



Life Journey through Autism: Navigating the Special Education System



ORGANIZATION FOR AUTISM RESEARCH

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by



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Dear Readers,

From OAR's inception in 2003, the organization has been committed to promoting positive life outcomes for those living with autism through applied research, education and awareness. Special education is a pivotal service for many children with autism. *Navigating the Special Education System* is intended to be a resource for families and care providers. Ideally, this resource will enable families to access the educational service system to the fullest extent, thereby promoting the best outcomes for their children.

Special education provides educational support to eligible students with autism between the ages of 0 and 21. This broad age range encompasses remarkable developmental changes for students, as well as significant opportunities to promote learning and help students prepare to lead quality adult lives. Education professionals must coordinate and implement a comprehensive system so that special education students can maximize the benefit of the services they receive. To do that well, parents need to be informed and actively engaged.

This Guide provides logical support, helpful tips, and words of wisdom for parents whose children with autism are eligible for or already enrolled in special education. It includes history and information about IDEA (the federal law that guides special education), an overview of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process, and keys to being an effective advocate. Each of these topics is written in user-friendly language, to provide families with meaningful information and support.

Thank you for your interest in the *Navigating the Special Education System* Guide. Special education is intended to be a collaborative process that involves individuals with autism, their families, schools, and professionals all working together to ensure best outcomes. By working alongside other members of the autism community, OAR strives to use research and information to make meaningful differences for people with autism and their families. Through collaboration, everyone benefits.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Patricia Wright".

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Introduction

As any parent of a child with autism knows, your life changes and you take on new roles after your child receives a diagnosis of autism. Ready or not, you are now expected to be an expert on interventions, support professionals, and special education. Suddenly, your concerns and worries are different from the parents around you. While they may be concerned with the everyday path of education issues, you are left to determine your own path over the unfamiliar ground of special education services and learning how laws such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) affect your child. Navigating the special education system is no easy task, but as an advocate for your child, and by extension other children with autism, there is no task more important.

Overview

The fundamental intent of special education is to provide instruction to meet each child's unique needs. *Life Journey through Autism: Navigating the Special Education System* offers information, tools, and tips that will help you become an even more effective advocate for your child. Many state education departments offer pamphlets with specific information about the special education system in their state. What is different about this Guide is its national perspective and specific focus on the needs of children with autism.

Why write a guide about the special education system that is focused on autism? Simply stated, autism presents unique challenges. With 1 in every 88 children being diagnosed on the spectrum, more students with autism are attending public school than ever before. Many teachers, administrators, and school support staff lack the background and training to meet the unique needs of students with autism. It falls to the parents to make sure that their children's challenges—whether with social interactions, communication, or behavior—are addressed with research-based interventions within the school setting. To assure this, parents must have a basic understanding of special education services, their child's rights, and their own.

This Guide is designed as a resource for parents. Its purpose is to give each family the information and tools needed to successfully navigate the education system anywhere in the country. More specifically, it offers:

- Background on special education in the United States
- An understanding of the laws and regulations about special education
- An overview of the timeline of services
- A detailed explanation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)

- Tips and techniques for being an effective advocate
- Sources and links that will help you identify state specific resources and find more in-depth information
- Lists and definitions of terms that are frequently used in school systems

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

IDEA is the framework of special education. While understanding a law of this nature and complexity may be daunting, it will help you understand your child's rights and your own, as well as the basis for special education. This will allow you to become a better advocate for your child.

In 1975, Congress passed the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) and reauthorized it in 1990 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. In 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Improvement Act passed, though it is usually still referred to as IDEA. This legislation is an extension of the civil rights movement and guarantees that all students with disabilities are provided a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). It also requires that students with disabilities be placed in the least restrictive environment (LRE), where they can make progress toward achieving the goals established in their Individualized Education Program (IEP). The overall goal of FAPE and LRE is for children with disabilities to be educated with children who are not disabled whenever possible.



IDEA

You can find the complete text of IDEA and other resources at <http://www.idea.ed.gov>.

This law dramatically changed educational opportunities for students with disabilities. In the 1970s, only one-fifth of children with disabilities went to school while the rest stayed home or, sadly, were institutionalized. With the passage of EAHCA, more

A Brief Timeline of IDEA	
1975	Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) passed, mandating that students with disabilities receive public education.
1980s	Early intervention services are added to EAHCA.
1990	EAHCA is reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ensuring students with disabilities are educated with their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent that is appropriate.
1990s	Transition services are added to IDEA.
Late 1997	Autism is added as an eligibility category under developmental delay.
2004	The Individuals with Disabilities in Education Improvement Act is passed, which extends IDEA and adds Response to Intervention (RTI).

children with disabilities began to enter the education system, and not just into special schools, but into neighborhood schools alongside their peers without disabilities.

Soon the need for services from birth was recognized as important. The realization that children made great gains with early intervention led to the addition of services from birth to school age to EAHCA in the 1980s. At the same time, vocational services were also recognized as important and the law was changed to include transition-related requirements.

Why are IDEA and Special Education Important?

Only 40 years ago, children with disabilities were not part of the public education system. IDEA established special education and ensures that every child has access to public education. IDEA does this by:

- Assuring free and appropriate education (FAPE) and services for children with disabilities
- Protecting the rights of both children with disabilities and their parents
- Helping states provide education to children with disabilities through increased funding
- Assessing and assuring effectiveness of educational programs

Transition plans became a required part of the IEP after studies examining outcomes for individuals with disabilities after they exited the public school system, conducted in the 1990s, reported dismal results. There was also a push for individuals with disabilities to be more involved in the typical classroom setting. Schools were encouraged to have families and educators work collaboratively for the most positive outcomes for students. States increased preparation and continuing education training for teachers and staff members to work with students who had disabilities. Another major change in the 1990s was the addition of autism to the definition of “Child with a Disability.” Prior to 1997, children with autism were served under other eligibility categories, such as intellectual disability or other health impaired, or may not have been found eligible for services given the lack of a clear definition of autism in the law. Now, IDEA includes autism as a separate disability category.

IDEA continues to change and expand. The most recent change is the addition of response to intervention (RTI). RTI requires that at-risk students receive evidence-based interventions before being diagnosed with a specific learning disability. It allows schools to use special education funding for interventions for students who may not currently be identified as needing special education.

While it may be tempting to view all this as unnecessary, extra hoops to jump through, especially for a situation that is already stressful, understanding and knowing how to use this federal law will help your child receive the best education possible.

Overview of the Parts of IDEA

IDEA is the federal law that establishes special education as we know it in the United States. Learning about the parts of a federal law may seem unnecessary, but by understanding IDEA you will have a deeper knowledge of the special education system. You do not need to be an expert on the law, but being familiar with the terms and parts will greatly help you be an effective advocate throughout your child's education.



Learn More About IDEA

In addition to
<http://www.wrightslaw.com>
you can learn more about
IDEA at bit.ly/OARlink1 and
<http://nichcy.org/laws>

IDEA goes into great detail about special cases and scenarios. The following section is a general overview (rather than a detailed explanation) for each part of the law. For more specific information about IDEA, please visit wrightslaw.com. This resource is written and compiled by lawyers focusing on disability and special education law.

Entitlement

An entitlement is something that is guaranteed by rule or law. Under IDEA, the entitlement provision is the part of the law that establishes that your child is guaranteed, or entitled to, a free and appropriate education and taught in appropriate educational settings. Entitlement consists of two main parts; Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) and Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).

- **FAPE.** All children with disabilities are entitled to FAPE. When you break down what FAPE stands for, it is easy to understand. Every child is entitled to a free public education, which means going to school at the public's expense. You do not have to pay for your child's education. The term *appropriate* means that the education provided meets each child's abilities and age. For example, it would not be appropriate for a student who is 16 years old to be placed in a kindergarten classroom regardless of ability.
- **LRE.** LRE requires "children with disabilities to be educated with their peers in the regular classroom to the maximum extent possible" (IDEA, 2004). This refers to where a child receives FAPE. As you might imagine, this statement is very open to interpretation. It is important to remember that the nature of special education is the focus on the individual. The law does not mandate that all

students be educated in a regular education classroom because that is not always appropriate. LRE makes sure that students with disabilities are integrated as much as possible to the benefit of the student with the disability.

Eligibility

In IDEA, the eligibility section defines what states must do to receive federal funds for special education services, though you will most often hear this term associated with qualifying your child for special education services. In the past, students with autism were served under “Other Health Impairments” or “Emotional Disabilities,” depending on the school or state. Autism is now a basis for eligibility. Each state determines and defines eligibility categories differently. Please check [Appendix K](#) for a list of state-specific resources.

A student does not automatically qualify for special education services simply on the basis of a diagnosed disability. To receive services, the underlying requirement is that the child must need special education to benefit from instruction. When dealing with autism, it is important to remember that the term “instruction” means more than academic instruction. Instruction in this context also pertains to learning the social and related skills necessary for classroom learning, as well as interaction with peers and teachers throughout the day. While students with autism often possess average or above average intelligence, that does not mean they may not qualify for specialized educational services. These students often need to learn the social skills and behaviors associated with learning, such as how to ask for help when an assignment is confusing.

Determining eligibility for special education involves assessment by the school district and may include reports that you provide from outside professionals. If your child has a diagnosis of autism from an outside child psychologist or pediatrician, this information will be considered (in addition to school-delivered evaluations) to determine eligibility.

Students with autism may qualify for services in multiple categories. For example, a child diagnosed with autism and ADHD could be found eligible in the categories of “Other Health Impairments” and “Autism.” A child with poor adaptive functioning, low IQ, and autism may be found eligible for services in the categories of “Intellectual Disability” and “Autism.”

Remember, eligibility requirements vary greatly by state. Please contact your local school district or state department of education for exact requirements.

Evaluation

IDEA mandates that schools must assess all students receiving special education services. Evaluations are not just tests, they also take into account school performance, observations, and any other information related to the student. Schools

must use a variety of assessments to gain a comprehensive view of your child. Basing educational decisions on one test alone is unfair and inaccurate.

Evaluations do not just consider skills; they also take into account functional capability, language, and behavior, if necessary. All this information is used to determine eligibility for special education services and eventually to help in developing the IEP. While testing may cause stress for both your child and you, it is essential to the evaluation process. It provides you and any teachers working with your child the best information about what your child needs to work on and learn in order to be successful in school.

IDEA is very clear about what schools are allowed or not allowed to do with regards to evaluation. Schools may not evaluate your child without your permission and you may request an evaluation at any time. When requesting an evaluation, it is always best to put your request in writing and keep a copy for your files. In fact, it is a good idea to make and keep copies of all the documents you receive, as well as those you give to schools and others involved in your child's education. [Appendix F](#) provides a guide for organizing and storing the documents and paperwork related to your child's education.

For more in depth information regarding evaluation and testing, please consult *Life Journey through Autism: A Parent's Guide to Assessment*.

Procedural Safeguards

IDEA mandates the rules and processes for protecting your and your child's rights through procedural safeguards. This is the part of the law that ensures your ability to disagree with the school and provides information on how to raise your concerns. Each state and school district must have written procedural safeguards; they should give you these each year. Most schools require that parents sign a form or part of the IEP stating that you received this information.

Another phrase you often hear when talking about IDEA's procedural safeguards is **due process**, the umbrella term that governs your right to file an official complaint regarding your child's IEP or services provided under IDEA.

When do you need to use due process? Most often, cases involving due process revolve around circumstances where the parent believes that the school is not providing services as specified in the IEP or required under IDEA. For example, if an IEP contains speech services and the child is not receiving speech instruction, the parents may move to due process.



More on Evaluation

To read more about evaluation and assessments, see OAR's *Life Journey through Autism: A Parent's Guide to Assessment* at bit.ly/OARlink2.

Parents may also resort to due process if there are issues related to their child's IEP upon which they and the school cannot agree. Placement offers a good example of an important area where parents and IEP team members can disagree. If the parent ultimately disagrees with the placement the school offers, their only recourse is due process.

The process begins with the parents filing a formal complaint and is typically resolved by mediation with the school. If the dispute cannot be resolved at this level, parents have the right to enlist the support of advocates and lawyers per due process procedures.

As challenging, burdensome, and stressful as due process may be, it is your right and one you must be prepared to exercise to ensure your child's rights and educational opportunities—as set forth under IDEA—are observed and protected.

Before you initiate a dispute over your child's IEP or special education services, be sure to read the school district's procedural safeguards thoroughly. This will outline the steps necessary to file a complaint. You will find further information on disputing your child's IEP on [page 34](#).

Confidentiality

A child receiving special education services creates a massive paper trail. Schools maintain files on each student. This includes IEPs, evaluations, report cards, work samples, and other pertinent information. Because the school collects so much documentation, IDEA requires them to maintain a high level of confidentiality. Files must remain locked, and schools must keep a record of who views the files. While various school personnel have access to the information as a function of their jobs, a parent must provide consent for anyone outside of the school to have access to their child's information. When might you want authorize access to other people? One example is if your child is receiving services outside of school, such as home Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy. It makes sense that these professionals might gain valuable information about your child from the records at school.

As a parent, you may review your child's file at any time. If you do not agree with the information on file, you may request that the information be changed. The ease of changing information in a file very much depends on the school. If the school will not change information in the file, you can have a letter by you put in the file explaining which information you wanted changed or removed and why.

Discipline

Discipline, in general and especially for students with autism, is an important and often controversial topic. IDEA is clear in stating that students with disabilities are subject to school rules and can be disciplined for breaking them. In the case of a student with a disability, however, schools must first determine if the student's actions

are a symptom of the disability before taking any disciplinary action. This process of determining whether the offending action is a direct effect of the disability is called the **manifestation determination**.

Some children with autism exhibit aggressive behavior. Because of this, it is hard to determine when a behavior is a result of the disability or it is an action that can be dealt with through regular school disciplinary procedures. If a child frequently exhibits behaviors that break school rules, these behaviors should be identified in the IEP. In that event, the child should also have a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) and Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) included in the IEP. The FBA and BIP focus on determining reasons as to why the student exhibits problematic behaviors and provides treatment recommendations. For more information about FBAs and BIPs, please turn to [page 17](#).

If the school determines that your child's acting out or behaving in violation of school rules has nothing to do with your child's disability, your child is subject to disciplinary action. That action, however, will not affect your child's special education services. If you disagree with the school's determination decision, you may need to file a complaint. To learn more about this process, please turn to [page 34](#).

Individualized Education Programs (IEP)

One of the first phrases to come to mind when talking about special education is the Individualized Education Program, whose abbreviation, IEP, instantly becomes one of those acronyms you will remember for life. Mention IEPs to parents and teachers alike, and their reaction tells the story. The term conjures up unpleasant memories and is frequently met with a groan. For someone new to the special education world, the IEP and its process can seem daunting and, at times, excessive. No matter how so, **IEPs are important.**

The IEP provides a description and action plan for what you and the school mutually determine that your child requires in terms of services and supports necessary to learn. It is a prerequisite to receiving special education services. At best, when well written, these legal documents assure that your child receives what he or she needs for success. Conversely, if not done well, they can become lengthy documents that involve inordinate amounts of time, are ineffective, and do not serve your child well.

How can you avoid IEP challenges? Collaboration is the goal and intent of IDEA. Work with the school professionals, understand the IEP process, keep accurate and detailed records, and prepare for each meeting as if it's a final exam. If you do these things, you will be better positioned to make sure that your child's IEP successfully assures him or her full access to the free and appropriate education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) envisioned by IDEA.

A few weeks before your child's IEP is set to expire, you should be contacted by the school to set up a time for a new IEP meeting. Depending on your school's policies, you may receive a letter or a phone call. IEP meetings are usually scheduled during school hours, which can be difficult for parents. If your work schedule is inflexible, many schools are willing to schedule meetings before school hours. Be advised that IEP meetings scheduled outside of school hours may result in absent team members.

When the IEP meeting time has been agreed upon, you should request that draft IEP goals are sent to you at least three days before the meeting. These goals will be drafted by your child's case manager or teacher, with input from the other IEP team members. The IEP draft is a working document, so be sure to read over the draft goals and come prepared to provide feedback at the meeting. You may also want an advocate or another person who knows your child well to review the goals. You can read more about writing IEP goals on pages 14–15. The other sections of the IEP should be written collaboratively, though team members may have individually drafted information they think is important to include in the document.

Make sure to arrive at the IEP meeting a few minutes early to allow time to complete any visitor registration at the main office. Your child's case manager will usually run the meeting, but any team member may be in charge. The leader will introduce every-

one on the IEP team and have them sign in, so as to maintain a record of attendance. From here, the team will progress through the document segments as described in the following section.

After reading this section, you will have an in depth understanding of all the parts of an IEP.

