

Individualized Education Plans

An **Individualized Education Plan** is a legal written document created by your school district for a specific student with special needs, and outlines the education services that the individual should receive in order to meet specific educational goals. An IEP is important because it specifies the services that a child's school district **MUST** provide for the child. An IEP can be created for children between the ages of three and twenty-one. A federal law, the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act** (IDEA) requires that all school districts provide early intervention and education services to children with disabilities. A child is eligible for an IEP if they are diagnosed with one of the 13 covered disability areas listed in IDEA. These include:

- 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

Why You Need an IEP

If your child meets the requirements for an IEP, your school district is required to provide special education for your child. IDEA requires schools to provide children with disabilities with a **free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment** for them – commonly referred to as FAPE. A free and appropriate education includes an education that meets a child's unique needs, and prepares them for further education, employment and the ability to live independently. A well-documented IEP works to ensure that your child is getting the most appropriate education for their needs.

What an IEP Includes

An IEP should include the following information:

- 1) Your child's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance
- 2) Information about how your child's disability affects participation in the general education curriculum
- 3) Measurable performance goals for your child

- 4) How your child's school will meet your child's educational needs including details about special education services and other related services
- 5) Information about how your child will be assessed and how progress will be measured
- 6) How often progress reports will be provided
- 7) Information about when the services will begin and how frequently they will be provided
- 8) Any assistive technology that your child may need
- 9) Any behavior management techniques that will be used with your child if needed

The IEP Process

Creating an IEP is a multi-step process that may involve many different individuals. The IEP is designed to identify any supplementary supports a child may need to gain access to an age appropriate and inclusive education. In most cases, a child with an IEP will remain in his/her regular classroom. It is important for you to familiarize yourself with each step in the process so you can actively participate in your child's education plan.

- 1) Pre-referral – Before you can begin creating an IEP, a child's teacher must start a pre-referral process to identify ways in which to modify or supplement instruction techniques with the hope of keeping a child in general education classes if special education is not needed. Teachers may try to identify developmental or behavioral issues that may be getting in the way of a child's learning which can include consultation from specialists. If a child is still unable to participate effectively in general education, an IEP referral process is started.
- 2) Referral – The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 has a Child Find mandate. Child Find refers to the requirement for school districts to actively identify and locate children with disabilities. Referrals for special education can come from parents, doctors, nurses, day care professionals and educational institutions. Often, younger children get referrals for severe or obvious disabilities, while older children may get a referral for learning or behavioral issues. As a parent, if you think your child may need special education services, you can request an evaluation at any time.
- 3) Evaluation – To determine whether a child actually needs special education supports,

evaluations are conducted by specialists, and information is collected from a child's family and doctor. Formal psychological assessments may be used for this purpose as well as behavioral data through observation and interviews. The information gathered at this stage determines if a child needs supplemental support for their education. Please note that no assessments can be completed without parental consent. While some parents may opt to conduct an independent assessment at their own expense, the school district still may reserve the right to conduct their own assessment. Without an agreed upon assessment platform, the child may not be diagnosed appropriately to receive the necessary support.

- 4) Eligibility – At this stage, the IEP committee confirms that special education is required, and also decides what types of special education and/or related services will work best for the child. If a child is considered ineligible, the family will not be able to move forward with the IEP process without an appeal. Once a child is determined to be eligible for an IEP, an IEP meeting must be held within 30 days. A child with special needs may require additional services such as:

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

IEP Meeting and Documentation - An IEP is a document that is written by a team of people involved in a child's education. Authoring the document is the primary responsibility of a child's teacher, but it includes information from parents and others support professionals involved with the child's educational plan. This IEP meeting itself is required to have all relevant professionals in attendance which could include specific related services professionals such as an occupational therapist, speech language

pathologist or psychologist. To initiate an IEP meeting, a school must inform a child's parents 10 days prior to holding the meeting. During an IEP meeting, you can expect to review your child's assessments, provide your input on what type of education and supplemental services you think would most benefit your child, discuss any special factors such as behavior, language proficiency (if English is not a primary language), and other special needs, and get a clear sense of how your child will be assessed and evaluated from time to time. The body of the IEP is focused on a collection of specific goals which are used to track developmental progress across all areas of need.

