



Autism Society
Inland Empire

TIPS & RESOURCES



AN INTRODUCTION TO
THE SPECIAL
EDUCATION PROCESS

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Introduction

When your child is first diagnosed with Autism, it can feel overwhelming. You may feel a mix of relief, worry, and confusion at the same time. One of the best things you can do is learn about the special education process.

Learning about special education helps you know what to do, what services your child might get, and how to make sure they get the right support to succeed in school. Special education isn't just about learning—it also helps your child build communication skills, social skills, and confidence. This support can start as early as age 3.

Knowing how it works gives you a clear path:

- How to ask for an evaluation.
- What is an IEP? (Individualized Education Program)
- What are your rights as a parent?

The sooner support starts, the better. Learning about special education helps you speak up and work with the school.

If you need help, the Autism Society Inland Empire is here for you. You can contact us by phone or email for support.

What Is Special Education

If your child has a disability and is having a hard time in school, they may qualify for special education services, and the good news is, these services are completely free.

Many people think special education means being pulled out of class or placed in a different classroom setting. But that's not always the case! Special education is not a place — it's a set of supports and services that help your child learn and succeed in school. These supports are based on a federal law called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and they're also protected by California law.

Where and How Special Education Can Happen:

- In the classroom with extra support
- In small groups with a specialist
- Through therapy or services outside the classroom
- With tools and strategies tailored to your child's needs

The goal is to help your child learn with their peers as much as possible—this is called the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).

Special Education Supports Your Child By:

- Providing personalized instruction
- Free services through your school
- Helping your child grow academically
- Meeting unique learning needs

Special education is a legal right. It's protected by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) – a federal law - and the California Education Code, which are state-specific rules that support IDEA. These laws make sure your child gets the help they need to thrive.

Asking for an Assessment

Schools have their own eligibility guidelines to determine if a student qualifies for special education services. If you have a medical diagnosis, you can choose to share the reports with the school or not.

What Schools Are Legally Required to Do:

- Monitor your child's progress in school
- Assess all areas where there may be concerns
- Determine eligibility for special education based on how challenges affect learning

Even if a doctor hasn't diagnosed your child, the school is still required to evaluate if there are signs your child may need extra support. The goal is to make sure every child gets the help they need to succeed in school.

To qualify for special education, two things must be true:

1. Your child has a disability (this could be learning, speech, emotional, behavioral, or physical).
2. That disability affects their ability to learn in a general education classroom without support.

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and California law, you have the right to:

- Request an Evaluation: You can ask the school in writing to assess your child for special education.
- Assessment Plan: The school must give you a plan within 15 calendar days (excluding long breaks).
- Parental Consent: You have at least 15 days to review and sign. Testing can't start without your approval.
- Team Participation: You're part of the decision-making team for your child's education.
- No Diagnosis Needed: Your child can qualify for services even without a medical diagnosis.

Where Do I Submit the Request?

If your child is already enrolled in school:

Hand your written request to the front office or your child's teacher. Ask for a copy that's stamped and initialed by the person who received it. This helps track the date it was submitted.

If your child is not yet enrolled:

Visit your local school district's Special Education Department. They'll help you start the process and guide you to the next steps.

The following is optional: parent(s) and/or guardian(s) can submit a copy of their child's medical diagnosis provided by their doctor. However, a simple request from parent(s) and/or guardian(s) with educational rights should suffice. A verbal request can also be made, but it is not recommended. We encourage parents to put everything in writing.

Sample Request for IEP Evaluation

A sample letter is provided below to assist parents in requesting an evaluation.

To Whom It May Concern,

I am writing to formally request an Individualized Education Program (IEP) assessment for my child, **[Student's Full Name]**, who is currently enrolled at **[School Name]**. As a concerned parent, I believe that an IEP assessment is necessary to address my child's unique learning needs.

