



An Overview of Special Education

What does the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) require for children with disabilities?

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the federal law that requires states to provide early intervention and special education services to children with disabilities, from birth through age 21. The law was first passed in 1975. All states must follow IDEA.

Early Intervention Services

Early intervention services are for infants and toddlers, from birth through the age of two, who have a delay in physical, cognitive, communication, social or emotional, or adaptive development.

The goal of early intervention services is to minimize developmental delays caused by a disability, reduce the need for future services as much as possible, and maximize a child's potential for independent skills.

Early intervention services include, but are not limited to:

- Assistive technology
- Audiology services
- Family training
- Health services (like catheterization, tracheostomy care, and tube feedings)
- Medical services (for evaluations only)
- Nursing services
- Nutrition services
- Occupational therapy
- Physical therapy
- Psychological services
- Service coordination
- Sign language
- Social work services
- Special instruction
- Speech-language services
- Transportation
- Vision services

In addition to direct services for the infant or toddler with a developmental delay, early intervention services include working with a child's family to ensure the family members have the skills and knowledge they need to support the child's needs. The family's concerns and needs drive the services provided by the early intervention program.

Special Education Services

Special education services are for children with disabilities from ages three through 21 who have a disability that adversely affects their education.

Special education is NOT a place. Children with disabilities do not "go to" special education. Special education is a set of services that children with disabilities receive to make progress at school. The specific services that a child receives are based on that child's unique needs. Special education is different for every child because every child's needs are different.

To qualify for special education, a child must have one of the 13 disability categories listed in the law:

- Autism
- Deaf-blindness
- Deafness
- Emotional disturbance
- Hearing impairment
- Intellectual disability
- Multiple disabilities
- Orthopedic impairment
- Other health impairment
- Specific learning disability
- Speech or language impairment
- Traumatic brain injury
- Visual impairment

In addition to having one of the listed disabilities, the child's disability must "adversely affect" their education, which means that the child isn't making appropriate progress at school. Concerns often start when students have failing grades, but other adverse effects might include attendance issues, behavioral or discipline challenges, an inability to communicate adequately, or poor social interactions.

Special education services include the specialized instruction and related services that a student needs to make appropriate progress at school. Specialized instruction includes how and what content is taught, as well as the accommodations and aids that are provided.

Related services include, but are not limited to:

- Audiology
- Counseling services
- Early identification and assessment
- Interpreting services
- Medical services
- Occupational therapy
- Orientation and mobility services
- Parent counseling and training
- Physical therapy
- Psychological services
- Recreation
- Rehabilitation counseling
- School health services
- Social work services
- Speech-language pathology
- Transportation

Child Find

Parents can ask for early intervention services or special education services if they have concerns about their child's development or learning. They should put their concerns in writing, ask for an evaluation, and send the request to the state's early intervention program or to their local school district.

However, IDEA also requires states and school districts to proactively identify all of the children in their state or school district that need early intervention or special education services. This responsibility is called “child find.”

For infants and toddlers, certain individuals and groups must have information about how and when to refer families to the early intervention program. These groups include:

- Hospitals
- Doctors
- Childcare providers
- Government agencies like health, social services, and child welfare agencies
- Homeless and domestic violence shelters

Information about early intervention services must be given to parents of children born prematurely or who have risk factors associated with developmental delays, such as children with Down syndrome, fetal alcohol spectrum disorders, spina bifida, and cerebral palsy. In addition, children must be referred to the early intervention program if they are found by a court to have been abused or neglected or exposed to prenatal drug use.

For preschool and school-age children, teachers and school staff must tell a school administrator if they have concerns and believe a child may need special education services. If the administrator determines that a special education evaluation is needed, they must get written permission from a child’s parent to complete the evaluation.

Where can I learn more?

You can find additional [resources online](#) or by emailing us at school@thearc.org.