The IEP Team

Federal law requires that certain people participate in the IEP process. These people, commonly referred to as the IEP team, include:

- **Parents or guardians**—First and foremost, you are there to act as an advocate for your child and ensure that his or her child’s needs are met. You know your child best. The information you provide about your child’s strengths, interests, and future plans are vital to the IEP process.
- **General education teacher**—If your child is participating in a general education classroom, a general education teacher must be part of the team. This person can offer insights into specific curriculum matters and which changes or accommodations might be needed to support your child’s continued education and development.
- **Special education teacher**—Just as the general education teacher offers knowledge and expertise relative to the general education curriculum, the special education teacher has more in-depth background on how to teach learners with special needs. They use that knowledge and experience to offer ideas for modifying the curriculum, individualizing instruction, suggesting behavior management techniques, and presenting progress data. In many cases, the special education teacher is also the child’s case manager; he or she is responsible for organizing meetings and tracking goal progress throughout the school year.
- **Individual who can interpret evaluations used within the school**—The special education teacher or another member of the team, such as the school psychologist, who is knowledgeable of the school’s special education services and resources can fulfill this role.
- **Local education or transition service agency representatives**—If the IEP team is discussing placing the child in a new educational setting or discussing transition planning that involves agencies outside the school, representatives from those agencies must be included.
- **The child**—When feasible and at the earliest time possible, your child should participate as a member of the IEP team. This becomes even more important after age 14, when transition planning for employment and life after school begins. Remember, the entire process revolves around setting practical, meaningful goals

for your child. Proceed with the understanding that the child's age and ability level will dictate the degree to which he or she may contribute to the meeting.

As the description of members and roles demonstrates, IDEA's intent is that the IEP team include all the stakeholders in the child's education and development. As such, the team can and should be expanded to include anyone with knowledge of your child, whom you or another member of the team believe can offer substantive input. This would include but not be limited to: professionals who provide support services such as the speech language pathologist (SLP), occupational therapist (OT), physical therapist (PT), behavior analyst (BA), or school counselor. Any person who can provide information about your child's needs (or expertise on how to meet them) should be on the IEP team.

Components of an IEP

While IDEA specifies who must be on the IEP team, it also requires that certain information be part of an IEP. Every IEP must describe, discuss, and ultimately make recommendations with respect to:

- Current performance, which is frequently called "Present Level of Performance" (PLOP)
- Annual goals and objectives
- Assessment
- Services
- Transition
- The Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) and Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA), as needed
- Placement

Each is discussed briefly in the following sections. While the organization of the IEP document and its headings may vary from one state—or even school district—to the next, its content must fully address each of the required components.

The IEP is written collaboratively. The case manager, along with setting up the meeting, will assemble the necessary materials. Teachers may write draft goals and the case manager may draft other information, but it is important to remember that anything written before the meeting is a draft. The final IEP document may include this information, but must contain input from the entire team at the meeting. During the meeting, the case manager may do the actual writing or typing, or another member of the team will be designated to record information.

Current Performance

For your child's IEP to be effective, the logical starting point is your child's current performance. In IEP terminology, this is called the "Present Level of Performance"

or, in abbreviated form, PLOP. Since this is where the team begins its examination of the unique needs of your child, the PLOP serves as the foundation for the plan you are about to develop.

Where is your child now—academically, developmentally, socially, and emotionally? Without knowing your child’s relative strengths and weaknesses with respect to behavior, academics, and understanding which aspects of autism most affect him or her, it will be impossible for the IEP team or anyone to measure progress or set future goals.

The PLOP in final form is a composite picture of your child based on objective and subjective input. It includes direct, observable measures of current academic achievement and functional performance based on grades, scores, and other data that is

easy to understand and interpret. It should also chronicle how your child’s disability affects his or her involvement and progress in the classroom. If your child has had private assessments and evaluations, they should be incorporated into this section.



Present Level of Performance (PLOP)

The PLOP should also describe needs related to non-academic skills.

Remember, IEPs do not only address academic goals. The total picture should describe needs as they relate to non-academic skills such as self-care or behavior. Parents of children with

autism often provide input regarding specific distractions or the behavioral needs of their child. This could include environmental factors, such as fire alarms or fluorescent lights, and behavioral concerns, such as triggers or warning signs of a meltdown.

The PLOP does not just discuss negatives and problem areas, it also includes the strengths of your child. What does your child do well or like to do? What helps him or her to remain on task? The PLOP should extend to a description of any preferred activities and reinforcers that have proven to be effective for your child. This would include any specific behavior systems or supports, such as a picture schedule or token board, that your child uses.

Goals

If the PLOP is the starting point, the goals developed through the IEP process represent key reference points or milestones along your child’s educational path. They are an essential part of the IEP. In this context, remember that IEP goals only focus on areas that need specific attention. You are not setting goals for your child’s full curriculum. The IEP will not contain goals for subjects and activities in which your child is performing satisfactorily or well.

Goals should address your child's unique needs in observable, concrete terms. Some goals require short-term objectives or benchmarks. These are the component steps that need to be achieved in order to reach an overall goal. In addition to setting goals tied to academic challenges, it may be necessary to include behavior goals or social skills goals for a student with autism. Thus, your child's IEP goals may differ somewhat from the goals of other students accessing special education.



Writing IEP Goals

One good way to test the effectiveness of goals is to read them from the perspective of a teacher who has never met your child. Do the goals clearly define what's needed, what's expected, and what defines success? Would they understand how to measure progress?

There is a method to developing and stating goals. They should not be vague or general and should specify the skills to be taught. To be useful and effective, they must be measurable. **Appendix D provides helpful tips for writing IEP goals.**

In addition to those goals you agree on that are relative to the curriculum, here are some skills the IEP team may need to consider when discussing and writing goals:

- Communication; both receptive (understanding) and expressive
- Visual performance; matching, sequencing events, puzzles
- Adaptive/Self-Help (frequently called Life Skills); hygiene, telling time, dressing, meal preparation, following a schedule
- Motor skills; fine motor (such as writing) and gross motor (big movements such as walking)
- Socialization; playing, turn taking, eye contact
- Community/Vocational skills; learning independent jobs such as data entry or photocopying
- Functional skills; non-academic skills and behavior skills needed for everyday living after your child leaves school

Assessment

Under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act, schools must conduct an educational assessment of each child. Depending on the state, these tests may be yearly in every subject or every few years on a few subjects at a time. Children with autism should receive the same assessments as their peers, consistent with their placement. The Assessment section of the IEP may take on various forms depending on the school or state, but it essentially contains the same content that will help determine if state and county testing will take place for your child in the coming year.

While the Services section of the IEP is where accommodations are specified, it is important to note that your child may need changes to the test delivery or testing environment

in order to be properly assessed. For example, your child may need to type responses on a word processor if handwriting is a major deficit. Your child may also need access to an alternate testing location that is free of distraction. Even though these accommodations are already part of the IEP, they may be referenced or re-stated in the Assessment portion of the IEP depending on state and school district.



Alternate Assessment

If your child is taking the alternate assessment, IDEA requires that he or she must have objectives in the goal portion of their IEP.

Students who do not participate in the general education setting receive alternate assessments. In these instances, they are usually working towards an alternative diploma or certificate of attendance. Alternate assessments are developed by the state to more appropriately evaluate the skills of your child. For example, this may mean a portfolio-related exam or showing progress on skills related to your child's developmental age.

Services

The Services section consists of two parts: *needs and accommodations* and *supplementary services*. Needs and accommodations are the supports your child requires in order to be successful in the classroom. Think of them as things that level the playing field academically or minimize obstacles to learning. These are highly individualized. Accommodations for students with autism may range from use of an assignment book to environmental changes in the classroom to decrease sensory issues.

The most important thing to remember about accommodations is their purpose. They are not meant to excuse your child from studying or doing required work; they

allow your child to most fully participate and learn. For example, your child may understand the material presented in class but have difficulty taking notes due to poor motor skills, a deficit found in many children with autism. Rather than allow this to impede the learning process, the school can make accommodations for your child. In this example, an appropriate accommodation might be the teacher giving your child pre-typed notes, allowing your child to use a peer's notes, or tape recording the presentation.



Accommodations

For students with autism, assistive technology in the form of a communication device is becoming a more frequent accommodation. Communication devices do not just mean voice output mechanisms, but also the use of picture communication systems.

Supplementary services refer to specialized services delivered by professionals whose expertise supports or supplements the program defined by the IEP. Some

examples of supplementary services often included in IEPs for individuals with autism are: speech and language, occupational therapy, and behavior support. For students in need of less support, these services may be provided within the classroom by the regular education or special education teacher. In other cases, your child may receive instruction outside the classroom. See [Appendix G](#) for a list of common accommodations.

Transition

IDEA requires every individual with an IEP also have a transition plan in place by age 16. The age requirement varies by state. Some states require a transition plan prior to age 13. The intent of this section of the IEP is to help ensure positive outcomes following high school. The transition plan considers your child's needs, strengths, preferences, and interests. If appropriate, it must include your child's input.



Transition Planning

Transition planning is challenging and emotional. For a more in-depth discussion of transition planning and goals please consult *Life Journey through Autism: A Guide for Transition to Adulthood*.

Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) and Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA)

BIPs and FBAs are more recent additions to IEPs. These are not needed for every student but are frequently included for students who have autism. The BIP is included as part of an IEP if your child exhibits behavior that impedes his or her own learning, or that of other children. If this is the case, your child will undergo a FBA to determine why the behavior is occurring. The state or school district determines how the FBA is conducted. The goal of the FBA is to determine why a behavior takes place and how the behavior can be changed. FBAs examine the behavior in question to learn what happens before it occurs (the antecedent), what the behavior looks like and consists of, and what happens after it occurs (the consequence). The person conducting the FBA should collect data on these three aspects over time in multiple settings such as the classroom, lunchroom, and playground. Anyone who has training on conducting FBAs can perform or oversee this process. This may include the teacher, classroom assistant, behavior analyst, or school psychologist.



Remember

Remember that what happens before and after a behavior may relate to the environment, such as a loud sound or bright light.

For example, a child may whine or cry every day in art class. Through observation and data collection, the teacher may determine that before the whining begins the student has been sitting in the room before class starts. After whining, the student

is removed from class. The teacher may think that the behavior is intended to get out of art class. The teacher examines the child's behavior in other classes and takes data. She notices the child does not whine after sitting in other classrooms for a few minutes. The child seems to enjoy the class activities and expresses desire to participate. After looking at all the data, the teacher realizes that the behavior is more likely related to the classroom environment. The child is sitting near the window in art class and the bright lights are causing a sensory issue.

Once the function of the behavior is determined, the IEP team develops a BIP, which is a function-based treatment plan. It addresses why the undesired behavior is happening and how it can be changed or replaced with a more acceptable behavior. BIPs should include information about what happens before and after the behavior as well. If your child has a BIP, the IEP should have a goal for reducing target behaviors.

Returning to the earlier example, the teacher decides to write a BIP for the child's whining in art class. She has the art teacher move the child's seat and gives the child a pair of sunglasses. He is instructed to put on the sunglasses if the light is too bright. This alternate behavior, putting on sunglasses, is more acceptable than disrupting class by whining. See [Appendix H](#) for more information about conducting an FBA.

Placement

Placement is an important objective of the IEP process, and it is a team decision. Your child's placement should never be decided without you. Conversely, you alone cannot dictate the educational placement of your child. Therefore, it is important that you come to the IEP meeting fully prepared to discuss educational placement. In order to do this, it is essential that you are knowledgeable about:

- The educational placements available within your school district
- The educational placements typically available to students with autism in your area
- Any private special education schools ("out-of-district schools") that are operating in your area

Deciding where to place a child is often very contentious. Your child should be educated with his or her peers in a regular education setting to the greatest extent possible. If your child's school cannot provide the requisite accommodations, he or she may need to be placed in special classes or schools.

The following list is intended to help you understand the types of placements that exist so that you can more effectively participate in team discussions regarding your child's educational placement. There are many strong opinions about proper place-

ment for students with special needs. Some parents and professionals believe that every student with a disability belongs in the regular education classroom, while others believe that students with disabilities are best served in settings that are specifically tailored to their special needs. The intent of IDEA and its LRE requirement is that a student should participate in the general education environment as much as possible without interfering with that student's ability to access FAPE. Each of the following four types of special education placements has its supporters and critics, but all that matters is which is the best match for your child. This may change over time.



Placement Options

You can find out information about placement options in your area by reaching out to local support groups.

While it is important to be familiar with the following terms, it is essential to remember that discussion regarding educational placement is the final step in the IEP development process, and it is a team decision.

General Education Setting

In the general education setting, also known as “inclusion class” or “mainstream,” a student is in a regular (“general”) education class with his or her grade-level peers. In addition to the general education teacher, there may be a special education teacher whose job it is to adapt the curriculum to the abilities of the student with an IEP. The participation of a special education teacher depends on your child's IEP. When a general education placement is the best match for a student's needs, it allows a student to participate in his or her education program in a more complex, natural setting which affords almost continuous opportunities for generalization. However, this setting is only truly helpful if it does not interfere with your child's ability to make meaningful progress in his or her educational program. When appropriate, related services such as OT, PT, and SLP can be provided in the general education setting. Of course, there are some students whose educational requirements are too complex and intense to be effectively addressed in the general education setting.

Special Education Placement

Students whose educational needs cannot be adequately met in the general education setting may require specialized attention in a smaller setting. In such cases, students complete grade-level work in targeted subject areas in a setting frequently called the Resource Room. In the Resource Room, a special education teacher works with a small group of students and utilizes instructional methods that will foster meaningful progress for those students. Related services may be provided in the Resource Room or a different room outside of the general education environment. Different students require different amounts of time in the Resource Room, and the IEP will designate what percentage of a student's school day should be in the Resource Room and what

percentage in general education. When the Resource Room is the best match for a student, it offers a combination of the features of the general education classroom and a more controlled setting.

Self-Contained Educational Placement

Placement in a self-contained classroom means that the student works in a small, controlled setting with a special education teacher for all academic subjects. Some students who are in a “self-contained” educational placement continue to access some general education settings (e.g. lunchroom, recess, and classes like art, music, and library), while others are “100% self-contained,” meaning that they are never included in the general education setting.

For a student who has autism and whose team has agreed upon partial inclusion in settings such as special classes and recess, there is a particular need for caution. As with all inclusion, this must be carefully planned. For many students with autism, the lunchroom, for example, can be one of the most problematic settings in the school. It is important to remember that many students with autism have a primary impairment in social skills. Occasions like this, when greater social interaction may occur, will need as much planning and support as might be required for inclusion in an academic period of the school day.

In addition, students in a self-contained class may be working at various academic levels with different textbooks and curricula. It can often meet the more intensive special education requirements of some students. However, as students are placed in these more “restrictive” educational placements, planning for generalization (using skills in places other than the classroom) must be a consideration.

Out-of-District Placement

While a self-contained educational placement may require a student to go to a school outside your neighborhood, an out-of-district educational placement has a student attending a specialized school specifically designed to address targeted students: specific disability groups, special types of learning needs, unique behavioral or emotional needs, and/or some combination of these. When an out-of-district placement is the best match for a student, that student typically has access to highly specialized educational programming with a heavy emphasis on structure, routine, and consistency. However, similar to a self-contained educational placement, generalization must be carefully considered and access to the “general” school population can be limited or nonexistent.

Which Educational Placement Is Right for My Child?

This is the final question the educational team and you will face. When trying to make the best decision for your child, there are several critical considerations. These include:

- In which placement can my child access the educational supports, modifications, and services required for him/her to meet the annual goals and objectives set forth in the IEP?
- Of the educational placements available, which will offer my child the most meaningful access to the general education setting?
- In which of these settings will my child find “just the right challenge?” What this really seeks to answer is which setting will provide enough of a challenge to help propel your child’s development but not to the extent that his/her development is either stunted or, worse yet, set back.

Finding the answer to the third question is the greatest challenge to educational team and you. For example, a child may have the intelligence and academic skills to participate in the general education setting, but lack the social and adaptive skills necessary to function in that setting. In other circumstances, students who have been the victims of severe bullying may find themselves unable to continue in the general education setting. This varies significantly from student to student.

Additional considerations include:

- In which setting does my child learn best, and in which setting is my child the least productive?
- Does my child have friends and/or a meaningful social support network in the general education setting?
- Has the general education setting been dangerous or unfriendly for my child?
- Where will my child be most comfortable?
- How much will my child be integrated into the general education setting?
- How does each setting support a child who is having a “meltdown” or significant behavioral difficulty?
- How does the classroom address any sensory issues for my child?
- Will my child be taught explicitly and allowed to practice the skills needed for living productively in the community and coping with its complex demands?

There should be an open dialogue about possible placements during the IEP meeting. If you are concerned with the proposed placement, you can ask to have the meeting rescheduled to give you time to evaluate what has been recommended. In the meantime, speak to your child’s teachers, other parents, special education personnel, advocates in your area, and most importantly to your child. Try to gauge which setting would be the most productive, most beneficial, most stimulating, and least threatening place for your child to learn.