I have observed that **[Student's Full Name]** exhibited challenges, particularly in the following areas:

- **[Describe specific academic difficulties (e.g., reading, writing, math)]**
- **[Mention any behavioral or social-emotional concerns.]**
- **[Highlight any physical or sensory issues that impact learning.]**

I kindly request that the school district conduct a comprehensive assessment to determine **[Student's Full Name]**'s eligibility for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The assessment should cover all relevant domains, including academic, behavioral, and social-emotional functioning.

Please consider this letter as an official request for an IEP assessment. I understand that the process involves collaboration between educators, parents, and other professionals. I am committed to actively participating in the assessment process and providing any necessary information to support it.

I appreciate your attention to this matter and look forward to receiving further instructions regarding the assessment timeline and procedures. If you require any additional documentation or have questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at **[Your Contact Information]**.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this request.

Sincerely,

[Your Full Name]

[Your Contact Information]

What If the School Refuses to Assess Your Child?

If you've submitted a written request outlining your concerns, the school may refer your child to a Student Study Team (SST) instead of starting a formal evaluation. These teams—sometimes called STS or RTI—include teachers who suggest classroom strategies like:

- Extra breaks
- Peer support
- Help with organization
- Response to Intervention (RTI)
- Preferential seating

These supports aim to help your child succeed in the least restrictive environment, meaning general education settings whenever possible.

Important Legal Protections

Schools cannot delay or deny an evaluation just by referring to an SST. They may only refuse your request if they reasonably believe your child does not have a disability. If they refuse, they must give you a Prior Written Notice (PWN) explaining why.

Next Steps If Refused

You can challenge the decision by requesting an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE). Let the school know in writing that you plan to seek reimbursement if your child is later found eligible.

The Evaluation Process

Assessment Period: Once you sign and return the plan, the school has 60 calendar days (not including long school breaks) to complete the evaluation and hold an IEP meeting to review the results.

The Evaluation May Include:

Classroom Observations

- A specialist may quietly observe your child in their regular classroom to see how they:
 - Pay attention
 - Follow directions
 - Interact with classmates
 - Handle transitions or challenges
- One-on-One testing with a school psychologist or specialist on tasks that look at: all areas of suspected disability (academic and functional)
- Interviews with you and your child. You'll be asked to share your observations, concerns, and your child's history. Your child may also be asked how they feel about school, what they find easy or hard, and what helps them learn.
- Input from teachers. The school will gather information from your child's current teachers and any other staff who work with them. They'll share what they've noticed and what strategies have or haven't worked.

All of this information helps the school answer two key questions:

- Does your child have a disability?
- Does that disability make it hard for them to learn in a general education classroom without support?

If the answer is yes to both, your child may qualify for special education services through an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

Eligibility Meeting

The Eligibility Meeting is a special meeting where the school team and you (the parent or guardian) come together to review the results of your child's evaluation. The goal is to decide if your child qualifies for special education services through an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

This meeting must take place within 60 calendar days after you sign the school's assessment plan (not counting long school breaks)

The meeting usually includes:

- You (the parent or guardian)
- Your child's teacher(s)
- A school psychologist
- Special education staff
- Other specialists who evaluated your child (like a speech therapist or occupational therapist)
- You can also invite someone you trust—like a friend, advocate, or family member—for support.

At the meeting, the team will:

- Go over the results of your child's assessments
- Talk about your child's strengths and challenges
- Decide if your child meets the criteria for one of the 13 disability categories under the law
- Discuss how your child's disability affects their ability to learn in a regular classroom

Many parents can find the process of reviewing the reports emotionally challenging. We recommend asking for a copy of the assessments before the meeting, so you have time to review them.

Before the Meeting

- Review the Evaluation Plan
Look over the areas the school assessed (speech, learning, behavior, etc.).
- Read Any Reports
Request copies of the evaluation results in advance of the meeting, so you have time to review them.

