education is a label.	Special education is a group of services, a program and a tool to help children learn and grow. It shouldn't be used as a label to define someone.
It's a bad thing for my child to be identified as being disabled – it means something is wrong with them.	More than a billion people in the world are disabled – it's a normal part of human diversity. It can be helpful to identify children with disabilities so they can start to receive individualized supports that help them grow and develop.

This guide uses both identity-first language (e.g., "disabled person") and person-first language (e.g., "person with disability") interchangeably, reflecting the range of preferences within disability communities. In practice, the best approach is always to defer to the language an individual uses for themselves.

Section 2:

Knowing Your Rights



Knowing Your Rights

Your Rights as a Parent & Your Child's Rights to a Quality Education

This section provides a simple overview of the key rights that protect both you and your child so you know what to expect, what you can ask for and how to speak up when something doesn't feel right.

Two key laws protect these rights: the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**, which ensures eligible children receive special education and related services, and **Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act**, which protects children with disabilities from discrimination and ensures access to their education. These laws exist to make sure your child receives the support, respect and opportunities they deserve.



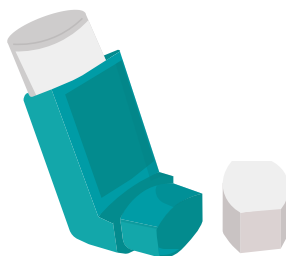
Early intervention (birth-3 years old)

Rights Covered in **Part C of IDEA**



Special Education (3-21 years old)

Rights Covered in **Part B of IDEA**



Section 504 (3-21 years old)

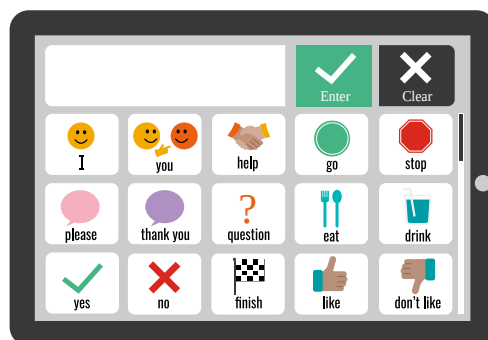
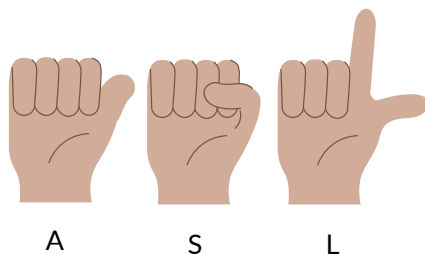
Rights Covered in **Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act**

⁴IDEA is a national law that requires states to provide children with disabilities with a free and appropriate public education. It outlines the requirements for testing, services and documentation discussed in this guide.

Your Child's Educational Rights at a Glance

Your child has the right
to:

- Learn in the least restrictive environment (LRE), meaning children with and without disabilities are together as much as possible.
- Receive the supports, services and accommodations⁵ they need to learn and participate fully.
- Access communication in ways that work best for them (spoken language, sign language, pictures, devices or other tools).
- Equal opportunities - regardless of disability, language, race, or background - including a free and appropriate public education (FAPE).



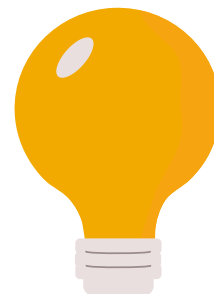
- Be treated with dignity and respect at all times.
- Be safe in all learning environments.
- Be recognized for their strengths, not just their needs.
- Be included in decisions about their learning, especially as they get older.

⁵An accommodation is a change that removes a barrier to learning. Examples include using noise-canceling headphones, having extra time to take a test, giving a child a calculator during a math test or using technology like text-to-speech.

Your Rights as Parent or Guardian at a Glance

Your Right to Be Involved

- **You are an equal member of your child's team.** This means they cannot make decisions without your involvement. The school must tell you about meetings in advance and find a time that works for you.
- **You can invite someone to support you (such as another family member, friend or disability advocate).** This can be very helpful if you are nervous.



Your Right to Understand and Ask Questions

- **You have the right to clear, plain-language communication.** If you don't understand something, ask for them to explain it again.
- **You can ask for things to be further explained or put in writing.** This can help give you more time to think about what's being offered before making a decision.
- **You can request copies of all reports, evaluations and meeting notes.**
- **You have the right to an interpreter if English isn't your preferred language.**

Your Right to Consent

- **You give written permission (consent) for the school or program to do something, like evaluate your child or start services.** Without your consent, the school cannot move forward with any plan or action. The school must get your consent before doing any evaluations or starting Early Intervention, Special Education or Section 504 services.
- **You can take time to review documents before signing them.**
- **You can pause or decline services at any time.**



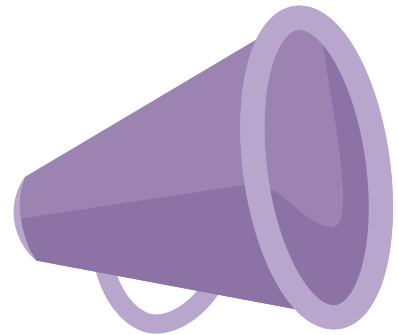


Your Right to Review Records

- You can ask to see your child's school and evaluation records at any time.
- You can request corrections if something is missing or inaccurate.