Although IDEA sets a descending sequence for placement starting with the general education setting, your child ultimately needs to be in an educational placement that will allow him or her to access FAPE. Your child may require a “more restrictive” setting now, but there may come a time in the future when a less restrictive setting is a better match. The IEP team will discuss educational placement every

year during the annual IEP review. Once your child receives a placement, monitor it closely. It is not set in stone. You can always request an IEP meeting to review your child's placement if you become concerned that it is no longer a match for his or her needs.

Extended School Year (ESY)

Extended School Year (ESY) is the official terminology for what most people refer to as summer school. Students with autism who are at risk or likely to lose skills have a right to some continuing services during the summer. Remember, this does not just mean academic skills but also self-care, behavior, and life skills. If time away from the routine and structure of school will adversely affect your child's behavior, your child should receive ESY services.

Different school districts qualify students for ESY in a number of ways. Commonly, there must be proof of regression or a history of losing skills over a period of time away from school. This could include winter vacation, spring break, or even a long weekend. If the data shows your child cannot maintain skills related to a current IEP goal during a break from school, your child will qualify for ESY. If your child exhibits behavior problems at school after a break but does not have a corresponding IEP goal, he or she may not qualify for ESY. In this case, you can always ask for an addendum to the IEP to add an appropriate behavior goal.

Despite the good intentions of ESY, many parents find it challenging in practice because it invariably introduces change and, thus, may cause problems for children with autism. The hours, transportation services and schedule, school, teacher, and classmates may all be different. By the time your child has adjusted to the new routine, ESY is over and it is time to transition back to the regular school year. Keep this in mind when deciding if ESY services are best for your child and your family.



ESY Alternatives

Ask about ESY alternatives. Some school districts offer materials and teacher support for you to work on maintaining IEP goal related skills over the summer.

IEP Addendums

IEPs should change as needed, and may be subject to an addendum at any time. You or the school may request an addendum. If the addendum suggests a substantive change relative to goals, placement, or testing, the addendum should be discussed at another meeting of the IEP team. If the entire team cannot meet, the people most involved in affecting the change should meet.

Small changes can be made without your presence. This may be changing hours to meet class schedules or adding information you request to the PLOP page. You may choose not to attend the meeting and will instead sign a form stating that you have

given permission for the changes without being in attendance. You will still be given a copy of the document to review and sign.

Consent

The end of the IEP meeting brings a critical decision time. Do you agree or disagree with the plan that has been set forth? While you may feel pressure to sign the document at the meeting, it is best to take the document home and review it one more time outside the meeting room before giving consent. Remember, you do not have to agree! If you do not agree, you will need to put your complaint in writing as discussed on [page 33](#). You may also agree with some parts of the IEP and not others. Put this in writing, too. If you do not agree, the previous IEP stays in place until a new and fully agreed upon IEP is developed and signed. Once the IEP is signed, the applicable services for your child will commence.

504 PLANS

If your school does not find your child eligible for special education services, your child may still be eligible for a 504 Plan. 504 Plans are not usually part of an IEP and are not part of IDEA. 504 Plans are part of the Rehabilitation Act, a law enacted to give people with disabilities greater access to services in school and in the workplace. A 504 Plan gives students accommodations when they would not otherwise qualify for special education. For example, a student with autism may be functioning independently in general education classes but have such poor motor skills that he or she requires the use of a computer to type answers for assignments. This student does not need an IEP to access the curriculum. This student does need access to a computer to succeed in class. 504 Plans create a way for students with disabilities that do not affect their capacity to learn to still receive services.

While 504 Plans are used infrequently, you may need one if your child is not found eligible for special education services. 504 Plans are usually coordinated by the school guidance counselor. If your child is not found eligible for special education services but still needs accommodations, your child's school will help you develop a 504 Plan.

5 Things to Remember About IEPs

- 1. You are a member of the team.** You are not just any member of the team; you are the team member who knows your child best and are his or her most important advocate. Be active and assertive in voicing your opinions and concerns without becoming adversarial.
- 2. You don't have to make any decisions right away.** Don't allow yourself to feel pressured into agreeing or disagreeing with any parts of the IEP during the meeting. In fact, you may need time to process the information, discussion, and recommendations. In that case, you might be better off doing that in a less stressful environment. Take the necessary time and don't hesitate to ask for help. In some cases, just having someone who knows your child well review the IEP may offer the reinforcement or assurances you need. In other instances, you might choose to consult with a professional advocate.
- 3. Everyone has your child's best interest in mind.** The process is designed with your child's interests in mind. Part of that process involves creating a team comprised of people with specific responsibilities and varied professional experience, academic backgrounds, and points of view. It is going to produce differences of opinion. Remember that the teachers and support staff at the IEP meeting are there because they choose to work with children who have disabilities. Even when they don't agree with you, their disagreement is based on their professional view of what is in your child's best interest.
- 4. IEPs can be changed.** IEPs are not stagnant, inflexible documents that remain in place indefinitely. The IEP team meets to review your child's program annually, which in most cases is enough. If circumstances arise which warrant review during the year, you can request to have the IEP team meet and, if necessary, change or update the IEP through an addendum.
- 5. IEPs are important.** They can also be frustrating to the point where a parent questions its practical value and simply signs the document just to move past it. Remember, IEPs set the goals for your child and frame the learning environment that will shape his or her development and education in the years to come. IEPs and the goals you choose help determine your child's future in school and beyond.

Timeline of Services

Special education services for children with disabilities, including autism, begin earlier and last longer than public education services for children without disabilities. The age range for typical public school students is 5 to 18; the educational period for students with disabilities can be from birth to age 21. You may hear the terms *Child Find* and *Early Intervention* frequently, particularly early on. Both of these programs fall at the beginning of the timeline of services related to special education. Another important part of the special education timeline is referred to as *Transition*. This takes place at the end of a child's special education experience and also includes when he or she reaches *Age of Majority*. This section aims to introduce you to some important events in the timeline of services your child may encounter.

Early Intervention Services (Ages 0–2)

Research has shown that the sooner a child receives early intervention services, the greater likelihood for positive outcomes. This is the driving force for IDEA Part C, which provides early intervention services from birth through two years of age. Children can begin accessing services even before receiving an actual diagnosis. Early intervention addresses five main developmental areas: physical, cognitive, communication, social and emotional, and adaptive skills. They focus on educating the child and providing early intervention services in the natural environment, which is usually the home. The federal requirements for early intervention programs recognize parents as the child's primary teacher and require parent involvement in therapies.

After a child's referral to early intervention services, a team of professionals from all developmental domains completes an eligibility evaluation. These evaluations take place in both clinical settings and natural environments, a reference you will hear frequently during early intervention. Natural environments are settings that are normal for a child this age to be participating in, such as preschool programs or the home. Professionals who specialize in working with very young children will assess speech and language, hearing, vision, and physical skills. As part of the evaluation, they will also ask you questions about your child's health, skills, weaknesses, and development.

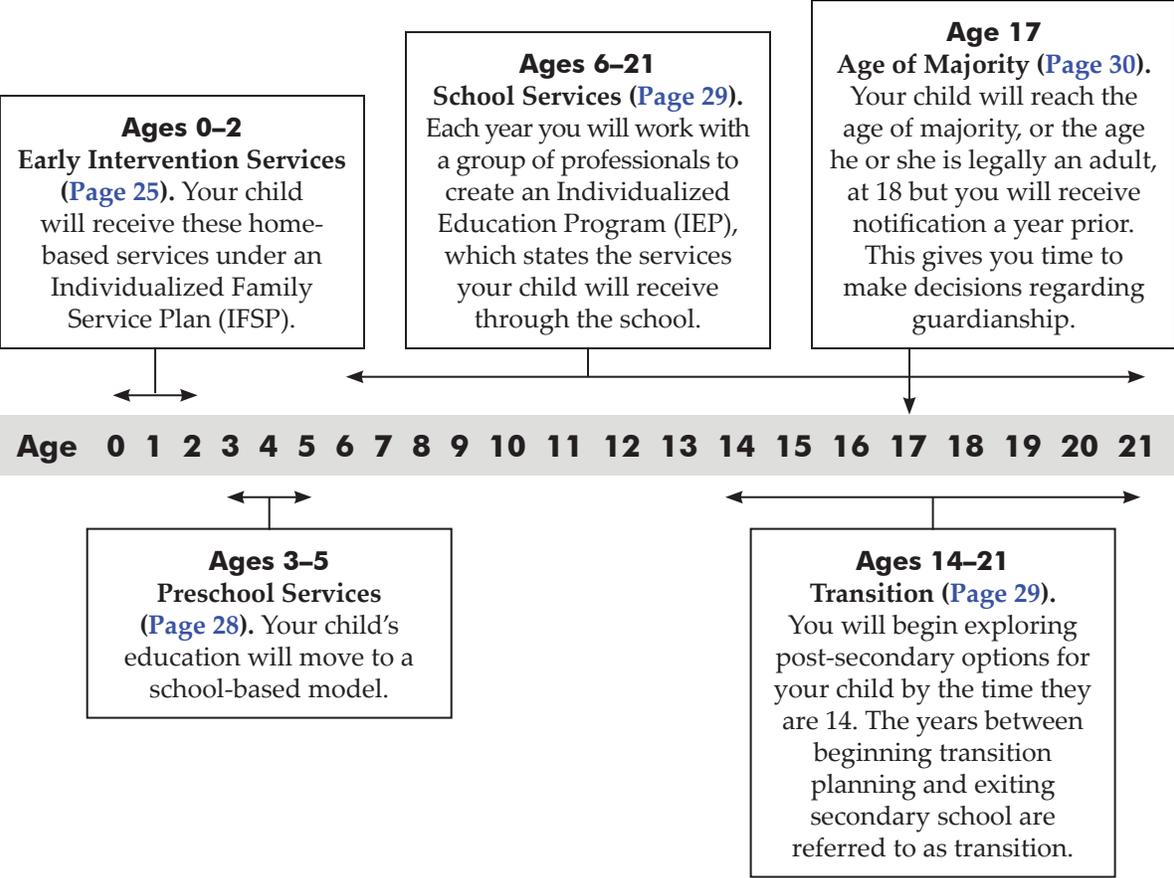
Developmental delays refer to the lack of skills a child should have by a certain age. If the child is found to have developmental delays, the Early Intervention team



Family Service Plan (IFSP)

For specific information about the development of an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP), please visit <http://www.nectac.org> and <http://www.nichcy.org>

Timeline of Services



will create an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) and assign you a service coordinator. The service coordinator will manage paperwork and coordinate with the professionals that are helping your child.



Early Intervention

For more in-depth information regarding Early Intervention, please consult the NICHCY document, which can be found at bit.ly/OARlink3

Many people help develop an IFSP, including you, the service coordinator, and professionals who have knowledge of your child (typically those who have helped perform evaluations). An IFSP addresses both child and family needs, and lays out the services they will receive. This process takes into account the areas that the family deems most important for their child to succeed in. The provision of services depends on desired outcomes determined by the IFSP team, as well as evaluation and assessment.

Your IFSP will describe or summarize:

- Your child’s strengths and weaknesses
- Family information, including concerns
- Desired outcomes for your child and family
- The services your child will receive
- Where and when services are provided, and for how long
- Who will pay for services
- Information about transitioning out of the program when appropriate

The Early Intervention team reviews IFSPs every six months and updates them at least once a year. Early intervention services provided in an IFSP depend on your child’s needs and may include family training, speech language pathology, occupational therapy, physical therapy, psychological and social work services, assistive technology, and service coordination.

Before age 3, children move from early intervention services provided under IDEA Part C to services covered by IDEA Part B. This can be difficult for parents, as some children found eligible for early intervention services under Part C may not qualify for certain services under Part B. If the Early Intervention and school teams find that the child does not need special education services to access public education, the child will not receive Part B services at all. Your service coordinator and public school case manager will help you with the eligibility process.



The National Dissemination Center

The National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities is an excellent resource for families who have a child with autism. Their resources can help you gain greater insight into early intervention and educational rights. Visit their Web site at <http://www.nichy.org>.

Throughout the Year

In the course of a year, you will encounter the entire IEP timeline:

Annually	IEP Meeting
Quarterly	You should receive progress reports regarding your child’s goals.
Throughout the year	Addendums—You may create an addendum to change your child’s IEP at any time.
Throughout the year	Data collection—Teachers and support professionals should keep ongoing data regarding your child’s progress towards IEP goals.
At least every three years	Re-evaluation—Your child can be re-evaluated at your request any time, but IDEA mandates re-evaluation every three years.

During the transition from Part C to Part B services, the focus of intervention delivery begins to shift from home models to school-based therapies. The team that collaborated to create the IFSP may change and a case manager will take over responsibilities from the service coordinator. A new team led by the case manager will work to create an Individualized Education Program (IEP), which is discussed in greater detail on [page 11](#). The IEP is more focused on in-school services than home-based therapies.

Child Find

Each state is required to identify children with disabilities. This process is called Child Find. The goal of Child Find is to ensure that families receive services before entering elementary school. Children with disabilities receive services from birth under IDEA Part C, which encompasses the Early Intervention Program or Preschool Special Education. Services range from speech therapy to more intensive applied behavior analysis (ABA), an intervention recommended for use with children who have autism. To receive these services your child must be found eligible, and eligibility varies by state. You can learn about eligibility by contacting the coordinator for your state. Contact information is available at <http://www.nectac.org/contact/Ptccoord.asp>.

In reality, most children with autism are receiving services before Child Find is needed. Parents of children with autism have usually visited a doctor and their child is already showing signs of delays during well baby check-ups. Upon noticing developmental delays, doctors will make a referral to a local agency for a complete team evaluation.

Parents can also visit www.nectac.org to search for referral services and begin the process of receiving early intervention services.

Preschool Services (Ages 3–5)

Preschool special education services are part of public education delivered by each state. One of the main differences between early intervention services and preschool services is the delivery model. Preschool services are school-based rather than home-based.

If your child has an IFSP and participated in Early Intervention services before age three, he or she will most likely receive preschool services after that as well. Students who have not participated in Early Intervention services usually enter preschool special education services through Child Find, after a recommendation by a pediatrician, or upon diagnosis of developmental delay. The child will then be referred to the local school district to determine eligibility for preschool services.

Preschool service placements vary by state. In some states, preschool programs are contracted privately. In other states, the local school district runs preschool

programs. To find out more about preschool services in your state, please consult the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities resource finder at <http://nichcy.org/state-organization-search-by-state>.

School Aged Children (Ages 6–21)

During the school years, or ages 6–21, your child will have an IEP while receiving special education services. You can find more information about IEPs on [page 11](#). Two important events in the special education timeline that occur as your child reaches the teen years are called *Transition* and *Age of Majority*. The next two sections will explain these terms and their significance.

Transition (Ages 14–21)

In 1997, the federal government added transition plans as a required part of IEPs for all individuals over age 16 that are receiving special education services under IDEA. This additional requirement came after several longitudinal studies tracking the post-secondary outcomes of people receiving special education services reported less than favorable results. The purpose of the transition plan is to prepare students receiving special education services for meaningful employment, schooling, and independent living after high school. For students with more severe skill deficits, the transition plan will include options such as sheltered employment and referral to county services, as well as discussions about possible future living arrangements, such as independent living (for most students) or group homes (for a small subset).



Transition

OAR's publication, *Life Journey through Autism: A Guide for Transition to Adulthood*, provides an in-depth look at the transition process and offers activities for parents and young adults to help with transition planning.

The transition plan is a required part of the IEP once your child has reached age 16. The IEP team needs to begin preparing a student for transition no later than age 14. It is important that the student takes part in these discussions, if possible. By the time the student is 16, the formal transition plan must be fully developed, implemented, and included in the IEP. The transition plan is outcome-oriented, meaning it is written with future goals in mind and extends to all domains including employment, living, and recreation. Transition plans must consider student strengths and preferences to create a meaningful addition to the IEP.

Writing a transition plan is the role of the IEP team, but IDEA mandates input from the student as much as possible. It is important to note that student input can include

the student's active verbal communication or a process by which the entire IEP team considers the skills and preferences of the student if he or she is unable to communicate. IDEA requires that the transition plan include information regarding instruction, related services, community experiences, development of employment, other post-school adult living objectives, acquisition of daily living skills, and functional vocational evaluation, if appropriate.

As a parent, it may feel strange to begin planning for your child's future when he or she is just 14. You may feel they have much to learn before thinking about life after high school. When it comes to autism, the sooner you begin to think about and plan for the transition to adulthood, the better it will be for your child and you. For example, many communities have waitlists for services that your child may need after high school. Knowing when to apply or enroll may help minimize your wait time. An early start will also help you become acquainted with local service agencies that will help your child once special education services end.