- **Write Down Your Observations**
Think about your child's strengths, challenges, and what you've noticed at home.
- **List Your Questions**
Prepare questions like:
 - What did the evaluations show?
 - Does my child qualify for special education?
 - What support might help my child?
- **Optional: Invite Someone for Support**
You are welcome to bring a friend, family member, or advocate to help take notes or offer support.

During the Meeting

- **Listen to the Team's Findings:** The school will explain what they learned from the evaluations.
- **Share Your Perspective:** You know your child is best, your input is essential!
- **Ask Questions:** Don't be afraid to ask for clarification or examples.
- **Discuss Eligibility:** The team will decide if your child qualifies for special education.

If your child is found eligible, the team will either start creating an IEP right away, or schedule a follow-up meeting within 30 days to develop the IEP plan

If your child is not eligible, the team will discuss alternative ways the school can support your child, such as a 504 Plan or classroom accommodation.

Although an IEP is more comprehensive, with specific educational goals and specialized instruction, a 504 Plan focuses on providing accommodations to ensure students succeed in a general education setting.

What Is an IEP?

An Individualized Education Program (IEP) is a written plan developed for each student who qualifies for special education (ages 3 to 21 years of age). It outlines your child's specific learning needs, the services the school will provide, and how progress will be measured.

Individuals who make up the IEP team are:

- You (the parent or guardian)
- You can also invite someone you trust—like a friend, advocate, or family member—for support.
- Your child's teacher(s)
- At least one general education teacher
- A school psychologist
- At least one special ed provider
- Other specialists who evaluated your child (like a speech therapist or occupational therapist)
- A Local Education Agency (LEA) representative
- An Interpreter for non-English speaking parent(s)
- The student (as appropriate) if 14+

The IEP is reviewed and updated annually to make sure it continues to meet your child's needs.

What Will Happen?

1. Review Evaluation Results. If this is your first IEP meeting, the team will go over the results of your child's assessments.
2. Discuss Eligibility. The team will decide if your child qualifies for special education services under the law.
3. Talk About Strengths and Needs. Everyone will share what your child does well and where they need extra support.
4. Ask you what your hopes are for your child.
5. Set Goals. The team (including you) will create specific, measurable goals for your child to work on during the year. This is crucial. If you do not have a goal, then you will not receive a service specifically to help your child in that area.
6. Plan Services and Supports. You'll discuss the services your child will receive (such as speech therapy or specialized instruction) and where they'll be provided.

7. Accommodation. You will discuss accommodation to help your child learn (like extra time on tests or visual supports).
8. Classroom Placement. The team will determine the most appropriate educational setting for your child, which may include placement in a general education classroom, a special education setting, or a combination of both, based on their individual needs.

You can ask questions at any time and share what you've noticed at home.
Your voice matters!

What if I disagree with the IEP?

Parents have the right to agree to some of the services and/or goals and disagree with other parts of the IEP. This section is called "Sign with Exceptions."

If a parent disagrees with some or all of the IEP, they should indicate that they do not agree with the IEP in its entirety. It is acceptable to sign that you attended the IEP; however, there will be a section where you must indicate whether you agree to the IEP, part of the IEP, or not at all. It is recommended that parents seek the assistance of a trusted agency/support group, advocate, or lawyer to help them navigate the next steps in obtaining what their child needs.

Common Services and Supports

There are many services available through your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) that can support their learning and development. These services are tailored to your child's unique needs and goals. For example, if your child needs help with social skills, make sure that goal is clearly documented in the IEP.

Below are some commonly provided services. Your child may need more—or fewer—depending on their individual needs:

Speech and Language Therapy: Supports communication skills such as:

- Expressing needs and ideas
- Understanding others
- Engaging in conversation
- Social communication (e.g., turn-taking, eye contact)

Occupational Therapy (OT): Helps with:

- Fine motor skills (e.g., writing, using scissors)
- Daily living tasks (e.g., dressing)
- Sensory processing (e.g., managing noise, staying calm)

Behavioral Support Services: Includes strategies like:

- Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)
- Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

These services help reduce challenging behaviors and teach new skills for emotional regulation and learning.

