

# Autism and the Classroom

## Accessing Services: Your Child's Right to Public Education

Every child has the right to a free appropriate education. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), enacted in 1975, mandates a public education for all eligible children and makes the schools responsible for providing the supports and services that will allow this to happen. IDEA was most recently revised in 2004 (and, in fact, renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, but most people still refer to it as IDEA). The law mandates that the state provide an eligible child with a free appropriate public education that meets his or her unique individual needs. IDEA specifies that children with various disabilities, including autism, are entitled to early intervention services and special education. In addition, the IDEA legislation has established an important team approach and a role for parents as equal partners in the planning for an individual child, and promotes an education in the least restrictive environment. In addition to the IDEA stipulations, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) sets forth, as a civil right, protections and provisions for equal access to education for anyone with a disability. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is another civil rights law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in programs and activities, public and private that receive federal financial assistance. Generally, the individuals protected by these laws include anyone with a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more life activities.

Advocating for your child's education is a very important role, and at times can seem overwhelming and confusing. Two books that may be helpful are *Wrightslaw: From Emotions to Advocacy - The Special Education Survival Guide*, by Pam Wright and Pete Wright and *How to Compromise with Your School District Without Compromising Your Child*, by Gary Mayerson. You will also find additional books and websites at the back of this kit that will also be helpful in this process.

**You, as a parent, are entitled to be treated as an equal partner with the school district in deciding on an education plan for your child.**

## What is an Individualized Education Program (IEP)?

An **Individualized Education Program (IEP)** is the document that spells out the student's needs and how they will be met. The IEP describes your child's strengths and weaknesses, sets measureable goals and objectives and provides details about the supports and accommodations that will be used to meet them. Throughout your child's education, it will be essential for both you and your child's various educators to continue learning more about autism. You will need to collaborate during each school year and stay motivated to make certain that your child is excelling and feels comfortable in his or her learning environment. It is vital that your child's needs continue to be assessed and that you work with the team at school to set goals and objectives in your child's IEP.

Your child's IEP will be the road map for his or her education each year. As the parent, you will aid the school in crafting this plan and will sit in on all important meetings and evaluations. IEPs are formed by many members of the school staff, including teachers, therapists, psychologists and special education teachers. After your child's IEP is established, this team of educators will meet regularly to discuss your child's progress, both successes and struggles. These meetings will address not only academic concerns, but also social and emotional issues as well.

## Questions to Consider in Developing Your Child's Draft IEP

**From *Individualized Education Program: Summary, Guide and Practical Tips*,  
a tool kit created for Autism Speaks by lawyers at Goodwin Procter LLC**

### **Classroom and Peers**

- Should my child be in a mainstream or special education class? Both?
- Should he/she be partially or fully mainstreamed?
- What transition plan should be in place for mainstreaming?
- What type of special education class would be ideal?
- If special education is appropriate, what are the educational classifications and cognitive and maturity levels of fellow classmates?
- How many other students should be in the classroom?
- How old should the other students be? What range of skill level should they have?
- What extra-curricular activities should be available?
- How far is the class from home? What distance am I comfortable with?
- What type of classroom or behavioral or teaching support(s) and accommodations does my child need to be supported in the least restrictive environment? (whether in a self-contained, mainstream or hybrid inclusion classroom)

### **Teachers and Other Staff**

- How many teachers should be in the classroom? How many aides?
- What is the ideal student/teacher ratio?
- What kind of special experience or training should the teachers have? The aides?

### **Class Content**

- What specific topics do I want in the curriculum? What don't I want?
- Are there specific known programs that would work for my child?
- Will my child take any statewide assessment exams? What accommodations will be necessary?

### **Related Services**

- What specific support services does my child need?
  - Transportation
  - Development services
  - Corrective services
  - Artistic services, art therapy
  - Music or dance therapy
  - After school or weekend services
  - Assistive (augmentative) technology and consultative support
  - The "transition" services point should add a parenthetical qualified: "(generally at age 14 and older)"

### **Goals**

- What specific and measurable goals are appropriate?

### **Transition Services**

- What services does my child need to be ready to (consider if appropriate)...
  - Live on his/her own?
  - Go on to higher education?
  - Work?

Prior to the IEP planning meeting, the school professionals will offer guidance and evaluate your child. The official planning meeting will then take place. IEPs generally contain goals for your child (both long- and short-term), and services that will be provided throughout the year. In addition to the goals set for your child, the IEP must also include ways that these goals will be measured and steps that will be taken for your child to accomplish them. The IEP will be designed each year according to your child's progress and needs.



## What is a “Free and Appropriate Public Education” (FAPE)?

As described previously, IDEA provides for a **“free and appropriate public education”** for all children with disabilities. Each word in this phrase is important, but “appropriate” is the one that relates specifically to your special needs child. Your child is entitled to an education that is tailored to his or her special needs and a placement that will allow him or her to make educational progress. Although you and your child's teachers or therapists may want to provide your child with the best and optimal programs and services, the school district is simply required to provide an appropriate education. One of the challenges here is working with the school district to determine what is appropriate and, therefore, what will be provided for your child. This is a collaborative process and may require considerable negotiation in order to secure the appropriate services from the school.

## What is “Least Restrictive Environment” (LRE)?

IDEA also provides that children with disabilities are entitled to experience the **“least restrictive environment”** in schools. This means that a school district is required to educate a student with a disability in regular classrooms, with his or her non-disabled peers.