Age of Majority

Age of majority is a term that enters the discussion at IEP meetings typically once your child is in high school. It refers to the age your child is legally considered an

adult. In most, but not all states, the age of majority is 18. When a person reaches the age of majority, certain rights accrue. This includes the right to vote, marry, and sign contracts—including credit card applications.



Age of Majority

Resources that goes into greater detail about age of majority can be found at bit.ly/OARlink4 and bit.ly/OARlink5.

In the context of special education, age of majority has great significance. When a child with autism reaches the age of majority, he or she is both empowered and expected to represent him or herself under the law regardless of ability to

do so. Accordingly, and to prevent negative consequences for students with autism and their families, the law requires school districts to notify the child and parent one year prior to age of majority in the event that parents choose to establish guardianship or conservatorship.

Unless there is a guardianship or conservatorship established, your child will now receive notice of IEP meetings, may choose who attends these meetings, and can give consent on an IEP. Even so, most school districts still include the parents in the IEP process and any resulting decisions.

When should you consider guardianship or conservatorship? It comes down to your assessment of your child's ability to make independent decisions about his or her future. Seeking guardianship or conservatorship is a legal process, so con-

sult with an attorney or someone with experience in such matters. Guardianship entails having your child found legally incompetent. With that, your child will lose the authority to make decisions on his or her own behalf and your parental responsibilities continue in full. Conservatorship, or limited guardianship, allows you to make decisions on behalf of your child as specified in the terms of the conservatorship. Conservatorship does not entail a declaration regarding the child's competency. As such, he or she retains all rights except those governed by the terms of the conservatorship.

If you decide to pursue either of these options, be aware that the process is lengthy and requires a significant amount of paperwork. Begin early, before your child reaches age of majority. You may find it helpful to consult a lawyer, because the process can't be completed without one. The first formal step is filing a petition with the court. In some states, the filing takes place in Family Court; in others it may be in Probate Court. The age of majority notification you receive from your school district (discussed previously) should include information about which court in your jurisdiction would handle matters of guardianship or conservatorship.

Once the petition is filed, you will attend a court hearing where the court will render its decision as to your child's legal competency and the scope of your responsibilities for him or her going forward. Be aware that if the court grants guardianship or conservatorship, you will be required to file annual reports.

Advocating for Your Child

As you may already know from personal experience or will soon learn, it takes more of your time and consideration to navigate the special education system than it does to send a typical child to school. Thus, it is easy to see why some families choose to seek the help of an advocate. An advocate works to ensure your child receives the services and support he or she needs for success in the classroom. While an advocate can be helpful, you do not need a professional advocate. With the right tools and the unique knowledge you have of your child's needs, you can serve your child as well, if not better, than any professional.

Over the past few decades, autism has moved into the forefront of public attention. This publicity has had a great impact on the special education process as more special education teachers know about autism and understand the needs of these children. Still, it may be necessary for you to push the school district for services you know your child needs, or even to file disputes if your child has been denied services, evaluations, or placements that would benefit him or her.

What do you need to know to be effective when serving as an advocate for your child?

What you most likely already know is that no one is waiting in line behind you to advocate for your child—you are it!

As such, you should know the basic essentials about special education:

- Your child's education involves more than academics. While autism may impact your child's academic achievement, it also may affect communication, behavior, social skills, motor skills, adaptive daily living skills, and other areas of development. Each plays a role in your approach and is part of how your child benefits from special education.
- Autism does not automatically qualify your child for special education or an IEP. Schools might say your child's disability is not significant enough to require an IEP and offer you a 504 Plan. A 504 Plan recognizes your child's disability, but not as a disability that adversely impacts his or her ability to learn. A 504 Plan allows your child modifications and accommodations so he or she has an equal opportunity to learn, and is not discriminated against because of a disability. Before you accept a 504 Plan, remember that the team should be considering deficit areas beyond academics when deciding eligibility.
- All children who are eligible to receive an IEP under IDEA are entitled to receive a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). FAPE means that your child's special education services should be appropriate and of no cost to you, just as another child's regular public education is of no cost to them.

- You do not have to agree with or accept the evaluations conducted by your school district. Should you disagree, you are entitled to ask for an Independent Education Evaluation (IEE) in order to get further information.
- You do not have to sign off on your child's IEP if you have unresolved concerns about it. As discussed previously, there are several ways your disputing a matter related to an IEP might proceed.

Disagreeing with Your School District

The right of parents to question actions or decisions by schools is clearly written into both IDEA and the regulations for Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Each law provides legal options for exercising your right to protest. As suggested earlier, however, try to use every available channel of communication with school representatives to try to settle disputes through mutual understanding, negotiation, and possibly mediation before you resort to legal action.

It is important to be aware of the people to whom you can turn for advice and the key officials with whom you should discuss your problems. Page 36 contains a checklist you can use to help you take constructive action when things become difficult. Remember that your child has the right to a FAPE that is guaranteed by law.

The people you have gathered as your advisors can help counsel you about next steps if all your efforts to come to agreement break down. Should a breakdown occur, you need to decide whether to call for a due process hearing before an impartial officer, a right provided by IDEA, or to take other legal action. This is your right and it may be necessary to use, but be sure before you move into legal action that you have done what you can to solve problems through the previously outlined methods.

It will probably be necessary to have more than one meeting to settle all the details. When meetings are held, make clear that you would like to have other people present who know your child and are familiar with the problem. Ask to have them included so that the discussion will be as productive as possible. Many problems can be settled in this way.

The federal laws lay out specific steps and timelines for due process hearings and appeals. See [Appendix K](#) for the parent manual for your state and take time to study your



Advocates

Your state's autism-related organization should be able to provide you with names of advocates. You can also visit the Council of Parent Attorney and Advocate's Web site at www.copaa.org to search for advocates in your state.

The National Disability Rights Network maintains the listing of Protection and Advocacy Systems and Client Assistance Programs at www.ndrn.org

Parent Groups

If you still have difficulty locating parent groups concerned about your child's disability, contact one of these organizations:

- National Information Center for Children & Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY) at 1(800) 695-0285(v/tty) or <http://www.nichcy.org>.
- If you are a military family, contact STOMP at 1(800)5PARENT(v/tty) or www.stompproject.org.
- Parent Technical Assistance Center Network at www.parentcenternetwork.org/.
- Check with area college and university departments of special education.

alternatives and get all the help you can from other parents, teachers, and advocates. This will allow you to be as effective as possible in defending your child's rights.

"Fair Weather" Advocating

Even if you are fortunate enough to have an IEP that surpasses all of your expectations, you would be well-served to understand the basics of special education and advocacy. When things are going well, you should still be an active consumer of information related to special education and your local processes. In [Appendix K](#), you will find a list of state-specific resources. Read these to become familiar with state policies and processes. In the future, if you meet with opposition, you will be ready for it.

Other Tips for Advocating and Educating Yourself

- Use resources from your state's Department of Special Education. Every state is required under IDEA to have an advocacy center. These non-profit organizations usually provide a wide variety of ways in which parents can learn more about how to advocate for their child. You can also call and ask your state's Department of Special Education to provide you with a list of all the advocacy centers in your state.
- Through the various autism-related resources in your state, sign up for conferences or workshops on IDEA, or other classes that teach parents effective advocacy skills.
- Purchase books on how to advocate for your child in special education. The internet and book sites provide abundant choices on the subject.
- Consider retaining a special education advocate if you feel limited in your personal capacity to ensure your child's best educational outcomes.

Learn more about what an advocate can do for your child and how to choose an advocate in [Appendix I](#).

10 Steps for Disagreeing with Your School District

Consider the following steps when you enter into a dispute with your school district related to your child's special education curriculum and needs:

1. Talk with your child's classroom teacher and other school personnel who are aware of your child's needs, such as the counselor, nurse, school psychologist, or social worker. Naturally, not all of these people are involved in every situation. Also, discuss the problem you face with any team members or specialists who know your child, such as therapists, classroom assistants, and other teachers, to see if adjustments or changes can be made through new understanding and effort.
2. If this first step does resolve the problem under consideration, be sure to find out who among the school personnel will be willing to offer support for your subsequent efforts. Is the teacher sympathetic? Will he or she stand by your request? Does the counselor have information that will help? Ask them if they will be willing to come to meetings with you later or supply statements in support of your position.
3. Discuss your concerns with professionals outside of school who know your child, such as your family doctor, pediatrician, psychologist, audiologist, neurologist, or other specialists. Will they support your efforts to get the requested services for your child? Will they write letters or come with you to important conferences to answer questions? Will they express their views on a tape recorder for you to bring to the school?
4. Remember to keep detailed notes on your conversations and a file of up-to-date records. These are invaluable.
5. Discuss your complaints with the school principal. Have a clear idea of your reasons for requesting a change in your child's program and present your documentation. Be straightforward and self-assured. You are an equal partner in this and other school conferences. It is neither necessary nor productive to be aggressive or apologetic. Approach it as a situation in which both of you are seeking a solution to a problem.
6. Go directly to your district Director of Special Education or Director of Pupil Personnel services if the school is unable or unwilling to change its decisions. If no such staff positions exist in your district, contact the superintendent of schools. The superintendent is responsible for all school programs in the district and must be involved if other officials are unresponsive. Again, your notes, records, and other files should be in order. Use them. In all of these conferences, it is important to know which parts of the federal and/or state law protects your child's rights.

7. Bring your complaint before the local school board if none of these approaches work. Increasingly, there are members of school boards who are deeply concerned about special education and they may be able to take action on your behalf. Even if their actions do not bring about immediate results that help your child, school board members, in the long run, see to it that education programs are developed, teachers are trained for new responsibilities, and schools are accessible and capable of meeting the special needs of children with disabilities.
8. Get in touch with your state Director of Special Education. He or she should have information and advice you can use. State Departments of Education are responsible for carrying out the provisions of IDEA. Fully explain what you see as a violation of your child's right to a free appropriate public education under the law. Find out what action they can take to help resolve the situation.
9. States are required by IDEA to appoint compliance officers to investigate problems and monitor implementation of the law. Find out if your state Department of Education has appointed someone to fill this position. Contact this officer for further advice, clarification of your rights under the law, and suggestions for action.
10. Locate all of the available resources! In addition to reaching out to and conferring with key people, it is extremely important to get support and information from other well-informed resources. Contact members of state and local chapters of parent and advocacy organizations. More and more parents are now trained and ready to go with you to school meetings and help you decide what to do next, and can often help you prepare and present your case.

10 Steps for Disagreeing with Your School District is adapted from an issue of Common Sense from Closer Look and the STOMP Communication Guide. Find the full communication guide at www.stompproject.org.

Other Considerations

Moving

Moving to a new school or district is always challenging for any child, and by extension the parents. For families that have children with IEPs, it presents additional difficulties. Special education systems and policies vary by state and even between districts within states. Parents are often surprised to discover how different things can be when simply moving to the next district. Even within districts, there may be great variation between schools depending on personnel and administrators. Researching schools and their unique policies is an absolute must when planning to move.

Moving to a New District

When you move to a new district, your child's IEP does not simply move to the new school as well. Schools may choose to implement the prior IEP or develop a new one. While this process takes place, the school must provide services comparable to the most recent IEP. It may be that some districts do not have the same resources as your previous district. In that case, the new school does not need to provide identical resources as outlined in the previous IEP. It does, however, have to make a good faith effort to provide similar services. The law is vague with respect to the development of a new IEP. It merely states that the new district must make "sufficient progress to insure that a timely evaluation is conducted." Obviously, this transition and any unexpected changes to the services and supports prescribed by your child's IEP can be frustrating for students and parents alike.

You can assist in this process by getting in touch with the new school district well in advance of your move. Each district has a special education department. Contact them before you move to determine the availability of services. It may also be helpful to contact a local support group. By reaching out to other parents of children with autism, you can learn more about the local schools and the quality of their special education programs and services.

Moving to a New State

Moving to a different state includes all the challenges of changing districts with one more significant hurdle: eligibility requirements often differ from state to state. A child eligible to receive special education services in one state may not qualify in another, or your child may need to be re-evaluated before creating a new IEP.



Moving to a New State

A great resource for moving to a new state is the Technical Assistance Alliance for Parent Centers, which can be found at <http://www.taalliance.org>.

Each state or region has a center dedicated to helping you understand special education and be an effective advocate for your child. Through these centers, you may be able to find specific information regarding eligibility and services in the state you are moving to. You can also connect with other parents in that location.

Special Considerations for Military Families

Given the nature of military service, military families experience the previously outlined challenges with far greater frequency than most families. Their situation is compounded by the length and complexity of the processes associated with reestablishing services in a new school and district, and the reality that they will face another reassignment and resulting move in a relatively short period of time. Being aware of these possible circumstances can help as you prepare to move. As discussed before, IEPs do not automatically transfer across states. When moving to a new state, your child's new school district may not implement the IEP the same way as previous districts did. They may not have the same services. In some situations, your child may need to be re-evaluated to be found eligible for services at all. Before moving, you can take steps to best assure the continuity of services:

- Incorporate “school hunting” into your house hunting efforts
- Contact the Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) Liaison at your current and new duty stations for information about schools in your new location
- Find out if your child will be attending a local school district or DODEA school
- Request copies of regulations from the school district; DODEA schools will use federally mandated regulations
- Keep school records, behavior plans, IEPs, and any documentation that accurately represents your child's current level of performance
- Contact the school to find out which services are available
- Leverage the military parent network to find out more about the schools and services offered at your next duty station

Early and frequent communication with your child's new school can help bridge the gap between moving, starting instruction, and receiving appropriate services. Visit the school if at all possible. Most schools will appreciate the work you put into helping them get to know their new student. Some schools may even allow you to observe classrooms to better understand the available placement options.

Unfortunately, not all schools are as welcoming and ready to accept new students. With the transitory nature of military service, some school districts have been known to “wait it out” with military families. If you sense that a school is unnecessarily prolonging the process and dragging its heels in providing appropriate services and creating an IEP, you may have to force the issue via due process. Seek legal assistance and other support if necessary. This is a worst case scenario, but it is a scenario that happens often enough to mention and be aware of.

The problem with due process, or the act of legally challenging the school, is that it is both expensive and time consuming. It frequently takes longer to complete the due process hearing than a military family may have time remaining at a duty station. Nonetheless, while fighting this battle may offer your child and you limited benefit, winning it may work to the advantage of the next child and military family in the same situation.

If you do find yourself in conflict with the school, you should inform your EFMP case manager about the situation, as well as any leaders in your immediate chain of command. Depending on the branch of service, you may have access to a school liaison officer who can help with conflict resolution and advocate for your child.

Fighting a school district or moving towards due process gets far more attention when a lawyer is involved, but lawyers can be expensive. The Marine Corps offers a unique service to families enrolled in EFMP that are faced with challenges related to schools and educational service. They assign lawyers with expertise in special education to assist and represent these families at no cost. These Marine Corps lawyers are paid for entirely and act on the family's behalf. Some Marine Corps families have had the support of these lawyers when choosing to use due process. If you are in the Marine Corps and need access to a special education lawyer, contact your local EFMP office. They will have the contact information for Joint Legal Services Offices and the lawyer for your region.



STOMP

Specialized Training of Military Parents (STOMP) can help with advocacy and education. They are available at 1-800-572-7368 or www.stompproject.org.

At present, the Marine Corps is the only branch that does this. Other military families remain hopeful that their branches of service will adopt similar practices.

Final Thoughts

The special education system exists to help your son or daughter. That does not mean it is easy to navigate or fully comprehend. The information in this Guide will enhance your understanding and help you in your efforts to serve as an advocate for your child. As you navigate the system, keep these tips in mind:

- 1. Become familiar with your school district's special education staff.** Start communication early and often so you develop an understanding of the full range of options available in your school district.
- 2. Read your state's procedural safeguards.** Before you decide to disagree with the school, do your homework. It is best to know the procedures for disagreement ahead of time, and they vary by state.
- 3. Keep a record of all communication and paperwork.** Record and maintain detailed notes (who, what, when, where) from all meetings and conversations in one place. Make sure to keep copies of any documents or correspondence relative to assessments, IEPs and special education services. This information will help you keep track of your child's progress and serve as a complete and ready reference for you as you advocate for your child.
- 4. Speak up.** Sometimes it can be daunting to challenge what professionals might be saying. Remember, you know your child best. If your knowledge of your child is at odds with what you hear from professionals or read in reports, speak up, ask questions, and shift the discussion toward a point of agreement. Use the information from this Guide to empower yourself. Armed with a more complete and working understanding of how special education works, you can and will be the powerful advocate your child and every child with autism needs.

Glossary

504 Plan—Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act. The Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act state that no one with disabilities can be excluded from participating in federally-funded programs or activities (in this case, education). A 504 Plan offers accommodations to help a person with disabilities access education or employment.

Accommodations—Supports that a child needs in order to access regular education or succeed in an educational placement. An example would be a special organization tool or having space provided for quiet time.

