

What is an IEP?

A federal law called the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#) (IDEA) requires that public schools create an IEP for every child receiving [special education](#) services. Kids from age 3 through high school graduation or a maximum age of 22 (whichever comes first) may be eligible for an IEP.

The IEP is meant to address each child's unique learning issues and include specific educational goals. It is a legally binding document. The school must provide everything it promises in the IEP.

Here's a quick look at what an IEP must include, by law:

- A statement of your child's present level of performance (PLOP)—this is how your child is doing in school now
- Your child's annual educational goals
- Special education supports and services that the school will provide to help your child reach goals
- [Modifications](#) and [accommodations](#) the school will provide to help your child make progress
- Accommodations your child will be allowed when taking standardized tests
- How and when the school will measure your child's progress toward annual goals
- Transition planning that prepares teens for life after high school

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Who qualifies for an IEP?

Your child struggles in math class, and the teacher's interventions—extra help after school, a chance to correct his mistakes—don't help. A scenario like this doesn't make your child [eligible for an IEP](#). Two things must happen before a child can get special education services.

1. An evaluation. Parents, teachers, a counselor, a doctor or anyone else who suspects a child is struggling can [request an evaluation](#). The school psychologist and other professionals may give your child various tests. They also may observe your child in the classroom.

Keep in mind that a physician or another medical professional—not the school—diagnose medical conditions, including [ADHD](#). School evaluators don't offer "diagnoses." Find out more about the [comprehensive evaluation process](#).

2. A decision. The IEP team, which includes parents and school officials, decides whether or not your child needs special education services in order to learn the [general education curriculum](#). IDEA says that having [any of 13 disabilities](#) may qualify a child for special

education. The school and parents review the evaluation and determine whether the results show that your child needs services and supports.

If the IEP team agrees that your child needs services, then the next step is to create an IEP. If your child is found ineligible, [you can still try to get services](#) for your child. For instance, you might pursue a [504 plan](#).

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What does an IEP contain?

IEPs are designed to meet kids' unique needs. That means that every IEP will look different. But by law, all IEPs must contain the following elements:

Your child's present level of educational performance (PLOP): This is a thorough description of your child's current abilities, skills, weaknesses and strengths. It's the part of the IEP that explains how your child's learning issues affect his ability to learn the general education curriculum. [PLOP](#) (also sometimes called PLP or PLAAFP) includes details on how your child handles academic subjects and everyday or "functional" activities, like socializing.

PLOP should be based on teacher observations *and* objective data, like test results. It's important that PLOP is not simply copied "as is" from one year's IEP to the next. Each year your child matures and masters skills. And each year the work becomes more challenging. So his performance and needs will change.

The results of your child's evaluations and tests: This should include district-wide and state assessments.

Special education and [related services](#) to be provided: The IEP spells out what kinds of support and services your child will receive. If your child is going to have [speech therapy](#), for instance, it will say how many minutes a week he will receive this therapy.

Accommodations and modifications: These help your child learn the general education curriculum. [Accommodations](#) are changes in *how* a child shows what he has learned. They can help your child work around his learning issues. For example, he may be given extra time on tests.

[Modifications](#) are changes in *what* is taught to or expected of a student. Some IEPs have what's called "modified promotional criteria." This defines the percentage of grade-level expectations a child must meet to move on to the next grade.

Supplementary aids and services: These are supports to help a child learn in the general education classroom. They might include a one-on-one aide, highlighted classroom notes, equipment or [assistive technology](#), such as software.

Annual educational goals: These should be realistic, achievable and measurable. The IEP lists the academic and [functional skills](#) that the IEP team thinks your child can achieve

by the end of the year. [Annual educational goals](#) should help your child participate in the general education classroom.

If your child has multiple or severe disabilities, the law requires that the IEP list short-term goals. These are also called objectives or benchmarks.

A description of how your child's progress will be measured and reported to you: By law, the IEP must explain how the school will track your child's progress toward goals. And it must describe how the school will share those results with you.

For instance, one goal might be that your child be able to read at a third-grade level. The IEP will specify how that will be tracked—informal and formal assessments, for instance—and how often those results will be reported to you. If these interim reports show that your child's progress has stalled, you and the IEP team may discuss new interventions.

An explanation of how much your child will participate in general education classes and extracurricular activities: Participation at the fullest level possible is required by law. This is called the [least restrictive environment](#).

The date the IEP will go into effect: Many states have formal timelines for this.

Depending on your child's age and situation, his IEP might also include:

A [transition plan](#): This kicks in when your child turns 16. [Transition planning](#) includes services and support to help a student graduate from high school and achieve post-high school goals.

Extended school year services: Some students receive special education services outside of the regular school year, such as during the summer or, less commonly, during extended breaks like winter break.