An IEP meeting is attended by the following people:

- Parents
- Child (depending on age)
- General education teacher
- Special education teacher
- Related Services Team which includes therapists and psychologists
- Others that the parents or school wish to invite
- Representatives from transition service agencies (generally for children 14 and above)

Creating a Strong IEP

- a) To make the most of your meeting, you should be well prepared to talk about your child's strengths, behaviors and needs. Although you may want your child to receive special education supports, you may also want to consider ways of including your child in activities with children who do not have special needs. Many school districts have established programs for inclusion which are often incorporated in less academic settings such as physical education and creative arts classes. With a major focus of the IEP to reduce dependency on special needs supports over time, there should always be a discussion about identifying a pathway to a mainstream experience, this is referred to as a Least Restrictive Environment.
- b) A good IEP is individualized to fit the specific needs that your child has. All IEP goals should be measurable and meaningful, part of the child's natural day, and appropriate for your child's grade and age level.
- c) During the meeting, talk about what and how other students will be informed about your child's disability and request it be added to the IEP notes to ensure that everyone is on the same page. Establishing classroom sensitivity to individuals with varying learning

abilities is important for creating a supportive environment for overcoming developmental challenges. Discussion of appropriate social emotional strategies is critical in building peer learning.

- d) You also want to be sure that your child will be appropriately challenged and have new things to learn, and that the school continues to have high expectations for your child's performance. A lack of academic challenge could result in adverse behavior.
 - e) An IEP should also include information about any assistance your child may need getting to and from school and at school. For example, does your child need help getting on and off the bus?
 - f) Talk about other modifications or accommodations your child may need. For example, your child may need a special type of desk, or a quiet place to work, or take home tests versus timed tests. Consider what types of assistive technology your child needs, such as visual icons, communication devices, computers, tablets, wheelchairs etc.
 - g) You should also discuss behavior, and how behavior will be managed. Be clear about what works best for your child, and what are the acceptable and unacceptable forms of discipline. If behavior is a concern, be sure to discuss communication strategies between the school and home so that any changes or concerns in behavior are readily exchanged.
- 5) IEP Implementation – Once an IEP has been created, a child will begin to receive special education services. If major changes need to be made to the IEP, a child's parents need to be informed in writing, and another IEP meeting may be required. Generally, this is not necessary, but it can happen. If you disagree with the services being provided and a suitable compromise cannot be attained with the IEP team, you can enter a mediation process.
- 6) Evaluation and Reviews – IDEA requires schools to evaluate and document a child's progress regularly. Usually an IEP is reviewed and updated annually. Every three years a student is fully re-assessed with formal evaluation in a relevant categories. You can also request to have a review meeting at any time if you feel that something has changed or is not working for your child.

Organizing Relevant Materials

One of the challenges that families face when creating and keeping an IEP is keeping track of all the paper work it involves. It may be helpful for you to use a Master Binder to track all your child's IEP related information. You can use this file to store all information, drafts, assessments and updates about your child related to the IEP process. It is very important to date each document you receive and send so that you have the latest version of it to work with. You should also track any requests to change a child's IEP. You can create an index table with the action, date, person responsible and notes at the front of the binder, and fill this index table by hand each time you add a document to the binder. It is best to file all documents chronologically, to avoid confusion about where to find a particular letter. Dating and adding details to the index table will allow you to quickly access this information whenever you need it. You can also create a list of all the contacts you work with, together with their name, designation, role and contact information. This will make it easier for you to communicate with them.

Conclusion

The IEP process is a multi-step complex process that takes time and diligence. This module is only an introduction and there are many other factors that affect the outcome of an IEP. For this reason, it is recommended that you do further research on the topic to fully understand the many aspects of creating this important document. The IEP process may also vary from state to state depending on state laws and requirements. We have listed a few additional resources here for you to consider. Thank you for taking the time to review this module today.

Additional Resources

<http://www.wrightslaw.com/info/iep/index.htm>

<http://www2.ed.gov/parents/needs/speced/iepguide/index.html>