



PUBLIC SPECIAL EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN WITH AUTISM: Five Things Parents Should Know

Children with autism learn differently than their peers. It's no surprise their education needs are unique. Use this guide to better understand special education services for your child with diagnosed autism or autism symptoms, and how to navigate getting the support they need through the public school system.

1. **Guaranteed public education to meet their needs**

Every child is *guaranteed a free and appropriate public education to meet their individual needs in all 50 states* through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Services are delivered at no cost to families and must be designed to address the student's unique, individual needs in an environment that allows them to make educational progress.



2. **Special education for children under age 3**

The IDEA provides states with federal grants to administer Early Intervention (EI) programs. If your child is under age 3 and has developmental delays or a physical or mental condition likely to cause a developmental delay, they're eligible for free EI services. These services vary widely from state to state but may include interventions like applied behavior analysis (ABA), speech or language therapy, occupational therapy, or physical therapy. They may even include caregiver training and support to assist your family and reinforce your child's EI learning at home.

Reach out to your state's EI program to ask for an assessment. They can provide an assessment and recommend support services if your child is eligible. You can find your state's EI contact information at www.cdc.gov/act-early/early-intervention/contact-information-by-state.html.

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3. Special education for children 3 and older

The legal responsibility for providing evaluation and education support services for children with disabilities transitions to the local public school district at age 3. At this point, you can reach out to your local public school and request a special education evaluation. School districts are a great resource and can provide support services even if your child is enrolled elsewhere—like in a private school—or before they're enrolled for kindergarten. You don't need a formal medical diagnosis of autism or other disability to be evaluated for special education services through the public school system.

4. What's involved with a special education evaluation, and what should we do in the meantime?

Call your local public school to request a special education evaluation. Your school district will likely require multiple assessments as part of the evaluation, like unstructured observations, developmental evaluations, speech-language assessments, parent interviews, behavior evaluations, or more. While the detailed information you gain is critical in planning services for your child, the waiting can be frustrating. Rest assured, however, there are strict timelines the school district is required to follow so you will not be waiting too long!

In the meantime, you don't have to wait idle. Educate yourself more on your child's symptoms and look into autism interventions and therapies, like ABA, that can be delivered concurrently through providers outside of the school system. Learn more about the autism services covered by your medical insurance or Medicaid. Time is precious, and early intervention can help children with autism symptoms better close developmental gaps with their peers.

5. What is an IEP?

After the special education evaluation, if your child is determined to have a qualifying disability and is eligible for special education services, you will work collaboratively with the school to develop their Individualized Education Program (IEP). An IEP is your child's blueprint for their special education experience and outlines individualized services to meet their unique needs. At a minimum, your child's IEP core team will include you and your child, any service providers (like behavior specialists, speech therapists, etc.), a general education teacher, a special education teacher, and a school administrator. Often others are involved in IEP meetings, too, like home or community-based therapists, family or friend advocates, or other school district staff. Reviewed and revised annually, an IEP should:

- » **Set goals:** Create clear, measurable annual learning targets for your child, along with periodic short-term objectives.
- » **Define services:** List exact special education services, like specialized academic instruction, behavior support services, or speech or physical therapy, to be provided by the school.
- » **Provide accommodations:** Outline classroom changes or test aids, like extra time or quiet spaces, to remove learning barriers.
- » **Ensure legal rights:** Act as a binding contract that holds the school district accountable for delivering the promised support.
- » **Track progress:** Monitor progress and any applicable barriers and adjust support strategies as needed.