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Who produces an IEP?

Your child's [IEP team](#) creates the IEP. Each person on the team plays an important role. By the law, the team includes:

- **You, the student's parent(s).** IDEA gives parents the legal right to participate in all of their child's IEP meetings. As the parent, you're a full and equal member of the team. After all, you probably know your child's strengths and struggles better than anyone else. Your concerns and suggestions about his education are invaluable.
- At least one of your child's **general education teachers**.
- At least one **special education teacher** or other special education provider.
- A **school district representative** knowledgeable about both general education and special education. This person also should have the power to make decisions that involve school

resources. In other words, if the school rep thinks your child should be given speech therapy, she should have the power to make that happen.

- A **school psychologist or other specialist** who can interpret the student’s evaluation and test results.
- When **your child** turns 16, he’ll be expected to participate as a member of his IEP team and help develop a transition plan. A representative from an outside agency, such as a post–high school vocational program, may join meetings.

You also have the right to invite others to attend your child’s IEP meeting. Be sure to send the school advance written notice of additional attendees. You may find it helpful to invite:

- A **professional you’ve hired**, who has knowledge or expertise about your child. Examples: a private tutor or health-care professional (such as a [speech-language pathologist](#)).
- A **friend** to serve as an “extra pair of ears” or to take notes for you.
- A **translator**, if you’re deaf or don’t speak or read English fluently. You may ask the school to provide a translator. IDEA requires that school districts do their best to accommodate parents who need this service.
- **Your child.** If your child is young, you may want to talk this over with the IEP team. Consider your child’s age, how his condition affects him, his level of maturity and his ability to understand the information discussed during an IEP meeting.

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What kinds of goals are in IEPs?

The law requires that every IEP include [annual educational goals](#) for the student. IEP goals need to be specific, realistic and measurable. This is very important because it’s how you and the team can tell if your child is making good progress.

“Jake will improve his reading skills” is *not* a specific or measurable goal. How do you measure his improvement? How much improvement is enough?

Here’s an example of how to make a specific, realistic and measurable goal: “Given a second-grade book, Jake will be able to read a passage orally at 110-130 wpm (words per minute) with random errors.”

The IEP team creates the goals in the meeting. When evaluating goals, you discuss:

- **Measurements showing your child’s progress toward goals.** Standardized tests and curriculum-based measurements (CBM) are two objective ways to measure progress. CBM involves teachers doing frequent screenings—brief tests—to determine how well a student is progressing. If the IEP goals are written in a specific and measurable way, this information will give you a good picture of how your child is doing.

- **When progress toward goals will be reported to you.** This should be done regularly—not just once a year. You'll typically be sent a report on progress toward goals when report cards are issued.

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What happens at IEP meetings?

The law requires the IEP team to review the IEP at least once a year. But the IEP team can meet any time you or the school want a meeting. Many teams meet more often than once a year.

The IEP meeting is key to making sure your child's IEP is working for him. It gives you a chance to discuss with teachers your child's weaknesses and strengths. If your child didn't meet any or all of his goals that quarter, you can hammer out new ways to help your child. That may mean modifying the goal and adjusting expectations. Or it could mean giving your child more or different kinds of services and support.

The IEP meeting is when you, teachers and the school give and get input on how your child is doing. You'll discuss what's working, what needs to change, and whether your child is catching up or falling further behind. Your child's feelings and motivations should be included in the conversation, whether or not he attends the IEP meeting.

Here are some other key things you and rest of the team may discuss during the annual [IEP review meeting](#):

- **Your child's strengths.** Share any success your child has had outside of school. Let's say your child struggles with attention issues and social skills. His IEP team will want to know that he finds it easier to follow directions from his soccer coach and is better at cooperating with teammates.
- **Your concerns and suggestions for improving your child's education.** The meeting is a good time to share where you still see your child struggling. Does he still have a tough time spelling? Is he constantly losing assignments? If you have any ideas for making these tasks easier for him, you may want to share them.
- **How well modifications and accommodations (such as [assistive technology](#)) are helping.** If they aren't helping your child as expected, the team can discuss upgrading, discontinuing or replacing them. The team can also consider any new instruction and technology tools that might be right for your child.
- **The results of your child's first or most recent evaluation,** if there is one. Your child should be evaluated every three years. The school psychologist or professional conducting the evaluation will usually explain the results at the IEP meeting.

During the meeting, the team leader will write a statement about your child's present level of academic and functional performance (PLOP) and goals. The statement is based on what you and the team have discussed in the meeting. The team leader will also document any changes to the IEP that the team—including you—have agreed to.

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How does an IEP go into effect?

The school can't start providing special education services until you give your permission, which the law refers to as "consent." You may be asked at the end of the IEP meeting to give your consent to the proposed IEP. (Some states require parents to give written consent, like a signature. Some states don't.)