Advocate—A professional or volunteer who assists parents with the special education process; he or she may attend meetings, prepare documents, and work with the school district.

Assistive technology—Any piece of equipment, high or low tech, that a student needs to properly access the curriculum.

Augmentative and alternative communication—Any system that enhances the communication capabilities of a child.

Behavioral objectives—Goals related to behavior that are clearly stated, based on a child's specific needs, and can be accurately measured.

Case manager—Often a child's special education teacher, the case manager serves as a representative during school placement meetings, communicates with parents, and keeps records in order.

Child Find—A program that allows local school districts to identify children with disabilities as early as possible.

Conservatorship—Also called limited guardianship, it is a legal ruling that allows a conservator (in most cases the parents) to make some, but not all, legal decisions on behalf of an individual over the age of 18.

Due process—The government must uphold the legal rights of individuals as defined by the law; due process is the set of formal proceedings carried out in accordance with special education rules, policies, and procedures.

Due process complaint—The letter or formal complaint filed by parents over an educational decision made for their child.

Due process hearing—An official hearing to resolve a dispute between parents and the school over a child’s special education eligibility, plan, or education in practice. It is presided over by a hearing officer who will make a binding decision on the matter once court-like proceedings have been carried out.

Early Intervention—Services provided to children before they are of school age that aim to curb the effects of developmental delay.

Eligibility—Being found qualified to receive special education services based upon disability status; requirements vary by state.

Eligibility minimums—The baseline eligibility requirements for receiving special education services under IDEA, determined by testing and qualification checklists specific to each disability.

Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)—The portion of IDEA that guarantees all children with disabilities access to free education that meets each child’s unique needs, allows each child access to general curriculum, achieves grade level standards set forth by the state, and that benefits each child.

Guardian—A legal term for an individual appointed by the court who is responsible for making decisions regarding an incapacitated adult’s care, health, safety, treatment, and residence.

Inclusion—When special education students and typically developing students are educated together.

Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE)—Special education testing performed by an examiner who is not employed by the state or school system; these are paid for by parents and results are completely at the discretion of parents to disclose.

Individual Education Program (IEP)—A written document that defines the educational program for a specific child in special education; it outlines the child’s present level of performance, goals, plans for how to reach the goals, and when check-ups should be scheduled.

Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP)—The treatment plan established for a child who is receiving early intervention services (and their family).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)—Federal law that outlines special education, early intervention, and related services for children with disabilities.

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)—The provision in IDEA requiring that students with disabilities have the greatest access possible to general education courses, extra-curricular activities, and other programs with non-disabled students.

Mediation hearing—Method of resolving disputes in place of a formal court hearing, and used when families appeal their child’s educational needs assessment; a mediator facilitates open discussion between the parties.

Natural environment—IDEA requires that each state, to the greatest extent possible, provide intervention services in an environment that is natural for children of the same age who do not have a disability.

Occupational Therapist—A certified professional who works with individuals with disabilities to help improve their ability to perform tasks related to work and self-care.

Out-of-district placement—Placement of a child in a school that is not within the school district of residence, such as a specialized school for a specific disability; this placement is appropriate when a local school district cannot meet the needs of a child.

Part B IDEA—Describes the statutory requirements for special education and related services for school-aged children.

Part C IDEA—Describes the statutory requirements for early intervention for pre-school-aged children.

Physical Therapist—Professional who works with students with disabilities to improve mobility, reduce pain, and restore function.

Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)—A form of alternative expression in which children communicate using pictures instead of words.

Positive behavior supports—A method that helps decrease inappropriate behavior by describing the behavior, identifying the context that it occurs in, finding the consequences of the behavior that serve to reinforce it, and creating a plan to change both the stimulus and reinforcement.

Present level of performance (PLOP)—The strengths and weaknesses of a child, quantified and stated in an IEP, that serves as a point of reference for progress.

Procedural safeguards—Provisions within IDEA that protect the rights of children who have an IEP and their parents.

Public Law 105-17—Also called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA); the federal law that establishes special education.

Related services—Services provided to students with disabilities that are part of providing appropriate education (e.g. speech and language services, physical therapy).

Resource Room—A separate educational setting designed for students with special needs; the room may be equipped with special equipment or tools, and usually has a much smaller student-to-teacher ratio to allow for more direct teaching.

Self-contained class—A classroom in which students with disabilities are taught by a special education teacher without the presence of general education peers.

Sensory sensitivity—Difficulty correctly processing sensory input, which often results in discomfort with typical environmental settings.

Service coordinator—State-assigned professional who coordinates necessary evaluations and assessments, facilitates IFSP meetings, helps the family receive services and supports, and safeguards the rights of both the child and their family.

Social Stories and Social Scripts—Provides a model of positive social interaction by (often pictorially) laying out a situation that a student has encountered or will encounter.

Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP)—Specialist who assesses, diagnoses, treats, and helps prevent delays and challenges related to speech, language, cognitive communication, voice, swallowing, and fluency.

Speech and language services—In-school speech-language pathology services that are provided to children who have communication difficulties; they are designed to help improve articulation, fluency, oral language, and voice.

State complaint—A complaint filed by parents with a state Department of Education that articulates a point of contention between the family and school district; this triggers a department investigation.

Transition Plan—A portion of the IEP that sets education and living goals for after high school is complete.

Work system—A method by which students sort out what they have done from what they need to do.

Common Abbreviations and Acronyms

AAC—Augmentative and Alternative Communication

BIP—Behavior Intervention Plan

COPAA—Council of Parent Attorney Advocates

DODEA—Department of Defense Education Agency

ESY—Extended School Year

FAPE—Free and Public Education

FBA—Functional Behavior Assessment

IDEA—Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

IEE—Independent Educational Evaluation

IEP—Individualized Education Program

IFSP—Individual Family Service Plan

LRE—Least Restrictive Environment

NCLB—No Child Left Behind

NICHCY—National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities

PECS—Picture Exchange Communication System

PLOP—Present Level of Performance

PPT—Planning and Placement Team

SGD—Speech Generation Devices

VOCAs—Voice Output Communication Aids

Appendix B

Information for Meetings

There are a variety of meetings that may occur regarding a child's special education program. The information provided in this section is laid out in a chronological order, as it occurs in most states. You may expect to attend:

- Transition Planning Conference
- Identification/Evaluation Meeting (for children who have been in Early Intervention programs)
- Identification/Evaluation Meeting (for school-aged children)
- Evaluation Planning Meeting
- Eligibility Meeting
- IEP Meeting
- Annual Reviews
- Re-evaluation Meeting
- Re-evaluation Follow-Up Meeting

The following pages will help explain each meeting in terms of what will happen, who will be there, and what you should do to prepare both your child and you. As a general practice, you should keep the following information on file for your child, as it will be helpful in advocating for him or her as you prepare for and attend each of these meetings:

- Letters and notes (from professionals, service providers, etc.)
- Medical records and reports
- Results of tests and evaluations
- Notes from meetings about your child
- Therapists' reports
- IFSP and IEP records
- Your child's developmental history, including personal notes or diaries on your child's development
- Records of shots and vaccinations
- Family medical history

If your child is already receiving Early Intervention Services, the transition into special education may occur without much additional work. There may be a transition planning conference put together by your service coordinator from the Early Intervention program in the year before your child is to enter preschool. In this meeting, the team will lay out plans for your child's needs and determine whether evaluation is appropriate, educate your family on the various programs and opportunities

at the school, and set you up with a case manager who will guide you through the next stages of special education process, including the initial assessment.

Transition Planning Conference

(if your child has been in Early Intervention programming)

- ***What you should bring:*** Proof of residency within the school district that you will be entering and any other documentation you may need to show proof of residency for both your child and you.
- ***What you should consider before attending the meeting:*** Do I want my child to be evaluated for special education? Which services would be helpful for my child? What services are available? Is there only one school district that I can choose to send my child? Is public, private, or home school best for my family? Where do I think my child should be placed: a Resource Room, general education, or self-contained classes?
- ***Who should be in attendance:*** The Service Coordinator from the Early Intervention system, an Early Intervention service provider, a district representative from the preschool (in some states from the Child Study Team), and you.
- ***What will be discussed:*** You will be presented with community program opportunities, state-run programs for children of school age, and any programs that the school may offer. You will discuss the process of identifying, evaluating, and determining eligibility for special education, and you will be introduced to the Individualized Education Program (IEP). Because your child is entering a school district, routine residency requirements and registration should also be covered.
- ***What decisions you may need to make:*** Whether or not to have your child evaluated for special education and if you wish to move forward with the necessary paperwork for these evaluations.
- ***What you should leave with:*** Written district registration requirements, a written list of district programs for preschoolers and special education options, and an IEP request form for evaluation and placement under IDEA Part B services.
- ***Helpful resources:*** This information is specifically for New Jersey but it is a great resource for those living in other states: <http://www.njeis.org/EarlyIntervTransition.pdf>.

Identification/Evaluation Meeting

(if your child has been in Early Intervention programming)

- ***What you should bring:*** Evaluations and information already on record for your child, evaluations or observations made by your Early Intervention or other service provider, and any other relevant material about your child's condition (medical history, etc.).
- ***What you should consider before attending the meeting:*** It is a family decision to have my child evaluated, but is it the right choice for us? If so, what can I do

to make sure that my service coordinators and school assistants understand my child's condition and need for special education programs?

- ***Who should be in attendance:*** A district representative from the preschool, a general education teacher from the district, and you.
- ***What will be discussed:*** Your child's records and other relevant documents will be discussed and reviewed by the school and government representatives; a decision will be made as to whether or not your child needs an evaluation in order to gain admittance to the special education system.
- ***What decisions you may need to make:*** Whether or not to consent to the evaluation if it is determined that your child is eligible.
- ***What you should leave with:*** A copy of the consent form for the evaluation of your child, as well as information on when and how you will be assigned a case worker if it is determined that an evaluation is warranted. In some cases, you may receive a name and number to call regarding a decision. If your request for evaluation is denied, see the advocacy section for how to appeal and resources you may find useful during this process.

Once children are of school age, implementation of the Child Find program is generally deemed the responsibility of the school district where your child will be attending. It is important that you are an advocate for your child during this process and notify the school that you would like your child evaluated, even if they do not come to you expressing concern regarding this matter. In order to be placed in the special education system, the school district must take action.

Once your child has been identified through Child Find, it is often necessary for an evaluation referral to be made. Referrals may be submitted by instructional, administrative, and other professional staff of the local school district, parents, and state agencies.

Identification/Evaluation Meeting (for school-aged children)

- ***What you should bring:*** Evaluations and information already on record for your child, including those that the school may not have. Bring any other relevant material on your child's condition, such as medical history, and a copy of the letter of request for evaluation.
- ***What you should consider before attending the meeting:*** Why do I feel that my child should be evaluated for special education? How can I best advocate for my child? What programs does the school offer that I think my child could benefit from?
- ***Who should be in attendance:*** A district representative from the school (in some states from the Child Study Team), a general education teacher who has had classroom experience with your child, and you.

- ***What will be discussed:*** Your child’s school records and other relevant documents will be discussed and reviewed by school and government representatives. A decision will be made, either that day or within the following weeks, regarding the need for your child to be evaluated.
- ***What decisions you may need to make:*** Whether to consent to an evaluation if it is determined that your child is eligible.
- ***What you should leave with:*** A copy of the consent form for evaluation and the name of a case worker or district contact if eligibility is determined that day. In some cases, the district will contact you regarding a decision of eligibility in the following weeks. If your request for evaluation is denied, see the advocacy section for how to appeal and resources you may find useful during this process.

Evaluation Planning Meeting

- ***What you should bring:*** Any past evaluation documents, results, and a calendar.
- ***What you should consider before attending the meeting:*** During this meeting, you will be notified about which evaluations will be performed and by whom. There is not much you need to prepare.
- ***Who should be in attendance:*** Parents, a district representative, any necessary specialists (e.g. speech and language therapist), and a general education teacher.
- ***What will be discussed:*** The course of action with respect to your child’s evaluation.
- ***What decisions you may need to make:*** When to schedule testing.
- ***What you should leave with:*** Information on testing and a number to call to learn the final decisions. Within a couple of weeks after the meeting, you will be contacted in writing and notified that your child is being considered for special education, that he or she has been cleared for testing, and the nature and scope of the testing that will be administered. You should also obtain and sign the consent form for the testing your child will complete, a copy of the rights your state guarantees to children undergoing testing for special education, and the school’s procedural safeguards statement. You should also receive your state’s special education and due process hearing rules.

Eligibility Meeting

- ***What you should bring:*** The evaluation reports that have been sent to you after your child’s evaluations are scored, and a copy of your state’s eligibility minimums for special education that are cross-referenced with your child’s scores. Knowing where your child stands will help you be a more productive advocate during the meeting and beyond.
- ***What you should consider before attending the meeting:*** Is your child eligible based on state minimums? If he or she is not, are there any other circumstances

that may need to be taken into account when determining his or her placement? If your child is determined to be eligible, how would you like the special education system to serve him or her? Would you like your child to still have access to general curriculum? Are there other school programs you want your child to be immediately considered for?

- ***Who should be in attendance:*** Parents, a district representative, any necessary specialists (e.g. speech and language therapist), a general education teacher who is knowledgeable about the student, the case manager, other school officials (in some districts), and the student (if appropriate).
- ***What will be discussed:*** Your child's test results and eligibility. If your child is determined to be eligible, an IEP may be put together at this time.
- ***What decisions you may need to make:*** If your child is deemed ineligible—do you plan to have your child re-evaluated, appeal the decision, or hire an advocate? Find out from the school district how you go about filing an appeal and see the section in this Guide on appealing decisions. If your child is deemed eligible, what would you like to have included in his or her IEP?
- ***What you should leave with:*** A copy of the decision made by the school district, forms for appealing the decision if you decide to do so, and IEP forms if your child is eligible for special education.

Individualized Education Program (IEP) Meeting

- ***What you should bring:*** Your child's school records and other relevant documents, a copy of your child's proposed IEP and educational placement as determined by the school, your IEP consent form, a tape recorder if you wish to have a copy of the meeting (you should tell the school ahead of time if you plan to tape the meeting), and a list of all procedural safeguards.
- ***What you should consider before attending the meeting:*** What are your child's strengths and needs? Which academic, social, and life skills need to be the primary focus areas? Which services will your child benefit from? What type of placement do you prefer for your child?
- ***Who should be in attendance:*** Parents, a district representative (Child Study team member in some states), any necessary specialists (e.g. speech and language therapist), a general education teacher, a special education teacher, the case manager, a member of the school staff/administration who is qualified to speak about special education, IDEA Part C and B coordinators when requested, an advocate if you choose to employ one, and your child (if appropriate).
- ***What will be discussed:*** You will collaborate with other team members to determine a course of action that is best for your child as he or she continues in the special education system. You will discuss the programs that the school has to offer and whether your child will be placed in general education, special education, or self-contained classes. The team will decide who is responsible

for implementing different parts of the IEP in order to ensure that it is carried out in full.

- ***What decisions you may need to make:*** You will need to decide which setting you would prefer for your child, the programs you want him or her to be a part of, which aspects of the proposed IEP you accept and which parts you would like to change, and which environment is best for your child. This process requires a great deal of consideration, and you may wish to involve a professional advocate if you anticipate having difficulty articulating your child's needs in the presence of school and state administrators.
- ***What you should leave with:*** A copy of the completed IEP and information about the programs that your child will be participating in.

Annual Reviews

- ***What you should bring:*** Your child's previous IEPs and notes referring to goal progress, the IEP prep worksheet from this Guide (pg. 71) filled out with information about your child that has changed or remained, any records from the last year that will be relevant for updating your child's IEP, a tape recorder if you wish to have a copy of the meeting (optional), and a list of all procedural safeguards.
- ***What you should consider before attending the meeting:*** How has your child been progressing toward the goals set at the last meeting? Were they met on schedule or at all? Are there any new issues? Has your child's medical condition changed? Are there any programs that you would like your child added to or removed from and what is the reason for this change? Which classes or programs would you like your child to remain a part of? Is your child preparing to make any transitions that should be discussed and planned for?
- ***Who should be in attendance:*** Parents, a district representative (Child Study team member in some states), any necessary specialists (e.g. speech and language therapist), general education teachers (more than one is preferable if your child is enrolled in multiple classes), special education teachers, the case manager, a member of the board of education who is qualified to speak about special education, IDEA Part C coordinators when requested, an advocate if you choose to employ one, and your child (if appropriate).
- ***What will be discussed:*** Your child's progress and any proposed changes to his or her IEP. If your child has undergone any new testing, the results will be considered when making amendments. Teachers will record observations in order to inform parents of their child's progress in both the classroom and social settings. The parents and IEP team will address any anticipated needs.
- ***What decisions you may need to make:*** You need to decide whether the educational setting that your child was placed in for the previous year was beneficial. You also need to consider which programs or teaching methods your student learned

best from and how these should be addressed in the next IEP. You need to decide whether special education is still the right place for your child or if he or she would thrive in a general education setting. You may also decide at any point in the process that you would like to appeal a district decision or hire an advocate.