Social Skills Training: Teaches children how to:

- Make and keep friends
- Understand social cues
- Participate in group activities

Specialized Academic Instruction (SAI): Adapts teaching methods to fit your child's learning style. Instruction may take place in:

- Small groups
- Resource rooms
- Co-taught or general education classrooms

Assistive Technology: Tools that support learning and communication, such as:

- Communication devices
- Visual schedules
- Educational apps

Paraprofessionals or 1:1 Aides: Provide direct, daily support to help with:

- Staying on task
- Managing transitions
- Ensuring safety and engagement

Transportation Services: If needed, transportation can be included in the IEP to ensure your child gets to school safely and consistently.

Accommodation and Modifications in an IEP

Every child learns differently, and for students with autism or other disabilities, schoolwork may need to be adjusted to help them succeed. That's where accommodations and modifications come in. Both accommodation and modifications are tools to help your child succeed. The IEP team—including you—will decide which ones are right for your child based on their strengths and needs.

Accommodations: Same Work, Different Support

An accommodation is a change in how your child learns or shows what they know—not in what they're expected to learn.

Your child still does the same assignments and tests as their classmates, but with extra support. For example:

- More time on tests
- Taking a test in a quiet room
- Listening to instructions instead of reading them
- Giving answers out loud instead of writing

These changes help your child work around their challenges while still meeting grade-level expectations.

Modifications: Changing the Work Itself

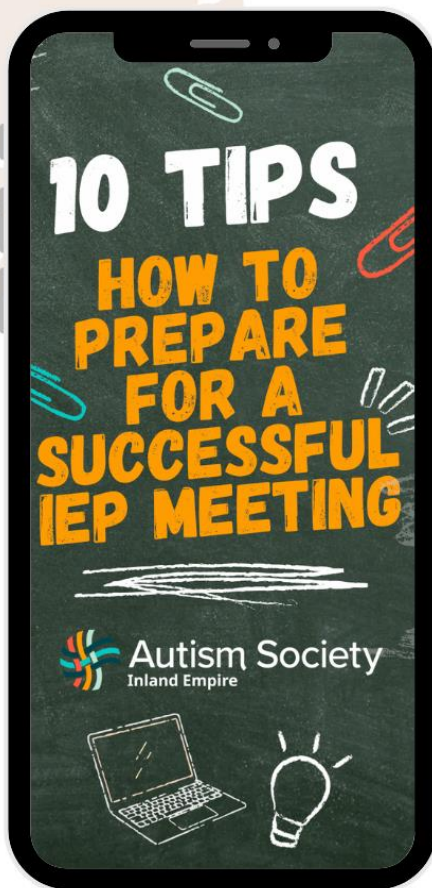
A modification is a change in what your child is expected to learn. The work may be simplified or shortened to match your child's learning needs.

For example:

- Fewer questions on a test
- A reading assignment at a lower grade level
- Focusing on key concepts instead of the complete lesson

Modifications help your child learn at their own pace, even if it's different from the rest of the class.

