

PAGE 1: UNDERSTANDING SPECIAL EDUCATION

Navigating Special Education Services at Your Child's School

Understand the process. Explore your options. Prepare for the next step.

● What is special education?

Special education refers to instruction designed to meet the individual needs of eligible students with disabilities. Depending on the student's needs, services may include specialized instruction, speech-language services, occupational therapy, behavioral supports, or other related services.

In U.S. public schools, two important federal laws are the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)** and **Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act**.

● Understanding IEPs and Section 504 plans

● Individualized Education Program (IEP)	◆ Section 504 plan
An IEP is a written plan for a student who qualifies for special education under IDEA.	A Section 504 plan documents services, accommodations, or other supports needed for a qualifying student with a disability to access education. A student may qualify under Section 504 without qualifying for an IEP.
It describes the student's educational needs, annual goals, specialized instruction, related services, and other required supports.	Examples of supports may include changes to classroom arrangements, accessible materials, communication supports, or additional time when individually appropriate.

Important: Eligibility and supports are determined through the applicable evaluation process. A diagnosis alone does not automatically establish eligibility for a particular plan or service.

● How does the process generally work?

- 1 Identify a concern or need.**
A parent, caregiver, or school professional may recognize that a student could benefit from an evaluation or additional support.
- 2 Request or discuss an evaluation.**
Parents can request an initial IDEA evaluation through the public school system. Schools also have independent responsibilities to identify and evaluate students who may have disabilities.
- 3 Review evaluation information.**
Qualified school personnel review relevant information to determine eligibility and educational needs. Parents have participation rights in the IDEA process.
- 4 Discuss possible supports.**
Depending on eligibility, a student may receive an IEP, Section 504 services or accommodations, or other available school supports.
- 5 Review progress and changing needs.**
IEPs must be reviewed at least annually. Families can communicate concerns, ask questions, and participate in relevant planning.

● What should families know?

- Parents have rights regarding participation, educational records, and procedural protections under IDEA.
- For IDEA initial evaluations, the federal timeline is generally 60 days after parental consent unless a state establishes its own timeframe; exceptions apply.
- Schools must provide appropriate notice and information about IDEA procedural safeguards.
- Public and privately enrolled students may have different service entitlements under IDEA.

Remember: Each child's educational needs and circumstances are different. Understanding the available processes can help families participate in decisions.



My Family Action Plan

Use this worksheet to organize information and prepare for conversations with your child's school.

1 What would I like to understand or discuss?

My child's strengths and interests:

Questions, observations, or concerns:

2 Where am I in the process?

Check any that apply:

- ☐ I am gathering information.
- ☐ I want to ask about an evaluation.
- ☐ An evaluation is being planned or completed.
- ☐ I have questions about an IEP.
- ☐ I have questions about Section 504.
- ☐ I would like to discuss existing supports or progress.
- ☐ I am unsure where to begin.

3 Questions I may want to ask

- ☐ What information is used to determine eligibility?
- ☐ What supports are currently available?
- ☐ How will my child's progress be reviewed?
- ☐ What is the next step, and what timeline applies?
- ☐ Who should I contact with additional questions?

My additional questions:

4 My next step

Person or department to contact:

Action I plan to take:

Date contacted:

Follow-up date:

Notes:

Learn more from trusted sources

U.S. Department of Education — IDEA Parents & Families

<https://sites.ed.gov/idea/parents-families/>

U.S. Department of Education — Section 504

<https://www.ed.gov/laws-and-policy/individuals-disabilities/section-504>

IDEA — Initial Evaluation Requirements

<https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/d/300.301>

Explore further with OH FAMILY

Visit

<https://www.ohfamilyinc.org>

and explore the Disability Navigator for additional guidance and resources.

About this guide

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Disclosure: This guide provides general educational information and is not individualized legal or educational advice. Federal protections provide a national foundation, but state requirements, school procedures, evaluation timelines, and available services may vary. Private school arrangements may have different requirements. Consult official education agencies or qualified professionals for guidance specific to your circumstances.