- ***What you should leave with (or receive within weeks of the meeting):*** A copy of your child's updated IEP and placement status.

Re-evaluation Meeting (can be waived if the district deems it unnecessary and the parents agree)

- ***What you should bring:*** Any record of your child's educational, medical, and behavioral history (especially if there have been changes), and a copy of his or her IEPs. This will determine whether special education is working for your child and if he or she should continue.
- ***What you should consider before attending the meeting:*** Is your child benefiting from special education? If not, is it due to a lack of progress or a failure to find programs and environments that work? Have there been changes to your child's condition that affect his or her schooling?
- ***Who should be in attendance:*** Parents, a district representative, at least one general education teacher who has taught your child, at least one special education teacher who has taught your child, the case manager, a school representative who is knowledgeable about special education, service personnel (speech language therapist, etc.), and the child (if appropriate).
- ***What will be discussed:*** Whether your child still has a disability that warrants special education. You will discuss your child's class performance and continued need for a special education environment. Developmental, educational, and academic needs, as well as any physical or medical conditions that warrant enrollment in special programs, will be considered. The team will determine whether your child may now be better served in a general education environment.
- ***What decisions you may need to make:*** If it is determined that your child still has a disability, you may decide to appeal this decision or agree with it. If your child needs further testing to determine whether a disability still exists, you may choose to appeal the decision through a hearing in the weeks following the meeting. However, if you fail to respond, you have (by default) given consent for your child to be re-tested.
- ***What you should leave with:*** If it is determined that your child's condition is unchanged, you will sign a form and receive a notice within a few weeks of the meeting that no additional tests are warranted and that your child continues to be eligible/ineligible. If your child needs further testing to determine whether a disability still exists, you will receive a consent form for the testing to be completed and a written notice of the nature and extent of that testing.

Re-evaluation Follow-Up Meeting

- ***What you should bring:*** Evaluation reports that are sent to you after your child's evaluations have been scored, a copy of your state's eligibility minimums for special education (knowing where your child stands on these will help you be an effective advocate), and copies of your child's past scores for comparison and assessment of progress.
- ***What you should consider before attending the meeting:*** Is your child still considered eligible according to state minimums? If he or she is not, are there any other circumstances that may need to be taken into account when determining a placement? How has the special education system served your child and is it continuing to do so effectively? Would your child benefit from the challenge of a general education curriculum? Could learning outside the special education system be a beneficial opportunity for your child? If your child continues in special education, are there any possible IEP changes that would be helpful?
- ***Who should be in attendance:*** Parents, a district representative (Child Study team member in some states), any necessary specialists (e.g. speech and language therapist), a general education teacher who knows your child (if applicable), the case manager, other school officials (in some school districts), and your child (if appropriate).
- ***What will be discussed:*** Your child's test results and eligibility. If your child is still eligible, any changes to their IEP will be made at this meeting. If your child is ineligible based on their test results, plans for transitioning to general education will be discussed.
- ***What decisions you may need to make:*** If your child is ineligible, you need to make decisions about a possible re-evaluation, appealing the decision, or hiring an advocate. Find out from the school district how you go about filing an appeal and see the section on appealing decisions in this Guide (pg. 34). If your child is eligible, what you would like to keep or change in your child's IEP?
- ***What you should leave with:*** A signed consent form that outlines the changes to your child's IEP (or educational plan if they are deemed ineligible). If your child is ineligible, you may also want to collect information regarding the appeal process for re-evaluations.

Appendix C

Related Services

Related services are supports that enable your child to access the general education curriculum. These vary widely based on need. When appropriate, many services such as occupational therapy (OT), physical therapy (PT), and speech language pathology (SLP) can be provided in the general education setting. There are some students whose educational requirements are too complex and intense to be effectively addressed in the general education setting, and many of the services listed below may not apply to your child, but all are helpful to be aware of.

Assistive Technology	Assistive Technology is any item or hardware that is necessary to enhance the educational capabilities of a student with special needs. This ranges from pencil grips and earplugs to computers other high-tech items.
Audiologists	Audiologists identify and treat problems with hearing and balance. They perform tests and fit those who have a hearing impairment with aids or cochlear implants. Audiologists also work with patients and their families to develop a plan for coping and how to compensate for deficits in language or sensory perception.
Educational Diagnosticians	Educational diagnosticians perform tests and observations in order to identify learning difficulties in students. Once a student has been diagnosed, they help make decisions regarding beneficial placements and teaching methods. They may also serve as support personnel that monitor the progress of the student once a plan is implemented.
Guidance Counselors	Guidance counselors primarily work with students and parents to choose educational/vocational goals and appropriate classes. Counselors also administer tests to students who are struggling to decide on a vocational path, and may advise students who are having emotional or social issues.

Low Vision Specialists	Low vision specialists (Doctors of Optometry) help patients who have vision impairments that cannot be corrected by surgical methods, prescription medications, or corrective eyewear. These doctors perform vision tests, work to find assistive technologies that will allow for greater independence, and teach patients how to use them. They also discuss changes to the home environment (such as marking furniture or using new lighting) and may visit a patient's home to assist in implementing these changes.
Management Registered Dietitians	Management registered dietitians manage school food programs, plan menus, and to oversee the individual dietary needs of students. Registered dietitians may also meet with families to discuss individualized dietary plans.
Music Therapists	Music therapists provide students with relaxation techniques, musical learning tools (such as mnemonic devices), and opportunities for expression. They may work with students in the classroom or private settings to achieve progress toward IEP goals.
Occupational Therapists	Occupational therapists help students build the capacity to perform daily living skills (e.g. hygiene, feeding), social skills, motor skills, sensory processing, and specific vocational or educational skills. Their goal is to help children achieve autonomy in their educational, social and living environments.
Orientation and Mobility Specialists	Orientation and mobility specialists work with people who have visual impairments to help them learn how to travel by themselves. They teach clients how to use assistive technologies and their remaining senses in order to navigate various environments.
Paraprofessionals	In education, paraprofessionals are commonly referred to as teaching assistants. They help run classroom activities and assist students, but do not have professional training themselves.

Parent Counseling and Training Team	A parent counseling and training team teaches parents about the IEP process and gives them the tools to support the IEP process at home. This includes information about special education, the specific diagnoses and needs of their child, how to use any assistive technologies or work with their children on activities, general child development, and where to go for support systems within the community.
Physical Therapists	Physical therapists work with students to build strength, increase mobility, and develop proper posture and balance. Their goal is for students to independently participate in the learning process and to engage in physical education and active recreation activities.
Recreation/Therapeutic Recreation Specialists	Recreation/therapeutic recreation specialists plan activities (e.g. crafts, sports) that allow students to practice and master the physical skills that are outlined in their IEP. These goals may be social, emotional, or vocational, and the activities may take place inside or outside the classroom.
School Medical Staff	School medical staff administers any prescribed medication regimens, monitors the safety of the school and learning environment, and communicates any concerns to teachers and parents.
School Psychologists	School psychologists provide counseling and advice to students about their learning styles, social issues, emotional issues, and self esteem. They also perform psychological tests necessary to determine special education eligibility and placement, as well as placement in community programs. School psychologists work with parents to teach home-to-school collaboration skills. School psychologists often spearhead school mental health programs.

<p>Social Workers</p>	<p>Social workers serve as both counselors and coordinators. They help students work through emotional difficulties, cope with a disability, and manage schoolwork. Social workers bridge the gap between school and home by communicating with parents, especially when the child has a disability. Lastly, they advise teachers how to create the best learning environment for students with special needs of all kinds.</p>
<p>Speech and Language Pathologists</p>	<p>Speech and Language Pathologists (SLPs) work with students who have difficulty with speech sounds, rhythm, stuttering, intonation, or who need to learn a new language. They also work with students who have cognitive-based communication problems or difficulty with basic oral functions, such as swallowing. SLPs work to strengthen muscles necessary for speech and use various techniques to teach rhythm, pitch, and new words. They may also choose to teach an alternative language method, such as sign language. SLPs also work on the pragmatics, or social aspects, of speech.</p>
<p>Teachers of the Blind and Visually Impaired</p>	<p>Teachers of the blind and visually impaired have training in Braille, teaching those with visual impairments, and special education. They translate from Braille to print for their students, help students use assistive technology, teach social and daily living skills, and advise general education teachers on how to make their classrooms conducive to the needs of blind and visually impaired students.</p>
<p>Teachers of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing</p>	<p>Teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing work with students who have hearing deficits. These teachers have a special knowledge of sign language, assistive technologies, and auditory equipment. They teach the general education curriculum so that students with hearing deficits can understand and engage, and advise general education teachers on how to properly include deaf and hard of hearing students in their classroom activities.</p>

Transition Facilitators	Transition facilitators work with case managers to find job opportunities, education opportunities, and community programs for students in the special education track who will soon be graduating. They also support students during job or school searches and communicate with families when appropriate.
Transportation	Transportation includes getting to and from school, and around the school building. Staff, such as a paraprofessional, may be needed to help a child move easily throughout the day. Specialized busses, ramps, or other assistive technologies may also be necessary.

Appendix D

Writing IEP Goals

Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) outline the supports your child with autism will receive in order to achieve his or her full potential in the classroom. IEP goals specifically state what your child will work on at school, and should focus on areas that need improvement or growth. You do not need a goal for every skill or academic subject. The PLOP (Present Level of Performance, see [pages 13–15](#) of this Guide for more information) will help you determine which goals to set. The PLOP page states your child’s current skills and deficits, as well as any assessment results. The IEP team, which includes you, will use this information to write the goals.

For an IEP goal to be useful, it must be specific. One way to remember the required aspects of a goal is by using the acronym **SMART**:

- **Specific**—clearly defined target behaviors
- **Measurable**—provides a way to determine progress from the PLOP
- **Achievable**—something that your child can actually attain
- **Relevant**—focuses on areas of concern, and where progress can be made toward independence and personal goals
- **Time Limited**—has a short-term and long-term plan for success, checkpoints for evaluation, and parameters for completion

The SMART IEP method is based on the model developed and presented in “From Emotions to Advocacy” by Peter W. D. Wright, Esq. and Pamela Darr Wright of wrightslaw.com, the special education law and advocacy Web site.

Specific and Measurable

Behavioral objectives should be clearly stated, based on your child’s needs, and able to be accurately measured. Writing your goals this way is essential to your child’s success. Although a goal is often more broadly stated (“in math, Jim will learn addition and subtraction using carrying and borrowing”), for the best positive results the objectives must provide the clear steps for attaining it (“when presented with 10 double-digit addition problems involving carrying, Jim will complete all problems with 90% accuracy within 10 minutes for two consecutive days). In general, a good behavioral objective must identify the learner (e.g. “Jim will. . .”) and the specific skill or behavior that is being targeted for increase—what is the learner expected to be doing when the objective is met? This requires a precise description of the skill in terms that are both observable and measurable. Your goals should include:

- Where the task is to be presented (e.g. the classroom)
- How many problems are presented (e.g. 10)
- What types of problems are presented (e.g. double digit addition with carrying)
- Observable verbs that describe measurable actions

Observable Verbs	Non-Observable Verbs
to write	to conclude
to point to	to appreciate
to name	to be aware of

- The conditions under which the skill or behavior is to be displayed
- What prompts the behavior (e.g. “when presented with the verbal direction, Jim will. . .”)
- A list of required materials (e.g. “using the math workbook, Jim will. . .”)
- Any necessary support staff, assistive technology, or accommodations that will need to be provided
- Characteristics of the environment (e.g. “during school assemblies, Jim will. . .”)
- The criteria for competent performance—define “success” clearly (e.g. “90% accuracy in a 10-minute time frame, for at least two consecutive days”)
- Once the objective is achieved as stated, the student is to be considered competent and ready to move on to the next objective

Achievable

- Write your goals in positive language; when writing IEP goals, the “Dead Man Rule” is often referenced—if a dead man can do it, it is not something that should be considered for a goal (a dead man can “not talk in classes” or “not touch others”)
- If it is not reasonable to expect your child to meet the class’s typical curriculum standards, then do not write these into their goal—write the goal so that your child can potentially achieve it
- Provide your child with a chance to have his or her success recognized—if setting a goal that is “reasonably” more than present performance means that your

child may still be failing by academic or other standards, consider what would need to be done to help increase their performance to a passing level

- For example: If a child has been unable to get to class on time unassisted, the goal of “arriving to class, unassisted, 50% of the time” may seem reasonable, but completing the goal would still leave the child truant. Therefore, another goal and plan for progress needs to be made.

Relevant

- Create goals that will help your child progress toward educational milestones or more independent living. Keep in mind that special education should be designed to remediate a child’s weaknesses. Consider general scholastic expectations, as well as those related to behavior, motor coordination, social-emotional well-being, communication, and self-help.
- Which aspects of school is my child having difficulty with due to his or her disability?
- What are the most important curriculum areas for my child to master?
- What other parts of school are difficult for my child (social interaction, timeliness, etc.)?
- Also think about what your child’s future goals are; if they wish to attend technical school, IEP goals may be different than if they want to go to a liberal arts college or straight into the workforce

Time Limited

- Goals must be given a time frame in order to be effective. IEP goals are time limited in two ways. One is connected to the IDEA format, in that IEP goals are written on a 12-month cycle; the second is that *each action* should be time limited.
- Most IEP goals aim to describe what a child will work towards and hopefully achieve within the next 12 months. This 12-month cycle allows for goals to be assigned timelines and checkpoints for tracking purposes. If a student does not reach their goal by the 12-month projection, it signals to the IEP team that something in the IEP plan is not working for the student and it needs to be revised. It is important to remember that the goal should be directly related to the PLOP in order to assess progress.
- Without information such as “within 10 minutes for two consecutive days,” it makes a goal almost impossible to measure. The action (complete problems) must have a time limit (10 minutes), as well as the number of times the student must show this proficiency (two days).

The goals below follow the SMART model:

Example 1

Jess will read one assigned paragraph at a 5th grade reading level (aloud) and will answer 10 questions (aloud or on paper) to measure comprehension of the material each week. By the end of the 2nd month of school, she will answer at least 60% correct, 70% by the 4th month, and 80% by the 6th month. If Jess is not making progress, she will be given the material to read in a different format or will use the help of a tutor.

- **Specific**—The specific behavior is reading a 5th grade level passage (aloud) and answering 10 questions
- **Measurable**—The number of questions answered correctly can be easily tracked and measured
- **Achievable**—Even without seeing Jess' PLOP page, this level of progress seems reasonable
- **Relevant**—Reading and answering questions tests comprehension, which is relevant to Jess' educational progress
- **Time limited**—This task is measured each week and there are different projected levels of competency every two months

Example 2

Joe will remain on task for 10 minutes when given an independent classroom assignment, without verbal or non-verbal prompts from his teacher to continue working, for 80% of the assignments he is given over the course of a full week.

- **Specific**—Joe will work independently to complete classroom assignments
- **Measurable**—Success will be determined by timing how long Joe stays on task
- **Achievable**—Even without seeing Joe's PLOP page, staying on task during independent work for 10 minutes is a skill that nearly all students should be able to master
- **Relevant**—Completing work independently without distraction and sustaining attention are important academic and life skills
- **Time limited**—Joe will stay on task for 80% of assignments given during the course of one week

Example 3

Meg will independently respond (verbally) to verbally-delivered questions asked of her by teachers and specialists in school, at least 80% of the time each school day. The questions will always begin with Meg's name to ensure that she knows the question is directed at her. She will do this both in the presence of other students and when working one-on-one with an adult.

