

K12 ACADEMICS — REFERENCE SERIES

The Special Education Journey

From first concern to transition — a step-by-step map of the IEP process, so no family has to navigate special education in the dark.



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2026 EDITION

The world's largest education resource.

Online since 2004, K12 Academics has helped millions of families, students and educators **find the right school, college, camp, business and program in their community** — a search engine, a community, and a resource in one.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE IN THIS

The special-education process can feel like a maze of meetings and acronyms. This guide walks the whole journey in **ten clear steps**, each with the timelines, your move, and a practical tip. Pair it with our **Parent's Rights Handbook** for the legal rights behind every step.

General information, not legal advice. Timelines and procedures vary by state — confirm specifics with your school district and your state's Parent Training & Information Center.

Recognizing the Signs

WHAT HAPPENS

The journey often begins when a parent or teacher notices a child struggling — academically, with attention, behavior, speech, motor skills, or social-emotional growth — well beyond the usual ups and downs.

BY THE NUMBERS

Birth–21

the IDEA eligibility span

Parent or school

either can raise concerns

No diagnosis needed

to ask for help

YOUR MOVE

Write down specific concerns with **examples and dates**. You don't need a medical diagnosis to request an evaluation.

HELPFUL TIP

Early intervention (birth–3) and preschool special education exist too – you don't have to wait for 'school age.'

Requesting an Evaluation

WHAT HAPPENS

You (or the school) formally request a special-education evaluation. This is the official start of the process — and it should always be **in writing**.

BY THE NUMBERS

In writing

dated, to the school

Free

evaluations cost nothing

Consent

you sign to begin

YOUR MOVE

Send a **dated written request** to the principal or special-education director and keep a copy — the legal timeline starts at your consent.

HELPFUL TIP

If the school declines to evaluate, it must give you **written notice** explaining why — and you can formally challenge that decision.

The Evaluation

WHAT HAPPENS

A team assesses your child across **every area of suspected disability** — cognitive, academic, speech, motor, behavioral, social — using multiple tools, never a single test.

BY THE NUMBERS

60 days

typical completion window

Many areas

no one test decides

Your input

counts as real data

YOUR MOVE

Share your observations, any outside reports, and medical information — **your knowledge of your child is part of the evaluation.**

HELPFUL TIP

Disagree with the results? You can request an **Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE)**, often at public expense.

The Eligibility Meeting

WHAT HAPPENS

The team meets to decide two things: does your child have a disability under one of IDEA's categories, **and** does that disability mean they need special education?

BY THE NUMBERS

13 categories

under federal IDEA

Two-part test

disability + need

Team decision

you are on the team

YOUR MOVE

Ask **which category and why**. Eligibility requires both a qualifying disability and clear evidence it affects learning.

HELPFUL TIP

Not eligible for an IEP? A **504 Plan** can still provide accommodations for a disability — ask about it before you leave.

Building the IEP

WHAT HAPPENS

If eligible, the team writes the **Individualized Education Program** — measurable goals, the services and accommodations to reach them, and how progress will be tracked.

BY THE NUMBERS

Measurable goals

specific and trackable

Services named

hours and providers

You co-author

an equal team member

YOUR MOVE

Bring your priorities in writing, make sure every goal is **specific and measurable**, and confirm you understand each service listed.

HELPFUL TIP

You don't have to sign on the spot — you can take the draft home, review it, and request changes before agreeing.

Services & Placement

WHAT HAPPENS

The IEP specifies the **services** (specialized instruction, speech, OT/PT, counseling) and the **placement** — in the Least Restrictive Environment right for your child.

BY THE NUMBERS

LRE

with peers where possible

Related services

speech, OT, PT, counseling

A continuum

inclusion to specialized

YOUR MOVE

Ask how much time is in general education vs. pull-out, and how each **related service** connects to a specific goal.

HELPFUL TIP

Placement follows the IEP, not the other way around — the team decides setting *after* writing the goals and services.

Putting It Into Practice

WHAT HAPPENS

The IEP goes live. Teachers and providers deliver the services as written, and your child's progress is tracked against the measurable goals.

BY THE NUMBERS

Progress reports

as often as report cards

A case manager

your main point of contact

Data-driven

goals actively monitored

YOUR MOVE

Get the **case manager's name**, ask for progress data regularly, and watch whether goals are actually being met.

HELPFUL TIP

If services aren't happening as written, that's a **compliance issue** — document it and raise it in writing right away.

Annual Review & Re-Evaluation

WHAT HAPPENS

The IEP is reviewed at least **once a year** to update goals and services, and your child is fully re-evaluated at least **every three years**.

BY THE NUMBERS

Annual

IEP reviewed yearly

3 years

full re-evaluation cycle

Any time

you can call a meeting

YOUR MOVE

Prepare for the annual meeting with examples of progress — and remember you can request an IEP meeting **any time**, not just yearly.

HELPFUL TIP

Bring **data**, not just impressions — concrete examples of progress (or its absence) drive the whole conversation.

Resolving Disagreements

WHAT HAPPENS

When you and the school don't agree, IDEA gives you a ladder of **formal options** — from an informal conversation all the way to a legal hearing.

BY THE NUMBERS

Mediation

free, voluntary, neutral

State complaint

filed with the state

Due process

a formal hearing

YOUR MOVE

Escalate in order: **talk** → **mediation** → **state complaint** → **due process** — and document every step along the way.

HELPFUL TIP

Your state's **Parent Training & Information Center** offers free, expert help at every stage — you don't have to do this alone.

Planning the Transition

WHAT HAPPENS

By age **16** (younger in many states), the IEP must include a **transition plan** toward life after high school — college, career, or independent living.

BY THE NUMBERS

By age 16

transition planning begins

Student-led

their goals lead

Life after HS

college, career, living

YOUR MOVE

Center your child's **own goals**, and connect early with vocational rehabilitation and adult-services agencies.

HELPFUL TIP

At the **age of majority** (usually 18), educational rights transfer to the student — plan together for that shift in advance.

The 13 IDEA Categories

To qualify for an IEP, a child must have a disability that falls under one of these **13 federal categories** — *and* need special education because of it.

1 Specific Learning Disability

2 Speech or Language Impairment

3 Other Health Impairment

4 Autism

5 Intellectual Disability

6 Emotional Disturbance

7 Developmental Delay

8 Multiple Disabilities

9 Hearing Impairment

10 Orthopedic Impairment

11 Visual Impairment

12 Deaf-Blindness

13 Traumatic Brain Injury

Two-part test: a category alone isn't enough — the disability must also **adversely affect educational performance** and require specialized instruction.

EVERY CHILD, SUPPORTED

Find Your Community.

You don't have to navigate this alone. Explore our **Parent's Rights Handbook**, special-education guides, and school directories — among **1,297 free guides** at our resource library.

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