If you don't feel comfortable making a final decision on the spot, you have the right to take the IEP home to review it. Some schools mail a copy of the proposed IEP to you soon after the meeting and ask for your signature. Make sure to [double-check everything in it before signing](#).

If you aren't fully satisfied with the proposed IEP, you have a few options:

- **You can accept only parts of the proposed IEP.** Say which items you agree to and which items you disagree with, or dispute. Explain your disagreement in writing and ask for your objections to be included in the IEP. The IEP team will include your objections as an addendum to the IEP document. Only the parts of the IEP you agree to will be implemented.
- **Refuse the entire proposed IEP.** Note your disagreement on the IEP form. If you're asked to sign the IEP to indicate your attendance at the IEP meeting, be sure your signature clearly indicates only your attendance not your consent for the proposed IEP.
- **Ask for another meeting to discuss your concerns.** You have the legal right to call an IEP team meeting at any time. If you have a good relationship with the other members of the IEP team, you can probably work things out.

It's also important to note that when a school wants to change your child's IEP, the school has to give you what's called "[prior written notice](#)." For example, if the school wants to reduce your child's services, add to them or change them in any way, it has to tell you ahead of time in writing. Prior written notice gives parents a chance to withdraw their consent and look for ways to resolve the dispute with the school.

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What if you have a dispute?

There may be a time when you and the school don't see eye to eye and can't talk through your differences. If that happens, IDEA gives parents [several options](#).

Here are steps you can take, usually in the order shown:

1. Ask for a mediation session. If the school doesn't automatically offer a mediation session, you can request one. (Be sure to do so in writing.) In this meeting, a mediator helps each party express their positions and understand those of the other parties. The mediator manages the discussion and helps the group reach an agreement. The mediator does not recommend solutions or take sides.

2. File a [due process complaint](#). If you're not satisfied with the results of the mediation, you can request a [due process hearing](#) by writing an official letter, also called a "complaint." A [due process hearing](#) is a formal meeting where parents and school officials present arguments and evidence to a hearing officer or administrative law judge. This person is *not* an employee of the school district.

The parents and the district are allowed to bring attorneys and present evidence. (Each state has different procedures; consult your state department of education to find out how to file this complaint and what to include in it.)

3. Hold a [resolution session](#). Before the due process hearing, the school district is required to hold what's called a [resolution session](#). This is a meeting between you, key members of the IEP team and someone authorized to make decisions for the district. You may bring an attorney (at your own expense) but you're not required to. The school district can only bring an attorney if you do.

4. File a civil lawsuit. This is the next option if you aren't satisfied with the result of the due process hearing. It's the most extreme option available to parents. It requires that parents hire an attorney and go through extensive legal proceedings.

5. When an agreement is reached, get it in writing. However you reach an agreement—during mediation, a resolution session or civil suit—you need a copy of it in writing. In fact, any changes made to your child's IEP and the steps the school will take need to be documented.

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Do private schools have IEPs?

Private schools aren't required by law to provide special education services. If your child is in a [private school](#), you can ask the public school district to evaluate your child for special education services. If the district agrees to your request, the evaluation will be conducted at no cost to you.

IDEA requires school districts to set aside some public funding to provide [special education services to students in private school](#). But this funding is limited. If your child's school agrees to work with the district, they may work together to create what's called a "services plan." This plan is likely to provide fewer services than your child would receive in a public school.

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What can make the journey easier?

After you agree to your child's IEP and have received a copy, it may be tempting to file it away and forget it. But paying attention will help ensure your child gets the services promised. Since several people are responsible for carrying out the IEP, sometimes the details can be overlooked.

- **Contact the IEP team leader when you have concerns.** If nobody on the team can address your concerns, you can contact the district special education director. If you don't get answers and action, request an IEP meeting. You *don't* have to wait for the annual IEP meeting.
- **Be sure to refer to the IEP during your regular parent-teacher conferences.** This is a chance to ask the teacher if the IEP is being followed. You can also express any concerns you have based on [what you're observing](#) in your child and his schoolwork.
- **Above all, remember that the IEP needs to reflect your child's current needs.** Your child is going to progress in school, master skills, acquire knowledge—and perhaps run into new challenges. That's why it's important for his IEP to evolve. It should document what he's mastered and should list new goals and accommodations.
- **Connect with other parents** who have experience with IEPs. Parents in our [online community](#) can be a source of support, understanding and parent-tested advice.

For more practical tips, try using our handy [IEP meeting toolkit](#) and other IEP resources to help you prepare for every IEP meeting. You can also [turn to our experts](#) for advice on how to understand and make the most of your child's IEP.

Source: <https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/special-services/ieps/understanding-individualized-education-programs>