Your Right to Disagree and Appeal

- **If you disagree with the school's decision about your child's services or eligibility, you can:**
 - Request another meeting to review or change the plan.
 - Ask for mediation (a neutral person helps you and the school reach agreement).
 - File a complaint or request a due process hearing.⁷
- You can ask for these steps in writing at any time.



⁷If you disagree with the team about your child's plan or services, you have the right to request a formal review called "due process." This is part of your legal rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Due process is explained in more detail on page 12.

What to Do if Rights Are Not Being Met

Every family has the right to ask questions, speak up and act if something doesn't feel right. If you feel that your rights or your child's rights aren't being followed, you aren't alone and you have options.

Start by talking to the school

Contact your case manager, service coordinator or principal and explain what's happening. Ask for a meeting, in writing, to review the issue. Bring your notes, emails or examples of what's been missed or not followed. Sometimes, misunderstandings can be fixed quickly through conversation.

Keep records of all communications in writing

If the problem isn't fixed after talking, send a written request or email asking for changes or clarifications. Keep copies (electronic or paper) of all communication; this helps show what steps you've already taken.



Ask for a review or mediation

You can ask for a new meeting to review your child's plan (IFSP, IEP or Section 504). If you still don't agree, you can request mediation.



Mediation is a process in which a neutral third person helps you and the team talk through concerns and work toward an agreement. Mediation is free for families and shouldn't affect your child's current services. In schools, mediation is a way to support positive conversations. The neutral mediator ensures both the family and school team can share their perspectives and work together to reach an agreement.



File a Complaint or Request Due Process

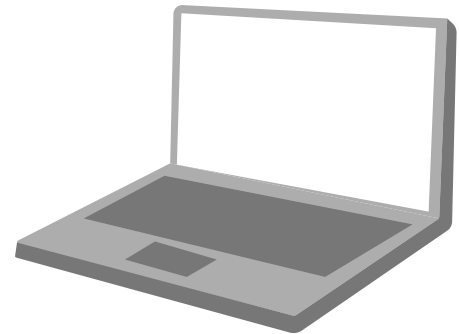
If the problem continues or your child isn't receiving their required services:

- You can file a complaint with your state's education department or the Office for Civil Rights (OCR). [Access the link here.](#)
- You can also request a due process hearing, which is a formal way to resolve disagreements under IDEA or Section 504.

Your service coordinator, case manager or local Parent Training and Information (PTI) Center (more information on PTI below) can help you start this process.

If you have questions on your or your child's rights or would like assistance, contact:

- [Your state's Parent Training and Information \(PTI\) Center](#)
- Your state's protection and advocacy agency; search "Disability Rights [Your State]"
- [Understood.org for free guides and resources](#)





Section 3:

Key Players in Special Education & Early Education

Your Child's Special Education or Early Intervention Team

Your child's team includes people with different skills and perspectives who work together to support your child's success. Some team members are required by law to attend meetings, while others may participate based on your child's specific needs. You may also invite people you trust to be part of the team. This section explains who these team members are and why they may be involved in supporting your child.

Common Attendees & Why They Are There

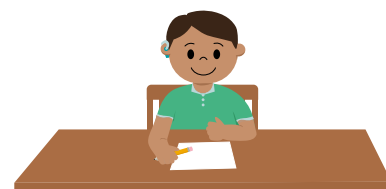
Attendees Required By Law:

Parent or Guardian

You play an important role on your child's team. Share information about your child, learn about your child's strengths and needs at school and work together with the team to decide what supports and services are best.

Your Child

When children feel comfortable being a part of their IEP meetings, they attend and sometimes even lead their own meetings! It's important that children have a say in their own education and keep up to date with teacher feedback. Your child can talk about what they like and don't like about their current school day and what helps them learn best.



Special Education Teacher

A special education teacher primarily works with children who have IEPs. They design and adapt lessons to meet each child's learning needs, track progress toward IEP goals and make sure the services and supports listed in the IEP are being provided.

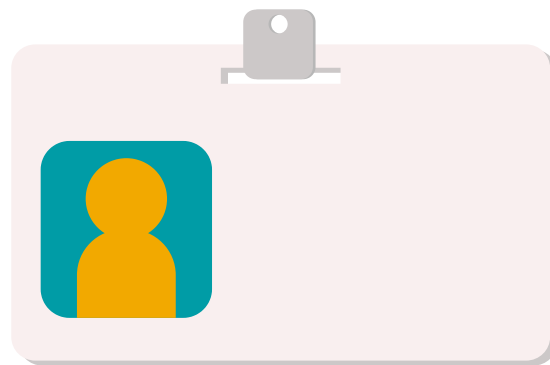
Special education teachers also work closely with general education teachers and families to help children succeed in all parts of the school day. Alternatively, if a child has a Section 504, a special education teacher may consult or collaborate with the child's team to help plan or monitor accommodations.

General Education Teacher

A general education teacher instructs all children in the classroom, including children with disabilities. They help create an inclusive learning environment and work with the team to make sure the accommodations and modifications in a child's IEP or Section 504 Plan are used when needed.

During the meeting, the general education teacher may share observations about how your child is learning, as well as plan for and review additional supports.

In many cases, this teacher may have referred your child for special education services after monitoring their learning and determining they might benefit from extra support in the classroom and special education services. Because the general education teacher works with your child every day, they're familiar with their strengths and areas where additional help may be needed.



School District Representative (Case Manager or Service Coordinator)

The case manager's main role is to set up and run the meeting. They're also there to make sure the family receives all the necessary paperwork and that they're given the chance to sign any consent forms. The case manager is also responsible for giving the guardians their rights in paper form. The case manager is NOT a parent advocate, but they can and should answer any questions you may have about the special education process.