TIPS



- 1. Familiarize yourself with your child's IEP**, including their goals, accommodations, and services. Note any concerns or questions you may have to address during the meeting. Invest in a 3-ring binder to keep all our papers organized.
- 2. Be Prepared to communicate your concerns.** Clearly express your concerns, observations, and goals for your child's education. Share any relevant information or updates about your child's progress or challenges.
- 3. Be an active participant.** Take an active role in the meeting. Request any assessments at least five days before the meeting. This gives you time to process and understand the information, seek clarification, and take notes on questions or issues. Ensure the assessment shows your child's areas of need to ensure their unique needs are met.
- 4. Bring supporting documents.** If you have any evaluations, medical records, or other supporting documents, bring copies to the meeting. These can provide valuable insights into your child's needs and help guide the discussion.
- 5. Make sure all the necessary people are there.** Be sure all the necessary people, such as Speech and Occupational Therapists, are present to help you address your concerns. You can request their presence if not listed on the IEP meeting notice. Someone who knows your child can attend the meeting; they don't need to be an expert; they can provide support by taking notes.
- 6. What hopes do you have for your child?** It is important to be prepared to answer this question during the IEP meeting. Let them know if you want your child to attend college, find a job, feel safe in the community, and enjoy family and friends. This helps the school understand what kind of future you envision for your child.
- 7. Decide if you want your child to participate in the IEP meeting.** Your child is a crucial IEP team member, but if you feel it's not appropriate for them to join, you can ask your child to write a letter about important things to them or have them attend for the first few minutes of the meeting.
- 8. Decide if you would like to record the meeting.** Per California Ed Code 56341.1, parents can audio record IEP meetings so long as they give the school/school district at least 24 hours written notice. Decide if the recording will help...
- 9. You do not have to sign the IEP document that you agree to or do not agree with at the IEP meeting.** We recommend not signing an agreement and taking the IEP home to review and ensure you understand what was discussed.
- 10. If there was an issue, send a follow-up email or letter** to the IEP team summarizing the discussed points, agreements, and any outstanding concerns (if not reflected in the IEP document). This provides a written record of the meeting and ensures everyone is on the same page. If you do not sign, new services and goals will not start; your child's previous IEP (if you already have one) must stay in effect.

Resources for IEP Assistance

The Autism Society Inland Empire maintains a resource list for advocates and attorneys who specialize in education law in California. Visit our page at <https://ieautism.org/special-education-advocacy/>



Common Special Education Acronyms

Understanding special education acronyms is essential for effective communication and advocacy within the educational system. These acronyms represent key concepts, processes, and legal mandates that impact the education and support of students with special needs. These are some of the more common special education acronyms – but do not be afraid to ask what it means if someone is using a term or acronym you are not familiar with:

504 Plan: A plan under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act that provides accommodation and services to students with disabilities who do not qualify for an IEP.

ADA: Americans with Disabilities Act: Federal law prohibiting discrimination against individuals with disabilities in various settings, including education.

ASD: Autism Spectrum Disorder: A complex, lifelong developmental condition that can impact a person's social skills, communication, relationships, and self-regulation. A specific set of behaviors defines it and is often referred to as a "spectrum condition," which affects people differently and to varying degrees.

ASL: American Sign Language: A visual language that uses hand movements, facial expressions, and body movements to communicate.

ADHD: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: Is an ongoing pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development.

ADD: Attention Deficit Disorder: A term commonly used to describe symptoms of executive dysfunction, inattention, distractibility, and poor working memory.

ABC: Antecedent, Behavior, Consequence: A model that helps people understand behaviors by examining their key components.

- **Antecedent:** The event, action, or circumstance that happens before a behavior.
- **Behavior:** The action or response that the person exhibits after the antecedent.
- **Consequence:** The event or response that happens after the behavior.

ABA: Applied Behavior Analysis: A scientific approach to understanding behavior that focuses on how it changes, how the environment affects it, and how learning takes place.

APD: Auditory Processing Disorder - A disorder of the auditory system that causes a disruption in the way an individual's brain understands what they are hearing.

AT: Assistive Technology: Devices or tools that help students with disabilities access the curriculum (e.g., speech-to-text software, communication devices).

BIP: Behavioral Intervention Plan: A legally defined plan to address challenging behaviors and promote positive behavior in students.

BSP: Behavior Support Plan: A district-specific tool guide to managing behaviors rather than a fully developed plan of action.

DIS: Designated Instructional Services: These support services help a child benefit from their special education program (such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, etc.).

DSM: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5): A vital reference book for mental health professionals in the U.S. It provides detailed definitions, symptoms, and criteria for various mental health conditions and organizes them into groups.

ED: Emotionally Disturbed: One of the qualifying conditions under IDEA for special education.

