



TOPIC

Special, Individualized Education for Children with Special Needs.

WHAT IS SPECIAL EDUCATION?

Growing up can be a difficult process that is further complicated when a child has special needs—such as cognitive (thought, perception and reasoning) disabilities, emotional and behavioral disorders, developmental delays, or physical disabilities. Among other repercussions, those special needs may impede the child’s ability to learn independently or in an ordinary classroom setting.

The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and state law entitle all children (ages 3 to 21; grades K-12) with a disability that hinders their ability to learn to free appropriate education (FAPE), or “special education,” within the public school system. Special education services are designed to address each student’s individual differences and needs. They may include, but are not limited to:

- Modifications in the education program involving teaching methods and/or the curriculum
- Smaller class size
- Peer tutoring
- Special technology and/or a specifically adapted teaching area
- Non-academic services such as transportation; recreation; occupational, physical and/or speech therapy; life skills training (for example, money and time management)

To qualify for special education, a child must have at least one of the disabilities identified in IDEA and it must adversely affect his or her educational performance. These disabilities, which are evaluated to determine a child’s eligibility for special education, include:

- Hearing impairment/deafness
- Visual impairment/blindness
- Communication/speech disorder
- Severe orthopedic impairment
- Other health impairment
- Autism and autistic-like behaviors
- Intellectual disability (the preferred term for mental retardation)
- Emotional disturbance
- Special learning disabilities
- Traumatic brain injury

ATTAINING SPECIAL EDUCATION

Referral. The first step in the special education process is the referral for evaluation of eligibility. Every school district has the legal responsibility to identify and evaluate children who may need special education services. If a school professional such as the child’s teacher or parents/guardians suspect a problem, they can refer the child to the school district’s Department of Special Services for an evaluation. In response to the request, a Child Study Team (CST) will perform an initial screening to determine whether a full evaluation is warranted.

Evaluation. Parental permission is required before assessments may be administered. Special education assessments measure a range of benchmarks such as cognition, academics and language skills as well as social, emotional, developmental and medical findings. IDEA requires that a variety of approaches must be used in conducting the special education evaluation, such as student school and medical records, work samples, observations, psychometric tests, and in-person interviews.



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INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLAN

When a student is deemed eligible for special education services, an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team meets to develop a unique educational plan based on the child's specific needs as assessed in the evaluation process. The team usually includes the child's parent(s) or guardian(s), school administrator, teachers, professionals involved in the assessment and, if appropriate, the student (if age 8 or above).

The IEP is a written document that describes any accommodations, modifications, or related services a student needs in order to receive an appropriate education. It also lists goals and objectives that are used to measure a student's progress and determine whether the program and placement are, indeed, appropriate. At least once a year, the IEP team must reconvene to review and update the IEP to ensure that it remains appropriate and discuss any modifications that may be needed.

Individualized education has helped countless children with special needs achieve a level of academic and personal success that wouldn't have been possible in a typical learning environment; the number who graduate from high school and go on to post-secondary education or employment increases every year. Special education also benefits parents and other family members of children with special needs by ensuring that their loved one receives the specialized attention necessary for them to succeed.

"A parent's awareness and participation in the IEP process is essential to the success of the child. As their child's "first teacher," parents play a most critical role. Therefore, parents should never be hesitant to request an evaluation for their child if they suspect they may be in need of assistance."

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