Interpreter (if applicable)

If the family's primary language is different than English, the school is required to provide an interpreter for any meetings. The school should ask the family what their primary language is before the meeting. The family does NOT need to find their own interpreter.

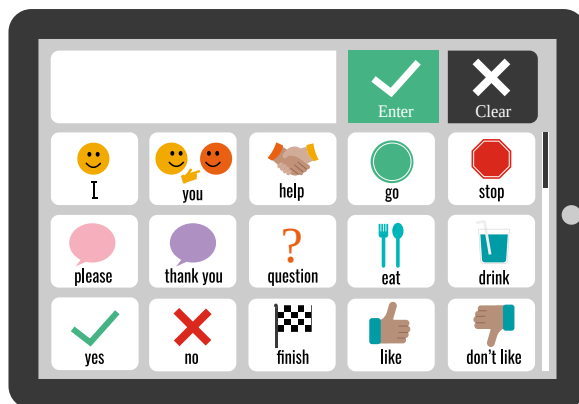
Additional Attendees:

School Psychologist

A school psychologist completes certain evaluations as part of your child's assessment, such as cognitive testing and social-emotional evaluations. They may also help identify supports to help your child succeed in school. A psychologist may be there for some meetings. They may ask you questions about your child during an initial meeting, explain testing results during an eligibility or IEP meeting or share their thoughts about your child's progress during a triennial meeting, which is a reevaluation meeting held every three years.

Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP)

A speech-language pathologist helps children who have needs related to speech, language or communication. They can help with things like understanding language, forming words, using speech devices or building social communication skills.



Occupational Therapist (OT)

An occupational therapist helps children build skills needed for everyday activities, such as holding a pencil, feeding themselves or getting dressed. They also help children who have sensory processing needs.

Physical Therapist (PT)

A physical therapist helps children improve movement, strength and coordination. They may work on activities like walking, balancing, or climbing stairs.

Social Worker

A social worker helps children and families with emotional or behavioral concerns, connects them with community resources and supports children in managing social situations at school.



Other Attendees Parents or Guardians Can Invite:

Special Education Advocate

You may choose to hire an outside special education advocate who doesn't work for the school. You'll have to pay for most special education advocates; however, there are some organizations who offer pro bono, or free, work because they want to help you. Advocates may look over draft documents, come to meetings with you, give you suggestions when making decisions, etc.

Friend or Family Members

Sometimes having a friend, family member or someone you trust can make a meeting less stressful and intimidating. You have the right to bring a trusted friend or family member to any meetings the school may hold. Be sure to inform the school who you're bringing before the meeting so they can add their name to the paperwork.

Trusted Service Providers

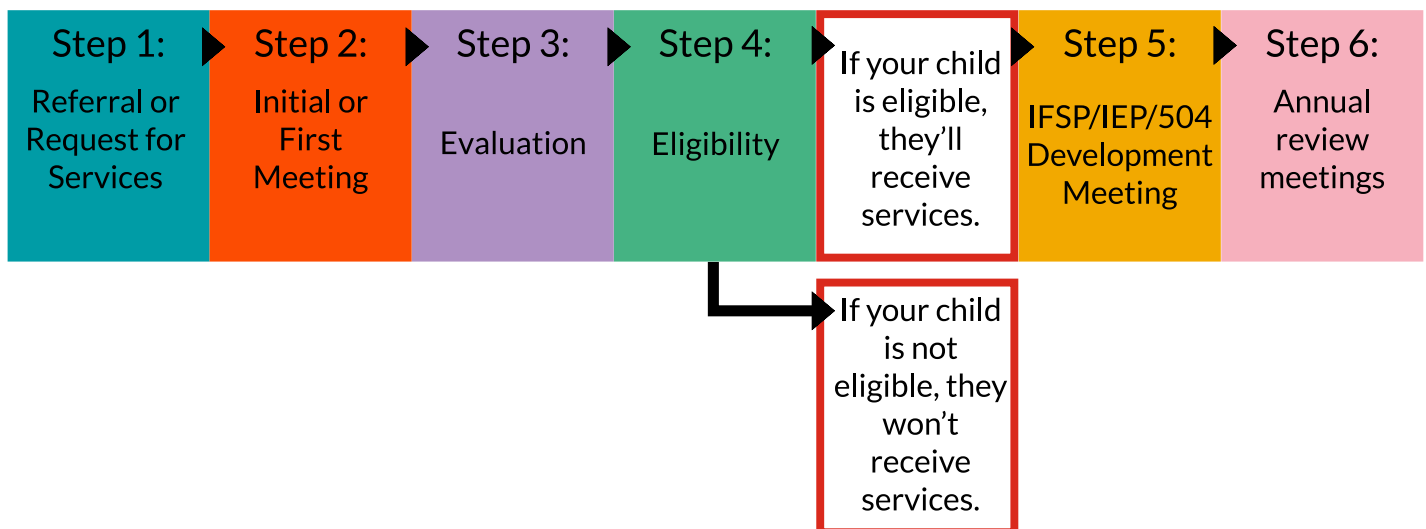
Someone outside of the school you trust who already works with or knows your child, such as a **Head Start teacher, home visitor, therapist or private specialist** may join the meeting if you'd like. They can offer helpful context about your child's strengths and needs from their own experience.