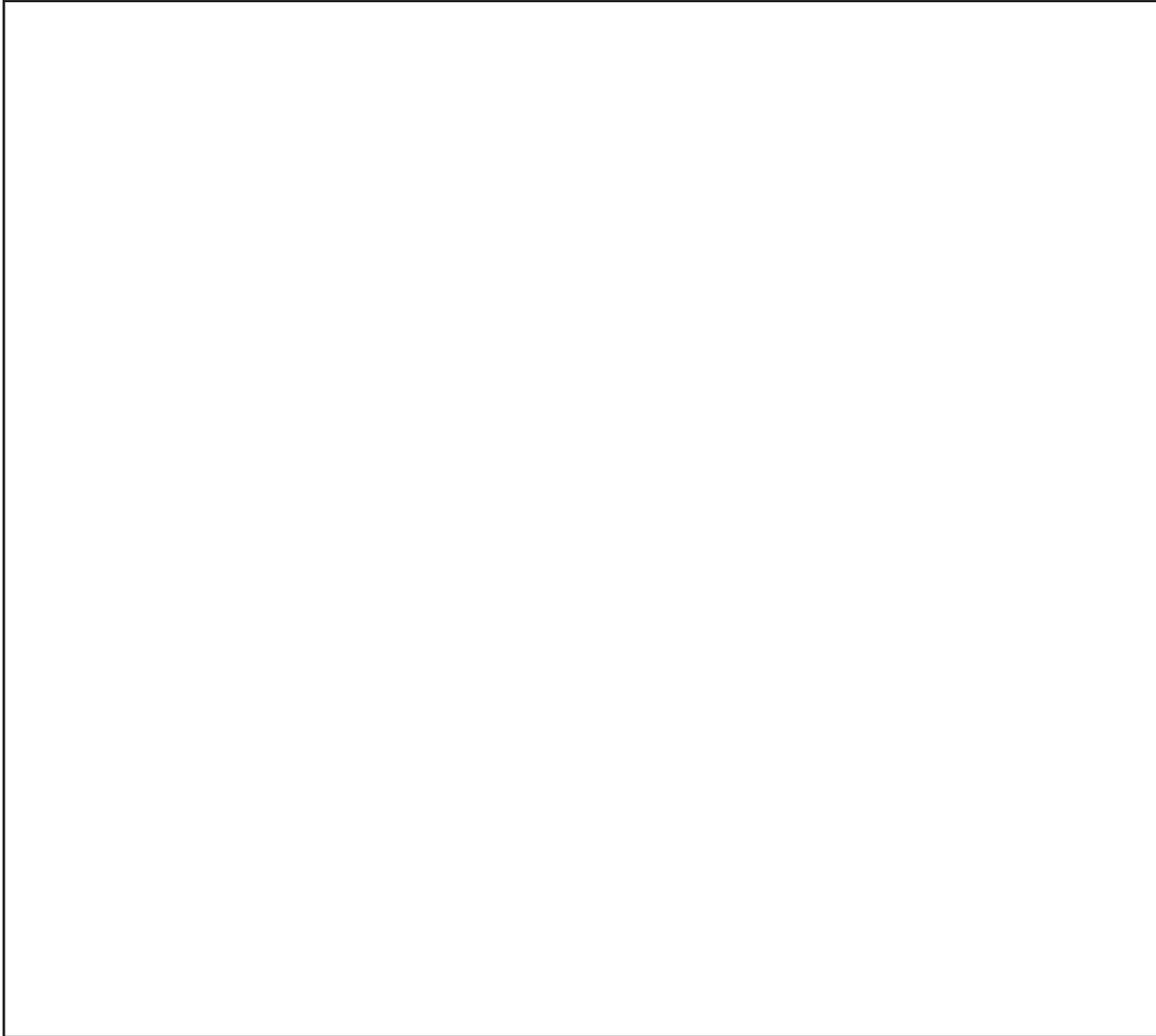
- **Specific**—The desired behavior consists of an adult beginning a question with Meg's name and Meg answering the question without being prompted
- **Measurable**—This can be measured by tracking the number of questions asked and the number of Meg's verbal responses
- **Achievable**—Without seeing Meg's PLOP regarding communication skills, responding to questions with 80% accuracy may seem low, but it is a good start if Meg has significant deficits
- **Relevant**—Meg appears to have communication deficits, so increasing her rate of responding to questions will be important
- **Time limited**—Meg is expected to answer 80% of the questions asked of her every school day

Appendix E

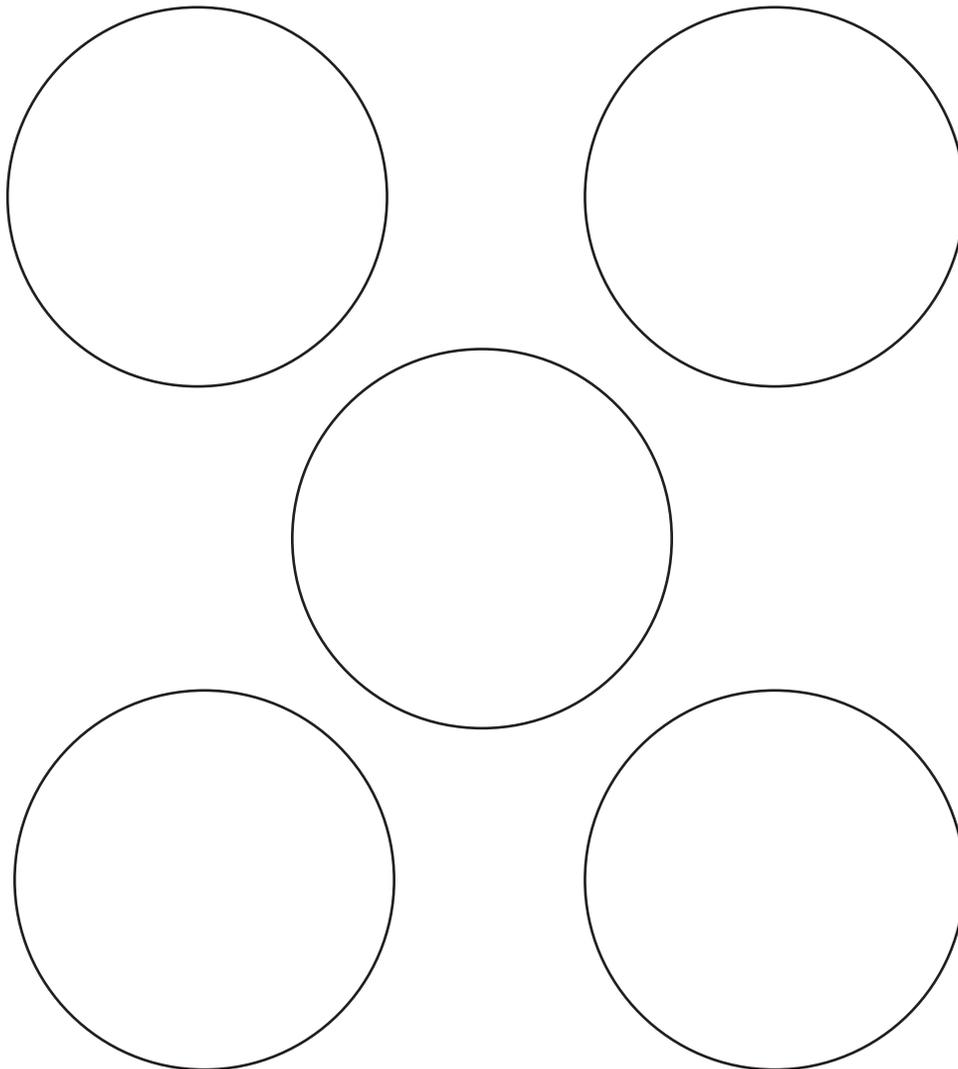
IEP Goal Worksheet

The following exercises will help you determine which domains (areas of learning) to focus on when writing IEP goals.

- 1. Brainstorm domains in need of improvement.** Some examples are: reading comprehension, functional math (money, time, etc.), writing, expressive language, receptive speech, conversation skills, social skills, vocational skills (staying on task, following a schedule, asking for help, etc.), self-care skills, and behavior management.



- 2. Circle up to five areas to concentrate on.** It may be helpful to consult with others who are familiar with your child. When choosing concentration areas, keep in mind which skills will be most beneficial for everyday independent functioning. Also remember that you do not need goals for every area your child needs help with. Too many goals can limit the amount of time your child spends mastering the most important ones.
- 3. Write the concentration areas in the circles below and brainstorm which specific skills your child needs to work on related to each area.**

The image contains five empty circles of equal size, arranged in a pentagonal pattern. One circle is in the center, and four others are positioned around it, two on the left and two on the right. These circles are intended for the user to write concentration areas and brainstorm specific skills.

- 4. Look at the specific skills.** Which can be observed and measured? Which skills will be most beneficial for your child right now? These are the areas to focus on when writing IEP goals.

Appendix F

Organizing IEP Paperwork

Special education services come with a significant amount of paperwork. It may be tempting to simply throw away many of the documents that come home, but keeping them is important for tracking your child's progress; this is especially true when there is disagreement with the school. Some post-school services require copies of various paperwork as well. To keep everything coordinated, it is important to develop an organization system that works for you.

How do I set up my organization system?

What you need:

- 3-ring binder
- 3-hole punch
- Binder dividers with tabs
- Permanent marker

The first step is to set up the binder for easy reference. Create individual sections for the following topics using tabbed binder dividers:

Tab 1—Communication

Keep a copy of the Contact Log Sheet ([see pg. 85](#)) and record all contact you have with the school regarding your child. Behind the communication sheet, keep copies of any letters and e-mails you send or receive.

Tab 2—Evaluation

Place all notifications and requests for evaluations, as well as evaluation reports, in this section. Your child may only be evaluated once every three years, so this section may not contain information for some years.

Tab 3—IEPs

Hole punch and file all IEPs and IEP drafts.

Tab 4—Progress

Schools send home reports on progress toward IEP goals in addition to report cards. Keep this information in this section along with any other reports, such as those from teachers.

Tab 5—Other Information

In this section, keep handouts from the school (e.g. Age of Majority notification and procedural safeguards) and information regarding school policies.

How do I maintain the organization system?

Each time you receive paperwork from the school, immediately hole punch it and put the item behind the appropriate binder tab. Bring the binder to any school meetings so you can immediately file information and ensure nothing is lost. Some parents prefer to create one binder for each school year, while others create tabs for each section in one notebook that is organized. How you decide to store the information depends on the amount of paperwork your child has for each school year and how frequently you need to access past information.

How long should I keep paperwork?

Keep school related paperwork until your child is no longer receiving special educational services in the public schools. Many parents prefer to keep paperwork until their child is 25 years old. Even then, you may want to keep copies of the most recent evaluations, IEPs, grades, and progress reports. These may come in handy when applying for post-school programs.

You can alter this system to meet your individual needs and preferences. You may consider keeping all documents electronically and scanning hard copies. However you choose to organize information, it is important to make sure that all the documents you need are easily accessible.

Appendix G

Common Accommodations

Accommodations exist to help students access the education they are guaranteed. Some may be visible to the casual observer (e.g. a speech output device), while others may be barely noticeable (e.g. preferential treatment). Some special education classrooms may look and operate differently than general education classrooms. These “reasonable accommodations” can be fairly basic changes that make the classroom more conducive to learning for children with certain disabilities or conditions.

There are two main types of accommodations: environmental and academic. Environmental accommodations change the classroom or school environment to benefit the student. Academic accommodations apply more to learning and teaching. Below are some examples of commonly used accommodations, why they may be implemented, and what they can do for students with special needs. This list is not exhaustive, but these are the accommodations you may hear about as a parent of a child with autism.

<p>Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) systems</p>	<p>Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) systems are used when a student does not have language, or if their language and communication skills are limited. A common AAC is the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), in which symbols or pictures are used to express and receive messages. A classroom outfitted for PECS might include larger work areas to lay out a PECS-based schedule for the day, or a specialized board where laminated pictures can be placed. AAC also includes voice output devices such as a Dynavox or an iPad.</p>
<p>Adapted keyboards</p>	<p>Big Keys and IntelliKeys are examples of products that make typing easier for those who have difficulty with fine motor skills.</p>
<p>Advance notice of assignments/syllabi</p>	<p>Students, especially those with autism, are able to better prepare for what is coming next when given assignments ahead of time. For a child in general education classes, a written class syllabus with important dates, class objectives, and an outline of what will be taught may be appropriate; however, for a child with fewer verbal and planning skills, it may be more helpful to have it in a</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>continued</i></p>

<p>Advance notice of assignments/syllabi <i>(continued)</i></p>	<p>different format. For example, teachers may write a daily schedule on the board for children who become overwhelmed when presented with too much information, and a picture schedule can be used for children with limited language or reading skills. Whichever method is used, it is important to remember that children with autism tend to thrive with predictability and routine.</p>
<p>Alternative ways of completing assignments</p>	<p>Depending on your child's deficits and strengths, they may need to complete assignments in a different manner than their classmates. This can include breaking down a large assignment into smaller pieces, reserving time outside of the classroom to work on classwork, or other similar modifications. For example, if a student with autism becomes anxious before a class presentation, it may be helpful to have him or her tape the presentation at home and show the video to the class.</p>
<p>Assistive computer technology</p>	<p>Computerized PECS schedules, learning programs, books, and even games can be beneficial stimulation and learning aids. They can provide students with control over what they see and a sense of accomplishment.</p>
<p>Assistive listening devices</p>	<p>One example is the personal FM system, in which the teacher wears a microphone and the student with a hearing difficulty wears earphones and the receiving unit.</p>
<p>Assistive technology</p>	<p>This is any piece of equipment, regardless of whether it is high or low tech, that a student needs to access the curriculum.</p>
<p>Classroom setup (structural)</p>	<p>In some cases, it can be important to have padded or rounded furniture, as well as specialized tables, desks, and chairs. The classroom may need to be segmented into areas for certain tasks if a child has attention deficits. Isolated spaces may also be beneficial for students who need an escape or cool down area. It is important to look at a child's classroom from their perspective and make sure nothing in it will hinder their learning.</p>

<p>Classroom setup (aesthetic)</p>	<p>Students with autism typically benefit from having minimal distractions in the classroom. Mobiles, flashy posters, brightly colored or patterned rugs, and extreme light can be distracting to those with sensory sensitivities. Lights can be covered, rugs can be made with neutral fabric, and posters and decorations can be taken down to make the classroom environment more sensory-friendly.</p>
<p>Location of the classroom</p>	<p>The location of a child’s classroom can be an important factor in their learning. An interior classroom without windows, a room near a bathroom, a room near an exit, or a room away from a noisy area may make a large difference for a child with sensory sensitivities, trouble focusing, or self-care concerns.</p>
<p>Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) or other visual representation system</p>	<p>A low-tech option to assist with communication and activity schedules. Word cards can be used for students with language capabilities. However, for students without language capabilities, there are programs (e.g. Boardmaker) that provide printable cards of task cues. For an even less expensive option, a classroom object can be used to represent each task.</p>
<p>Pencil grips and other writing instruments</p>	<p>Students may find certain writing instruments (e.g. pencils) uncomfortable or difficult to use; soft grips and other accommodations can make writing more comfortable and take some anxiety out of the process.</p>
<p>Social stories and social scripts</p>	<p>These tools allow parents, teachers, or professionals to lay out a scene that the student has encountered or will encounter, thereby providing a model of a positive social interaction. These stories can be read repetitively or acted out to help improve and generalize a student’s social interactions.</p>
<p>Test modifications</p>	<p>Test modifications may apply to classroom tests, as well as state and national exams. Some children may require extra time or an alternative testing location, such as a quiet room without other students. Other children may be able to deliver answers orally or have the test read aloud.</p>

Time extensions	Students placed in general education classes may be eligible for more time than their classmates to complete tests or assignments.
Timers	Timers help make sure that students stay on schedule and are prepared for transitions. If a timer can be set to go off repeatedly at set intervals, students can move through their activity schedules with greater independence and less teacher intervention.
Touch screen computers	For students who lack advanced fine motor abilities, or who have a hard time using a mouse, touch screens can make using computers much easier.
Videos	Videos showing acceptable social behavior and tasks the child will need to perform can be extremely helpful. Videos directly model speech, body movement, language, and routine tasks. Their content never changes, and students with autism often enjoy watching and learning from them because of their predictability.
Voice Output Communication Aids (VOCAs) or Speech Generation Devices (SGDs)	These devices “speak” for students based on picture-labeled buttons they press or sentences they type. Length of speech segments and number of items that can be represented pictorially usually depends on the specific device. These are especially useful tools for students who have little or no verbal language, but who understand pictorial representation or how to construct sentences.
Weighted vests or mats	A weighted vest can calm a student while allowing them to continue with their work. If one is not available, some students find that rolling themselves up in a mat provides the same comfort.
Work systems	A way for students to sort out what they have done from what they need to do. For example, this could mean laying out PECS cards in an activity schedule and then discarding them into a “finished” box when ready to move on to the next cards.

Appendix H

Using a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA)

Most schools have processes for addressing serious situations that are unable to be resolved using standard classroom practices. When students exhibit undesirable behaviors or act out in ways that inhibit learning, teachers or other school personnel may be asked to write a functional behavior assessment (FBA). They are being included more and more on IEPs. If you haven't written one before, the prospect of doing so can be intimidating and if you aren't familiar with what an FBA is and what it is intended to do, you'll have a difficult time effectively contributing to the process. Whether you are a teacher, supporting team member, or a parent, these 10 steps will help you understand and contribute meaningfully during the FBA process:

1. Understand what it is. A functional behavior assessment is just what the title says.

- *Functional*: An FBA is based on the "function" of the behavior in question. The function is the answer to "why is the student behaving this way?" Everything we do has a function. Everything we do has a purpose. If you scratch an itch on your leg, you are trying to make that painful feeling go away. When you go to work, you expect to get paid.
- *Behavior*: It is also important to discuss what the exact behavior is. The behavior must be something you can clearly define in a way that another person knows what you are talking about.
- *Assessment*: To assess and modify behavior, you must have data that can be evaluated later to see if an intervention is working. Data can be gathered in many different ways, depending on the type and frequency of the target behavior (see step 3 below).