ESY: Extended School Year: Special education services provided during breaks to prevent regression.

FAPE: Free Appropriate Public Education: The right of students with disabilities to receive an education tailored to their needs at no cost.

FBA: Functional Behavioral Assessment: A process that schools use to identify and understand challenging behaviors in students.

G&T: Gifted and Talented: When a student has academic or creative abilities that are above average for their age.

HOH: Hard of Hearing: A hearing loss where there may be enough residual hearing that an auditory device, such as a hearing aid or FM system, provides adequate assistance to process speech.

ID: Intellectual Disability: Significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period.

IDEA: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: Federal legislation that ensures students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment.

IEP: Individualized Education Program: A personalized plan developed for students with disabilities, outlining their educational goals, services, and accommodations.

IPP: Individual Program Plan: A document that describes your child's needs, goals, and objectives, as well as the services and supports your child requires to achieve those goals and objectives.

IQ: Intelligence Quotient: A measure of the intelligence of an individual derived from results obtained from specially designed tests.

LD: Learning Disability: A lower intellectual ability, significant impairment of social or adaptive functioning, and onset in childhood.

LEA: Local Education Agency: A local entity involved in education, including school districts, county offices of education, direct-funded charter schools, and special education local plan area (SELPA).

LID: Low Incidence Disability: A severe disability that affects a person's daily life and occurs in low numbers within the general population.

LRE: Least Restrictive Environment: The educational setting that allows students with disabilities to learn alongside their non-disabled peers to the greatest extent possible.

NCLB: No Child Left Behind: An education act that requires states to establish student academic standards as well as an assessment system to ensure that all students are meeting the educational standards.

NPA: Non-Public Agencies: An entity contracted with a school district to provide a program of special education services for students whose special education needs cannot be met by their resident school district.

NPS: Non-Public Schools: A private, nonpublic, nonsectarian school that enrolls individuals with exceptional needs under an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

ODD: Oppositional Defiant Disorder: A behavioral disorder in children and adolescents that's characterized by frequent episodes of anger, hostility, and disobedience.

OHI: Other Health Impaired: A broad category that covers conditions that limit a child's strength, energy, or alertness.

OI: Orthopedic Impairment: a physical disability that may qualify a child for an Individualized Education Program (IEP) if it significantly affects their ability to learn in school without special education services.

OT: Occupational Therapy: A service that helps students develop fine motor skills, sensory processing, and daily living skills.

PT: Physical Therapy: A service that focuses on improving students' physical abilities and mobility.

PWN-Prior Written Notice: a legal right guaranteed to parents of students with IEPs. A PWN must be sent every time a district proposes or refuses to initiate a change to the identification, evaluation, educational placement, or provision of FAPE for a student.

RS: Related Services: Supportive services that help students with disabilities participate in special education and maximize their educational outcomes.

RTI: Response to Intervention: A multi-tiered system of support to address academic and behavioral needs.

SAI: Specialized Academic Instruction: A service that schools provide to students with special needs to help them access the general curriculum

SDC: Special Day Class: A self-contained classroom in a public school system that provides specialized instruction and services for students with disabilities who require more intensive needs than a general education class can meet

SELPA: Special Education Local Plan Area: A group of school districts, charter schools, and County Offices of Education that provide special education and related services to students with disabilities.

SIB: Self-Injurious Behavior: This involves the occurrence of behavior that could result in physical injury to one's own body.

SLD: Specific Learning Disability: A category of disability that affects academic skills (e.g., reading, math).

SLP: Speech-Language Pathologist: A professional who assesses and treats communication disorders.

ST: Speech Therapy: A service that focuses on improving pronunciation, strengthening the muscles used in speech, and learning to speak

TBI: Traumatic Brain Injury: An acquired brain injury caused by an external force that can impair a child's educational performance.

VI: Visual Impairment: A term that includes both partial sight and blindness and is defined as a vision impairment that negatively affects a child's educational performance, even with correction.