Section 4: Steps to Getting Special Education Services For Your Child



Steps to Getting Special Education Services for Your Child

Families play an important role in getting services for their child. Whether you're seeking Early Intervention, an IEP or a Section 504 Plan, the process includes a series of meetings, evaluations and decisions. This section explains each step in simple, clear language so you can feel confident, informed and ready to advocate for what your child needs.



Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP)

Step 1: Referral/Request for Services

If your child needs support in one or more of the five developmental domains (communication, physical, cognitive, social-emotional, self-help/adaptive), you can talk to your child's pediatrician to get a referral or contact your state's Early Intervention office. Every state has an Early Intervention office (sometimes called Part C Services).

If the Early Intervention Office doesn't contact you directly, you can:

- Call your state's Early Intervention central intake line
- Visit your state's Early Intervention website and complete an online referral form
- Ask your local school district or regional center for the Early Intervention contact number

Step 2: Initial Meeting with Early Intervention Representative

When Early Intervention receives the referral, they'll connect you to a service coordinator. They'll ask you questions about you, your family and your child to help find the best way to support your child. Any information you share is kept confidential and will not be shared without your permission.

Step 3: Evaluation

Before your child can get an IFSP, they'll need to be evaluated. During an evaluation, a small team of specialists will connect with your child through play, conversation and gentle observation. This helps them learn how best to support your child's development.

Step 4: Eligibility

The team will schedule an eligibility meeting to discuss their observations and thoughts about your child's skills and needs. Feel free to ask questions or share concerns if you disagree - you know your child best.

If your child is eligible, they'll receive IFSP services.

If your child is not eligible, they will not receive IFSP services. If you disagree with the decision, let the team know. If you'd like to move forward with a formal process, ask for information about due process.



Step 5: IFSP Development Meeting

You and the team will meet to make a plan that includes what services your child will receive, including when, how, where and the goals they're trying to meet. You typically have 14 calendar days to sign, which signals your consent. If you disagree with what's being proposed, mark "disagree" and request another meeting. Services begin only after consent is given.

Step 6: Annual Meetings

IFSP teams must meet at least once a year to update the plan. **You can request a meeting at any time to discuss progress or changes.** Contact your service coordinator to schedule additional meetings.

Step 7: Transition Out of Early Intervention (Typically Begins 90 Days Before Your Child's 3rd Birthday)

Transition planning begins at least 90 days before the child's 3rd birthday (or earlier). Together, you and the team create a plan for what comes after early intervention (which ends by age 3).

- The service coordinator will ask for consent (permission) to share your child's information with the local school district.
- If you give consent, the district may conduct a new evaluation or use the IFSP to determine whether your child is eligible for preschool or community programs such as Head Start.
- If you don't give consent, your child's services will end when they turn 3.

If your child qualifies, services will continue through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) provided by the school system.

If not, the service coordinator will share information about local community programs and services.



What's in an IFSP?

Child and Family Information

There will be basic information about your child such as their birthday, address and name. There will also be guardian information, including contact details and relationship to the child.

Service Coordinator Information

The IFSP will include all the information about your service coordinator. This will be important whenever you need to call or email your service coordinator with questions, concerns or updates.

Present Levels of Development

This section will describe your child's strengths, as well as areas where they may benefit from additional support. The information should be accurate, respectful and reflect your child's abilities in a positive and supportive way.

Family Resources, Concerns and Priorities

This is a section where you can add in any concerns you have about the process, services or your child's development. The section for family strengths and resources should only include positive information and avoid being hurtful to the family.

Measurable Results or Outcomes

Your child's annual goals describe what your child will work toward and how the team will monitor progress. The IFSP should include the goal, activities and services the child will receive, how the goals will be tracked, how often the child will receive services, who will be providing the services and where the services will be. These goals are created with families and focus on meaningful growth that supports your child's development.



Natural Environments/Settings

IFSP services should only happen in an environment most natural to the child. This means that children should be where they're most comfortable and most likely to be themselves without feeling stressed or overwhelmed. This could happen at home, at daycare, at their grandparents' house, etc. Tell the team where the child is most comfortable.

Other Services

"Other services" in an IFSP are things the family needs but that Early Intervention isn't responsible for funding. The team still lists them so families know what to pursue. Examples include medical services for speciality doctors, childcare, assistive technology, housing or family support services, etc.

Consent

In many states, you'll have 14 calendar days to decide if you give permission to start services. Services will begin the day you sign that you give permission. If you don't give permission, the service coordinator will schedule a follow-up meeting.



Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

Step 1: Referral/Request for Services

If you or your child's teacher notices that your child is struggling in school and may need extra support, you can ask for an IEP evaluation.

Contact your school and say: "I would like to request an evaluation for special education services in writing for my child. May I please speak to the person in charge of Special Education referrals?" A school staff member, such as a teacher, counselor, or nurse can also make a referral.



Step 2: Initial Meeting

The initial meeting, sometimes called the domain, referral or evaluation meeting, is your first meeting with the full special education team. This may include service providers like speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, general and special education teachers, case managers, psychologists, the school nurse and other professionals who support your child. If anyone needs a language interpreter, let the school know before the meeting - they're required to provide one.

This meeting is your opportunity to share what you see at home, including what works well, what's challenging and what you believe your child needs to succeed. The team may ask you and your child's teachers many questions. It's always okay to ask them for clarification or to repeat or explain something again. Special education processes can be confusing!