2. Define the undesirable behavior in clear and descriptive terms.

Let's say that a student hits others. Does that mean he slaps your arm or does it mean he punches you in the face? Those are two very different behaviors that could both be categorized as "hitting." It is important to clearly define the behavior you are witnessing to ensure that all parties using the FBA know what the specific behavioral issue is.

3. Start with data to determine the function.

In order to determine the function of the behavior, it would be easiest to control the environment and change one variable at a time. However, that is not a practical option in most cases. Instead, you can complete a descriptive assessment of the behavior. In order to begin a descriptive assessment, you must first gather information. Data should come from at least two sources.

First, you can use the Functional Analysis Screening Tool (FAST)—a quick and easy questionnaire that asks about possible functions. It can be found by doing a simple Internet search. Print and copy the form, give it to each person who works with your child, then compile the results. It should provide a lot of information about possible functions of the behavior in question.

The second method for obtaining descriptive data is to complete an ABC (antecedent, behavior, consequence) chart. These are also available for download on the Internet and are easy to create on your own. An ABC chart requires that you record the antecedent (what happens right before the behavior), state what the behavior looks like in detail (e.g. “hitting and kicking” instead of “tantrum”), and outline the consequence (what happens directly after the behavior).

By looking at data from these and other sources, you can categorize the various antecedents and consequences in order to determine the possible function. For example, you may realize that every time a child is asked to complete a worksheet (the antecedent), he rips the paper (the behavior) and receives a failing grade (the consequence).

4. Determine the function of the behavior.

Next, you need to use the information you’ve found while gathering data to make a hypothesis about the function of the behavior. Typically, functions fit within one of the four following categories:

- **Attention:** These behaviors are intended to get another person’s attention. A baby cries repeatedly. A colleague says, “Excuse me, I have a few questions for you.” A five-year-old says, “Look at me!” A child with autism may hit you repeatedly until you stop what you are doing to look at her.
- **Escape/avoidance:** These behaviors are intended to get rid of something that is undesirable. A student may rip up a paper in hopes of avoiding homework or run away during recess to escape a bully. A student with autism may cover his or her ears to avoid a loud sound.
- **Access to an object:** When trying to access an object, there are many ways someone might try to communicate. A person might order from a menu to get access to the dish he or she wants. A younger child might point at the TV and say “Barney.” A person with a picture exchange communication system (PECS) might hand someone a picture of a snack.
- **Automatic/Sensory:** The functions of these behaviors are hard to determine, as the benefit cannot be seen from the outside. When something inside our body is uncomfortable, we do what we can to fix it. We scratch an itch. We bite our fingernails. We blow our nose. People with autism exhibit other behaviors such as rocking, flapping hands, or bouncing on a therapy ball. All of these activities may give the person an automatic reinforcement by making their bodies more comfortable.

5. Match your intervention with the function.

It is very important that you match the intervention with the function of the behavior. For instance, if a student is getting out of her seat and screaming at the top of her lungs, the teacher might think that an appropriate consequence (response) would be a time out to allow the student to calm down and minimize disruption to the class. However, after collecting data, the teacher notices that the screaming only happens after the student is asked to do work. If a function of a behavior is to make the work go away, and the student gets sent to time out, then screaming worked. The student got out of doing work just like she wanted to. If the consequence doesn't match the function, then the behavior will not decrease, and there is a chance that the undesirable behavior will actually increase. To address this problem, move on to Step 6.

6. Teach a replacement or alternative behavior.

When attempting to decrease a problem behavior, it is critical to teach a replacement or alternative behavior; show the child what you want him or her to do instead. For example, let's say that a child runs out of the classroom and down the hall every time he needs to use the bathroom. This is a problem because the student didn't ask for permission and you are concerned about where he is going.

If you stop him from running out of the room without teaching a replacement behavior, he might start going to the bathroom in his pants.

If you want him to ask to use the bathroom, it must be taught. Maybe the student can verbally say "bathroom," or use a sign or picture to tell you he needs to use the bathroom.

7. Explain FBA procedures to all parties to maintain consistency.

Consistency is of the utmost importance. If everyone involved in the student's life understands the plan and works together, you will be able to address the behavior more quickly and effectively.

8. Expect an extinction burst.

The behavior may actually get worse before it gets better. Let's use the example of a child who cries to get their mother's attention. If Mom decides to ignore the behavior, the child will cry louder. In the child's mind, crying always works; if she cries a little louder, that make a difference. If that still doesn't work, the child may progress to lying on the floor and kicking while crying. The behavior goes on and on until Mom responds.

When Mom adopts a new strategy to change expectations, the child will keep trying the old behavior, and maybe even more extreme behaviors, to see if anything else will help her get what she wants. This extinction burst does not mean that the interven-

tion is not working. It is important to stay consistent, ignore the previous behavior, and reinforce the new behavior. In this case, the child could learn to get her mother's attention by tapping her shoulder or using words. Mom should reinforce the new method. By doing so, the child learns which method works faster, better, and with less exertion. Soon, she will learn that the new strategy for attention is more useful and will not engage in previous methods.

9. Gather data.

Analyzing data is the only way to judge if an intervention is working or not. With problem behaviors, it is especially hard to just "remember" if it is getting better. This is not the time for subjective analysis. Make sure you record the data as soon as possible so it's accurate.

10. Review data and adjust as necessary; the FBA is a fluid document.

An FBA should never be set in stone. The reason we gather data is to be able to adjust intervention strategies as needed. Refer back to the data often, meet as a team, and make changes.

Appendix I

Using an Advocate

How can a special education advocate help your family?

Advocates may be volunteers or paid professionals, and can be a helpful tool for families. They assist parents with the special education process, including attending meetings, preparing documents and working closely with the school district. The following list describes what an advocate should do:

- Know the federal and state laws pertaining to special education, as well as the procedures, and be able to explain them to you in plain English
- Obtain your child's complete educational record, then review and explain the records to you
- Teach and remind you about your child's and your rights before each meeting or transition
- Answer any questions you have and seek out answers they do not know
- Meet with you to develop a plan before important decisions or meetings, and provide you with worksheets or documents so that you can stay organized
- Write appeals or other communications with you in a way that will command administrators' attention and yield positive results
- Meet to go over special education and Section 504 documents, student files, assessment reports, IEPs, and 504 Plans
- Go with you to IEP, 504, and other meetings; speak up for your child if necessary
- Help you participate more fully in the IEP process
- Review IEPs and other important documents before you sign and return them
- Help you voice concerns to the district and resolve disputes
- Judge the strength of your case before a due process hearing, make any changes, and refer you to a lawyer if necessary
- Accompany you to mediation hearings, if necessary
- Determine the validity of your concerns regarding your child's needs and the services currently offered by his or her school
- Objectively analyze the quality of your child's education program, and whether it is the most appropriate for him or her

- Identify alternative options and suggest additional evaluation, if appropriate
- Assist you as you follow up with your child's school regarding IEP addendums and proper implementation

How to Choose an Advocate

- Seek out references. Ask about their effectiveness, promptness, professionalism, knowledge, and accessibility. If you are in a parent group or other autism related group, this could be a great source for references.
- Look for an advocate who specializes in children with autism. They will know information specific to special education and autism, such as eligibility standards.
- Look for a certified advocate or someone with a background in law.
- Advocates should listen to your desires and needs, but also speak up when their experience enables them to see something you may not. Look for someone who is strong enough to advise and not just be a passive presence.
- Beware of an advocate who seems to promise too much.
- Ask about fees up front, including base price and which services might cost extra. Some advocates work for free as volunteers or through government agencies, but beware of going for the lowest bidder. Make sure your advocate meets the requirements above; if not, there is no use in paying for their services.

Appendix K

State Resources

Each state interprets IDEA in a different way. The following Web sites provide state-specific special education information.

State	Parent Resources/Handbook	Parent Technical Assistance Network
Alabama	ftp://ftp.alsde.edu/documents/65/HANDBOOK.pdf	http://www.alabama-parentcenter.com/
Alaska	http://www.eed.state.ak.us/TLS/sped/handbook/TOC.doc	http://www.stonesoupgroup.org/
Arizona	http://www.azed.gov/special-education/files/2011/06/special-education-handbook-for-principals-part-ii.pdf	http://www.raisingpecialkids.org/
Arkansas	http://arksped.k12.ar.us/sections/rulesandregulations.html#BOTTOM	http://www.adcpti.org/
California	http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/qa/documents/pseng.doc	http://www.matrixparents.org/
Colorado	http://www.cde.state.co.us/spedlaw/download/ProceduralSafeguards2009.pdf	http://www.peakparent.org/
Connecticut	http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/PDF/DEPS/Special/Parents_Guide_SE.pdf	http://www.cpacinc.org
Delaware	http://www.doe.k12.de.us/infosuites/students_family/specialed/files/speced_E1861ParentsCanBetheKey.pdf	http://www.picofdel.org/
District of Columbia	http://www.osse.dc.gov/seo/cwp/view,a,1222,q,561151,seoNav_GID,1507,seoNav,%7C31195%7C,.asp	http://www.aje-dc.org/
Florida	http://www.fl DOE.org/ese/parent/	http://www.fndfl.org/
Georgia	http://www.gadoe.org/DMGetDocument.aspx/Sp_Ed_Implementation_Manual_revised_4-182011.pdf?p=6CC6799F8C1371F67AB7079EFB446E847FC5E21D0F9D1BF7888B6846CD34CB0D&Type=D	http://p2pga.org/
Hawaii	http://doe.k12.hi.us/specialeducation/index_rights.htm	http://www.lidahawaii.org/

State	Parent Resources/Handbook	Parent Technical Assistance Network
Idaho	http://www.sde.idaho.gov/specialeducation/docs/Manual/Manual.pdf	http://www.ipulidaho.org/
Illinois	http://www.isbe.state.il.us/spec-ed/pdfs/parent_guide_english.pdf	http://www.insource.org/
Indiana	http://www.doe.in.gov/exceptional/speced/docs/A2_Special_Ed_FAQ.pdf	http://www.insource.org/
Iowa	http://www.iowa.gov/educate/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1283&Itemid=2281	http://www.askresource.org/
Kansas	http://www.ksde.org/Default.aspx?tabid=3152	http://www.families.togetherinc.com/
Kentucky	http://www.education.ky.gov/KDE/Instructional+Resources/Exceptional+Children /Forms+and+Documents/	http://www.kyspin.com/
Louisiana	http://accessguide.doe.louisiana.gov/site%20pages/Disabilities.aspx	http://www.laptic.org/
Maine	http://www.maine.gov/education/speced/MUSERrevised9-2010.rtf	http://www.mpf.org/
Maryland	http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/NR/rdonlyres/6FB406E5-4D57-44B4-BB53-37C093D1DCC6/22211/UnderstandingtheIEP1.pdf	http://www.ppmid.org/
Massachusetts	http://www.fcsn.org/parentguide/parentguide.pdf	http://fcsn.org/index.php
Michigan	http://www.bdalecards.org/joomla/images/phocagallery/admin/mykie/pdffiles/procsafesept10.pdf	http://www.michiganallianceforfamilies.org
Minnesota	http://www.minnetonka.k12.mn.us/academics/sped/Documents/SEAC%20Manual.pdf	http://www.pacer.org/
Mississippi	http://www.mde.k12.ms.us/special_education/index.html	http://www.mspti.org/
Missouri	http://dese.mo.gov/divspeced/Compliance/documents/ParentGuide.pdf	http://www.ptimpact.org/
Montana	http://opi.mt.gov/Programs/SpecialEd/#gpm1_6	http://www.pluk.org/
Nebraska	http://www.education.ne.gov/sped/parentinfo/ParentalRightsEng.pdf	http://www.pti-nebraska.org/
Nevada	http://nde.doe.nv.gov/SpecialEducation_Resources.htm	http://www.nvpep.org/

State	Parent Resources/Handbook	Parent Technical Assistance Network
New Hampshire	http://www.education.nh.gov/instruction/special_ed/faq.htm	http://startingpointsforhparents.org/home
New Jersey	http://www.state.nj.us/education/specialed/form/prise/prise.pdf	http://www.spannj.org/
New Mexico	http://www.ped.state.nm.us/seb/	http://www.parentsreachingout.org/
New York	http://www.p12.nysed.gov/specialed/publications/policy/parentguide.htm	http://www.advocacycenter.com/
North Carolina	http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/ec/policy/resources/2008/ecparenthandbook0409.pdf	http://www.ecac-parentcenter.org/
North Dakota	http://www.dpi.state.nd.us/speced/resource/parent/index.shtm	http://www.pathfinder-nd.org/
Ohio	http://www.ode.state.oh.us/GD/Templates/Pages/ODE/ODEDetail.aspx?page=3&TopicRelationID=981&ContentID=11128&Content=91971	http://www.occid.org/
Oklahoma	http://sde.state.ok.us/Curriculum/SpecEd/pdf/Parent/Handbook.pdf	http://www.oklahomaparentscenter.org/
Oregon	http://www.ode.state.or.us/search/page/?=289	http://www.oregonrisecenter.org/index.html
Pennsylvania	http://www.pattan.net/files/Parent/ParentRights.pdf	http://www.parentednet.org/
Rhode Island	http://www.ride.ri.gov/Special_Populations/Programs_Services/default.aspx	http://www.ripin.org/
South Carolina	http://ed.sc.gov/agency/Standards-and-Learning/Exceptional-Children/Basicsofspecialed.html	http://www.proparents.org/
South Dakota	http://doe.sd.gov/oess/documents/SPED_parentalrights_handbook.pdf	http://www.sdparent.org/
Tennessee	http://www.tn.gov/education/speced/doc/80608SEMManualfinal.pdf	http://www.tnstep.org/
Texas	http://www.texasprojectfirst.org/SEProcessStep.html	http://www.partnerstx.org/
Utah	http://www.schools.utah.gov/sars/Guidelines.aspx	http://www.utahparentcenter.org/
Vermont	http://education.vermont.gov/new/pdfdoc/pgm_speced/laws/educ_speced_guide.pdf	http://www.vermontfamilynetwork.org/

State	Parent Resources/Handbook	Parent Technical Assistance Network
Virginia	http://www.doe.virginia.gov/special_ed/parents/parents_guide.pdf	http://www.peatc.org/
Washington	http://www.k12.wa.us/SpecialEd/Families/default.aspx	http://www.wapave.org/
West Virginia	http://wvde.state.wv.us/osp/handinhand.pdf	http://www.wvpti.org/
Wisconsin	http://www.specialed.us/Parents/plainlanguageindex.htm	http://www.wifacets.org/
Wyoming	http://edu.wyoming.gov/Libraries/Publications/SpecEd_Policy_and_Procedure_Manual_2010Jul1.sflb.ashx	http://www.wpic.org/

Appendix L

Recommended Reading

Cohen, Matthew D. (2009). *A Guide to Special Education Advocacy*. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Weinfeld, Rich and Davis, Michelle. (2008). *Special Needs Advocacy Resource Book: What You Can Do Now to Advocate for Your Exceptional Child's Education*. Waco: Prufrock Press, Inc.

Wilshurst, Linda and Brue, Alan W. (2010). *The Complete Guide to Special Education: Expert Advice on Evaluation, IEPs, and Helping Kids Succeed*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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As the number of children being diagnosed on the spectrum continues to increase, more children with autism are attending public school than ever before. Many teachers, administrators, and school support staff lack the background and training to meet the unique needs of students with autism. It falls to the parents to make sure that their child's challenges, whether with social interactions, communication, or behavior, are addressed with research-based interventions within the school setting. To assure this, parents must have a basic understanding of special education services, their child's rights, and their own.

This Guide is designed as a resource for parents. Its purpose is to give each family the information and tools needed to successfully navigate the education system anywhere in the country. More specifically, it offers:

- Background on special education in the United States
- An understanding of the laws and regulations about special education
- An overview of the timeline of services
- A detailed explanation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)
- Tips and techniques for being an effective advocate
- Sources and links that will help you identify specific state resources and find more in-depth information
- Lists and definitions of terms that are frequently used in school systems

The Organization for Autism Research (OAR) is a national non-profit organization dedicated to promoting research that can be applied to help families, educators, related professionals, and individuals with autism spectrum disorders find the much-needed answers to their urgent questions. Committed to excellence in service to the autism community, OAR funds applied research that will make a difference in the lives of individuals; provide accurate and useful information; and offer opportunities for the autism community to collaborate and make advances together.

www.researchautism.org



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