By the end of this meeting, the team will decide between two options:

- **Option A:** "Proceed to do a Full and Individual Evaluation (FIE)" **This means the team will move forward with the IEP evaluation process.**
- **Option B:** "Decline to conduct an evaluation" **This means the team does not believe your child needs special education services at this time.** If you disagree, review [Section 2](#) of this guide for information about Knowing Your Rights.

Step 3: Evaluation

During the initial meeting, the school team decides who will evaluate your child. During the evaluation, team members usually meet for 30–60 minutes with your child during the school day and to ask questions, observe learning and take notes. Afterward, they combine their observations and decide if your child may benefit from special education services. If a school district isn't willing to conduct an evaluation for your child, you can always get an independent evaluation done and use those results to request services from the school district.

Step 4: Eligibility

You'll meet with the evaluators to decide if your child is eligible for an IEP. Children are only considered eligible if they have a disability in one of the 13 categories listed in federal law and if their disability affects their education. The 13 categories include:

- specific learning disability
- speech or language impairment
- other health impairment
- autism, intellectual disability
- emotional disturbance, developmental delay
- multiple disabilities, hearing impairment
- orthopedic impairment
- visual impairment
- traumatic brain injury
- deaf
- blindness



Please see the [Resources](#) section of this guide to learn more about each category.

- **If your child is eligible, the team will create an IEP.**
- **If your child isn't eligible, your child will not receive services.** If you disagree with the decision, let the team know. If you'd like to move forward with a formal process, ask for information about due process.

Step 5: IEP Development Meeting

You and the team will schedule a meeting at a time that works for everyone. You can invite anyone you choose, such as a friend, family member or advocate, for support. Before the meeting, the team should send you a draft IEP to review. During the meeting, you'll work together to create a plan that explains what services your child will receive, when and where they'll receive them, how they'll be provided, and the goals they'll work towards. Do not sign the IEP unless you agree with everything in it. If you disagree with any part of it or need more time, tell the team you want to review it after the meeting. In most states, you have 14 calendar days to sign. If you disagree, mark "disagree" and request another meeting to discuss changes. Services will only begin after you give consent.

Step 6: Attend Annual Review Meetings

The IEP team must meet at least once a year to update your child's plan. You can ask for an IEP meeting at any time during the year, if you believe updates are needed. If your child moves to a different school their IEP records will transfer so services can continue.

What's in an IEP?

Present Levels of Development

This section will describe your child's strengths, as well as areas where they may benefit from additional support. The information should be accurate, respectful and reflect your child in a positive and supportive way.



Annual Goals and Service Delivery

These are either academic or functional (independent functioning, social-emotional, etc.) skills your child can complete in a school year. This will also include how the team will track your child's progress and when they'll get support to reach this goal during the school day. You should be told about your child's progress on their goals each time report cards are given out.

Accommodations and Modifications

These are different strategies the teachers can use during the day to mitigate or remove any barriers to your child's education. This will also include ways they'll change the classroom, the work your child receives and the way they show work.

If your child attends an after-school program led by the school district, their IEP can include the supports they need in that setting. This may include accommodations, extra time, behavior supports, sensory tools or transition support. Including after-school needs in the IEP helps ensure your child is supported throughout their full day, not only during in-school hours.



An **accommodation** is a change that removes a barrier to learning. Examples include using noise-canceling headphones, having extra time to take a test, giving a child a calculator during a math test or using technology such as text-to-speech.



A **modification** is different from an accommodation. A modification changes what the child learns, either the amount or level of work. For example, a modification in the classroom where children are learning how to add and subtract may be to have the child with modified work add and subtract 1-2 digit numbers while the other children add and subtract 3-4 digit numbers. The child is still learning the same skill as the other children, but their method and showing they understand is slightly different.

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

This section is extremely important, and you should pay special attention to it when reading the draft of the IEP. If applicable, tell the IEP team you want your child in an inclusion classroom¹³ during the day. Sometimes, the school will say no, or it's not possible. If your child should be in an inclusion classroom, it's important to tell the school that you don't agree with their decision.

¹³Inclusion classrooms are where children with and without special education services are learning side by side. There are typically a special education teacher and a general education teacher co-teaching or a special education teacher offering push-in services, meaning they come into the general education classroom to provide support rather than pulling a child out for separate instruction. Inclusion classrooms are often the preferred way for children to learn because children are meaningfully included, and the teachers typically use many ways of teaching that can benefit children with and without disabilities.



Paraprofessional Justification

A paraprofessional (para) is most commonly known as a teaching assistant. A paraprofessional can help with daily school activities, such as behavior support during recess and lunch, academic support during things like math, reading, science or social studies, and/or physical support for children who may need help with feeding, toileting, mobility, etc. If your child requires a paraprofessional for either a part of the day or the full day, the team will put this in writing on the IEP under the Paraprofessional Justification section.

Consent

In most states, you'll have 14 calendar days to give permission to start services. If you don't give permission, the case manager will schedule a follow-up meeting.

If your child is 14 years of age or more...

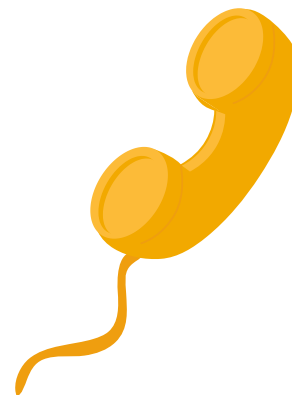
Transition Plan

This is created by the IEP team, including your child, to outline steps to plan out their future for their teenage years. This includes their interests, what classes they enjoy, skills they'd like to learn and thoughts about college, further schooling or joining the workforce. Transition planning can start as early as 14 years old, but is required at 16 years old in most states.

Section 504 Plan

Step 1: Referral/Request for Services

If you or your child's teacher notices that your child is struggling in school and may need extra support, you can ask for a Section 504 plan. If you don't know whether your child would benefit most from a Section 504 plan or an IEP, tell the school you would like the child to be evaluated for special education services and they'll help determine the most appropriate plan.



Step 2: Initial Meeting

The initial meeting, sometimes called the domain, referral or evaluation meeting, is your first meeting where you and the school team talk about your child's strengths and needs. The people who join will depend on what your child needs. For example, a general education teacher may attend if classroom accommodations are being discussed, and a school nurse may join if your child takes medication or has a medical condition like asthma.

This is your chance to share what helps your child at home and what's hard for them. The team might ask you and the teachers questions.

Often, if a Section 504 plan seems appropriate, the school will move straight into the evaluation process. Section 504 plans are usually quicker to set up than IEPs because they don't always require a special education teacher.

Step 3: Evaluation

The school team will review your child's records, grades, attendance and any medical or psychological reports to decide if more testing is needed. Sometimes, a doctor's note or documentation about your child's condition may be requested.



Step 4: Eligibility

The team will meet with you to decide if your child qualifies for a Section 504 plan. You can ask questions or share any information that helps the team understand your child's needs.

Step 5: Section 504 Plan Development Meeting

If eligible, the team will work with you to write the plan. It lists the accommodations and supports your child will receive and how the school will use them to make sure your child is fully included and learning alongside their peers.

Step 6: Attend Annual Review Meetings

Section 504 teams must meet at least once a year to update your child's plan. You can also request a meeting anytime during the year if you think updates are needed. If your child moves schools, their Section 504 documents will transfer so services can continue.

What's in a Section 504?

School Information

School information can include the school's name, when the document was created and the child's name. It may also include your child's disability if they've been diagnosed with one in the past. The Section 504 plan will include the team members who attended the meeting.

Teacher Support

Since a Section 504 plan is usually followed in the general education classroom, the general education teacher may need some help to follow it. This section includes anyone who may meet with the teacher and give them some support, such as a special education teacher or school nurse.

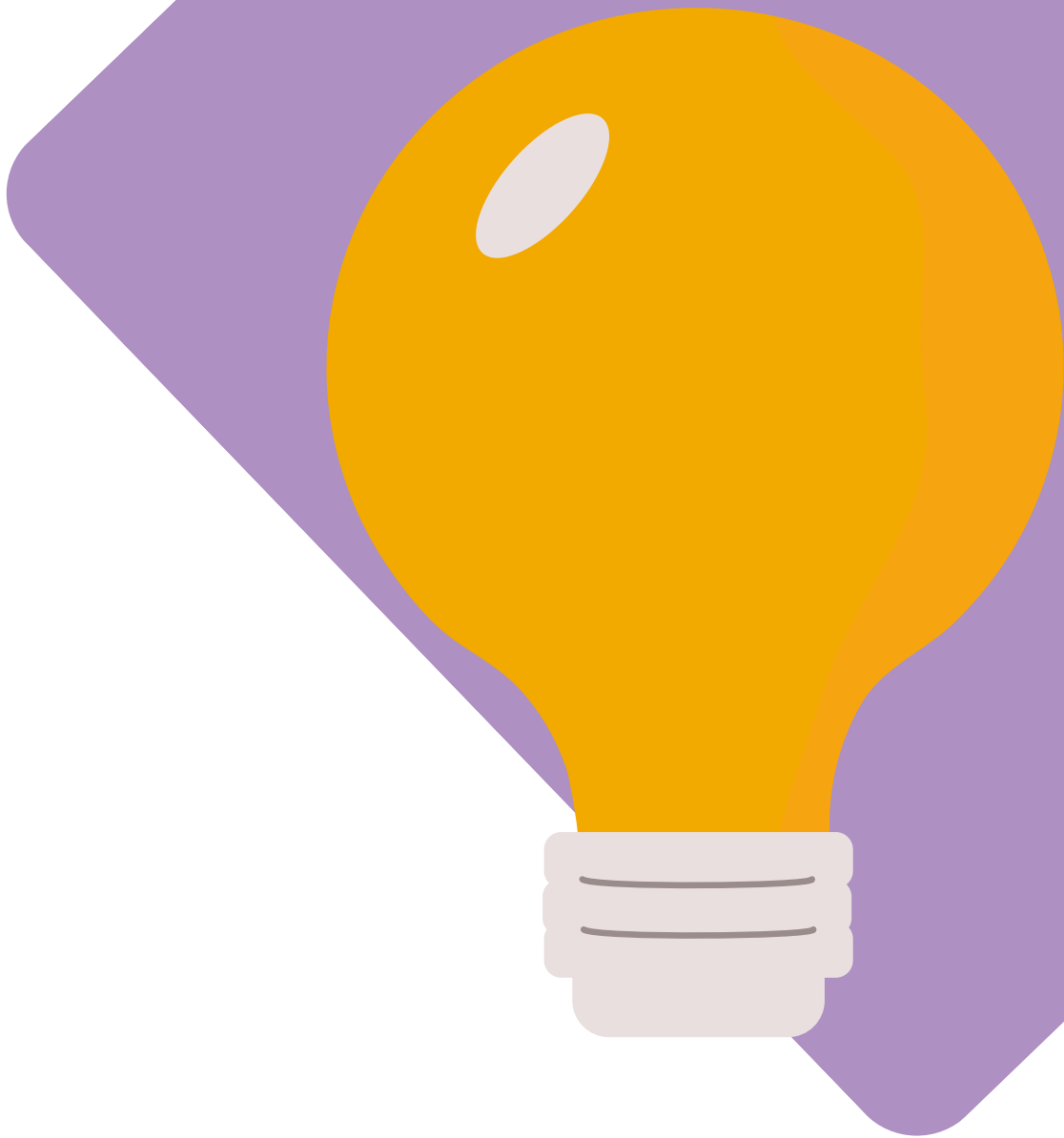
Accommodations and/or Services

This section includes what kinds of accommodations your child will get in the classroom. This could be extra time on some assignments or a seat in a quieter area. The Section 504 will list the person who's in charge of providing the accommodations. This is usually the responsibility of the general education teacher(s). Finally, this section will include when the child receives those accommodations (i.e. every day, every two weeks, etc.)

If your child attends an after-school program led by the school district, their Section 504 Plan can include the supports they need in that setting. This may include accommodations, extra time, behavior supports, sensory tools or transition support.

Notes

The document will have a section where any notes from team members can be added. This may include any of your own concerns as well.



Section 5: Meeting Tips

Meeting Tips for Discussions about your Child's Special Education Needs

The following tips are designed to help guardians prepare for and participate in meetings related to special education services. These tips are useful at any stage of the process and can be applied to all types of special education meetings.

These are only suggestions. **The most important elements of a successful meeting include being present, focused and asking questions whenever something is unclear.**

Preparing For Your Meeting

Review your rights

Schools are required to respect and follow both your rights as a guardian and your child's rights as a student. If you need a reminder of these rights, refer to the [Know Your Rights](#) section in [Section 2](#) of this guide.

Look through draft plans the school sent home

Before most meetings, if the team creates a new plan or makes changes to an existing one, they should send you draft copies of all documents a few days ahead of time. Review the documents carefully, note anything you don't understand or disagree with and write down any additions you'd like to suggest. Be prepared for the team to discuss and make changes during the meeting.

Prepare your questions and talk to your child

There's no such thing as a silly or bad question, especially when it comes to your child's education and well-being. Before the meeting, you should develop a list of questions. Ask your child about how school is going and if they have any questions for their teachers or concerns about how the school day is going.

Invite any guests or advocates

You have the right to bring anyone to the meeting who can support you or contribute to the discussion. Let the case manager know in advance who you plan to bring and whether any guests need accessibility accommodations or an interpreter.

During the Meeting

Share about your child

Although teachers know how children are at school, you can provide valuable information about your child at home. Talk about any changes you've seen in behavior or routine. This may be a sign that something needs to change at school.

For example: If the school says your child has no behavior issues, but when they come home they seem more aggressive or upset, this may mean they're holding in a lot of stress during the school day and letting it out at home where they feel safe. In this case, you may want to talk about why your child doesn't seem to express themselves at school.

Keep an open mind

You may have an idea of how you want the meeting to go and what you want for your child. Keep in mind, it's important to listen to all team members' ideas and suggestions. Remember that you can take time to think things over - **no decisions must be made during the meeting.**

Ask questions

Special education language can be confusing, and the process isn't always easy to understand. Don't be afraid to ask questions or let the team know when you don't understand something. If you choose not to ask questions during the meeting, write them down and email them to the case manager after the meeting. **Do not sign consent forms until all of your questions have been answered.**

Be polite but firm

You are your child's strongest advocate. Remember that your child has the right to an equal education in the least restrictive environment. With the right supports and accommodations, your child can succeed while learning alongside peers with and without disabilities.



After the Meeting

Review and sign the final documents (if there are any)

You don't have to sign documents during the meeting. You have the right to take them home, review them and sign only when you feel comfortable. Remember, only sign if you agree with everything. If you disagree, contact the school to request another meeting to discuss your concerns.



Check that the school team is following through with the plan

Anything written in a legal document must be followed by the school. If your child needs a paraprofessional, speech therapy or support from a special education teacher in a general education classroom throughout the day, they should receive those supports. Talk to your child about school, how they feel about the changes and if they feel supported during the day. Ask your child's teachers once in a while about how the plan is going.

Share information with your child

After you've talked to the team, and before signing the document, talk to your child about the possible changes in their school day and how they feel about them. Explain that these changes aren't permanent. If your child seems upset or unsure, you can meet with the team again to discuss a different approach or a gradual change to new supports. (For example; starting with ten minutes a week with a SLP and slowly working up to 30 minutes a day.)

Keep the finalized documents in a safe and easy-to-find place

Most documents are emailed and can be stored in a folder on your computer. You'll also receive a paper copy after signing. Keep this in a secure and easy-to-find place. If you lose your copy, ask the school for another. Be careful with the documents since they include sensitive information about your child.

Section 6: Conclusion



Conclusion

You play a central role in your child's education and access to special education services. You are not only an advocate for your child, but also for yourself. While the special education process can be complex, you don't have to navigate it alone.

Final Suggestions to Keep in Mind

Stay firm about inclusion

Children with disabilities have the right to be included in classrooms and activities with their peers without disabilities as much as possible. Inclusive settings can support learning, confidence and a strong sense of community.

Talk to your child and tell them their opinion matters

Your child's voice matters. Ask them how they feel about school, what helps them learn and what makes it harder. Children are often the best source of information about what is or isn't working.

Continue learning about disability and advocacy

Disability is a part of human diversity. Keep learning from people with disabilities and organizations that advocate for disability rights. Their experiences and insight can guide you in supporting your child's growth, confidence and self-advocacy.

Be patient with yourself

This is a learning process. There's a lot to understand about special education laws, rights and supports, and it's normal to feel overwhelmed. Every child and family situation is different. Ask questions, seek clarity and give yourself grace as you grow more confident in this process. Remember, other than themselves, you are already your child's best advocate.



Section 7: Glossary

Glossary

These are common words and phrases you may hear during the special education process. Understanding these words can help you feel more confident in meetings, when reading through plans or when speaking to educators about your child.

Behavior

Behavior is a form of communication, not a problem to be fixed. It shows how a child experiences and responds to the world. Children have the right to be supported in safe, understanding and inclusive environments that help them feel regulated and connected.

Developmental Delay

When a young child takes longer to reach specific set milestones in areas like communication, movement or social skills. Early identification allows families to access supports that help children build these skills during important stages of growth.

Developmental Delay Domains

There are five domains (or skill areas) to focus on when your child is young:

1. **Communication** - the way they respond to and how they communicate with others. Communication does not have to be spoken words. It can also look like hand gestures, pointing to pictures, typing on a device or certain sounds.
2. **Physical** - another way to describe the child's five senses (taste, touch, sight, smell, hearing), any major movements they make with larger muscles (walking, crawling, leaning forward), any small movements they make with smaller muscles (writing, holding items, tapping their fingers, pressing buttons) and their ability to move from one space to another.
3. **Cognitive** - the child's ability to think and understand information and what's happening around them.
4. **Social-emotional** – the child's ability to interact with others, express themselves and handle conflict.
5. **Adaptive** - a way to describe how a child can care for themselves. This includes things like eating, drinking, toileting, bathing, getting dressed, etc.

Disability

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) defines persons with disabilities as including those who have "long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others".

Extended School Year (ESY)

ESY helps make sure your child doesn't lose important skills or fall behind when school is not in session. The IEP team decides if your child qualifies for ESY based on their needs. If your child needs it, the services must be written in their IEP and provided at no cost to your family.

General Education Classroom

A general education classroom includes students with different strengths and needs learning the same curriculum. When a child receives special education services, they still have the right to learn in this setting as much as possible, with modifications and accommodations provided as needed.

High Support/Low Support

These terms describe how much help a child needs in a specific setting, not who they are or what they can achieve. Using "high support" or "low support" is more respectful and accurate than saying things like "severe," "mild," "low-functioning" or "high-functioning." It shifts the focus to the supports a child has a right to so they can fully participate, learn and feel successful. The goal is always to create environments that meet each child's needs, not to label the child.

Natural Environment

When providing IFSP services, it's important for the child to receive support in the most natural environment they learn in, or more specifically, an environment suited for learning with reduced stimulation. Typically, this can be done in an environment with which the family and child are already familiar.

Neurodivergent

A person is neurodivergent when their brain processes, learn or experiences the world in ways that are different from what's considered typical. This can include people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyscalculia and intellectual or learning disabilities.

Neurodiversity

Refers to the idea that there are many different ways of thinking, learning and experiencing the world and that these differences are a natural part of human diversity, not something to be fixed.

Resource Room

A classroom led by a special education teacher that often provides short instruction (i.e. 30 minutes to 2 hours a session) to a small group of children with special education services. They focus on specific areas, such as reading, writing or math. Resource rooms provide additional instruction while still allowing children to spend most of their day in general education classes with their peers.

Self-Contained Classroom

A self-contained classroom is a smaller learning setting where most or all students receive special education services for most of the school day. The class is usually taught by a special education teacher and may include one or more paraprofessionals. This setting is designed for children who need more intensive or individualized support. Under the law, it should only be used when a child cannot make progress in the general education or inclusion classroom, even with modifications and accommodation.

Stimming (or self-stimulation)

Stimming means repeating movements, sounds or actions (rocking, flapping hands, humming or tapping) to help a person regulate how they feel or respond to what's happening around them. Many people, including people with autism, use stimming to calm themselves, focus, express emotions or manage sensory input. Stimming is a natural and important way for people to communicate and feel comfortable in their environment. It should only be addressed if it causes harm or prevents the person from taking part safely in daily activities.

Section 8: Resources & References



Resources

Navigating Your Rights

Understood — Plain-language guides on IEPs, 504 Plans, evaluations and family rights. One of the most accessible and family-friendly resources available.

Center for Parent Information and Resources — The national hub for Parent Training and Information (PTI) Centers. Helps families find their state's PTI for free, individualized support.

Office for Civil Rights (OCR) — For families who need to file a complaint; accessible through the U.S. Department of Education website.

Early Intervention (Birth–3)

Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (ECTA) — Explains Part C of IDEA and helps families find their state's Early Intervention program.

Zero to Three — Research-based resources on early childhood development and family support.

Office of Head Start — Resources specifically for Head Start and Early Head Start families.

Disability-Specific and Rights-Based Resources

The Arc — Advocacy and resources for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families.

National Disability Rights Network (NDRN) — Connects families to their state's protection and advocacy organization for free legal support.

Lives in the Balance — Free resources and training for families and educators on supporting children with behavioral challenges through compassionate, collaborative approaches rather than punitive ones.

Easterseals — A national nonprofit with local affiliates across the country offering services to children and adults with disabilities and their families, including early childhood support, therapies and community programs.

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