The child must be educated in the school he or she would attend if not disabled, to the maximum extent appropriate, and supported with the aids and services required to make this possible. This does not mean that every student has to be in a general education classroom, but the objective is to place the student in as natural a learning environment as possible, within his or her home community. This decision is made by the members of the IEP team, with consideration of the myriad of issues related to appropriate environment and supports for the student. Placements and the LRE for a particular student may change over time.

The participation of children with disabilities in the general education environment is often referred to as “mainstreaming” or “inclusion.” Inclusion does not mean that a child with special needs should be placed into a general education setting just like a typical learner; a variety of special education supports should be provided in order to create a successful environment and positive experience for everyone involved. Careful planning and training are essential to providing modifications or accommodations and to successfully situating a child with a disability in the least restrictive setting. These supports might include providing a specially trained classroom or one-on-one paraprofessional, altering testing environments or expectations, adapting curriculum, providing visual supports or adaptive equipment, etc. The special education department should provide training, strategies and support for general education staff and others in the general school community who may interact with students with special needs. It is important to note that philosophies about inclusion vary considerably

among school districts, staff and parents of students with and without special needs.

IDEA provides for a team approach to planning so that the objectives of all members of the team can be considered and the necessary supports can be put in place to maximize inclusion. Not all parents will feel that a mainstream environment will enhance the growth and development of their student with special needs and allowances need to be made to accommodate various perspectives. Additionally, not all students will be ready for full inclusion all of the time. The anxiety and sensory issues related to inclusion may mean that efforts should begin with small steps to generate ongoing success and increase participation within the local student body and community.

## Medical vs. Educational Diagnosis

Eligibility for services in school is based on an educational evaluation and diagnosis, not simply a medical diagnosis under the DSM-5 from your child's health-care provider. Unfortunately, a medical diagnosis of autism does not automatically entitle a student to special education services under IDEA.

To get an educational diagnosis and access to services, an educational determination of disability must be made by a multidisciplinary team of school professionals. It is important to request a school evaluation for your child after your child's medical diagnosis so he or she can access special education services as soon as possible. This evaluation is based on the impact the medical diagnosis of autism has on the student's ability to learn in school. The information from a medical assessment is included in the review, but specific attention in the evaluation is paid to the student's performance in school and how the diagnosis affects his or her educational performance.

The evaluation includes an assessment of academic achievement, observation of behaviors in school settings, family interviews, reports of problem behaviors by family members and school professionals and more. The results determine the student's IEP plan, as well as his or her rights to the special education services that will provide the student with an effective free and appropriate public education. Under IDEA, a re-evaluation must take place at least every three years and can take place more often if you or your child's teacher makes a written request based on feelings that his or her needs have changed. These re-evaluations help when modifying your child's IEP so that he or she has continued access to the special education services that will help achieve the best possible outcomes.

## Setting Up Services and Supports in School

Throughout your child's educational process, it is important to remember that each child has a unique set of abilities and challenges. Educating both yourself and your child's educational team at school will be fundamental to your child's success in the classroom. Since children with autism can be diagnosed at all different stages of the education process, it is imperative to make sure that the proper accommodations are given to them no matter when they are diagnosed. Individuals with autism may show evidence of distinct issues; they may struggle more with social interactions and communication than with their studies and schoolwork. Since each child is different, the parents and educators need to work collaboratively in order to play on the child's strengths and enable him or her to have a positive and successful educational experience.

Once your child is diagnosed, it is crucial to make sure he or she has the proper supports in school. As you work with your school system, it is important to remember that your child's program should be designed individually, as each child has unique needs,



even if the diagnosis is the same as that of another child. Acquiring these services will help your child and will also ensure that his or her teacher can provide the best and most effective education possible.

When telling your child's teachers and other school professionals about his or her diagnosis, be sure to provide them with helpful information about autism if they aren't informed and to cover both your child's strengths and weaknesses when discussing the best ways to support him or her in the school environment. You may need to communicate frequently with school professionals to make sure your child's needs are being met in a successful and supportive way.

The Autism Speaks School Community Tool Kit is a very helpful resource for you to share with your school to assist all members of the school community in understanding and supporting students with autism like your child. The kit provides helpful information about students with autism, as well as tools and strategies to achieve positive interactions and increase learning for your child, his or her peers, teachers, school administrators and more. It contains information for everyone from peers to paraprofessionals to bus drivers, security officers, nurses and more.

**Download the School Community Tool Kit for free at [autismspeaks.org/school](https://autismspeaks.org/school).**



## Six Steps to Success for Educators and Service Providers

In the classroom, the student and the teacher will face different challenges. The Organization for Autism Research (OAR) offers the following six step plan for teachers, which is included in their comprehensive kit entitled, *An Educator's Guide to Asperger Syndrome*, to help support your child in the classroom and throughout his or her years in school. It may be helpful to share these tips with your child's teacher. Note that the term Asperger Syndrome in the original piece has been replaced by the word "autism," as a result of the DSM-5 changes.

### Step 1: Educate Yourself

Different behaviors are a large part of autism. Learning about autism and the specific characteristics of your student will help you effectively manage the behaviors. Here are some helpful hints that can guide everyday school life for students with autism.

**Operate on "autism time."** "Autism time" means "Twice as much time, half as much done." Students with autism often need additional time to complete assignments, gather materials, and orient themselves during transitions.

**Manage the environment.** Any change can increase anxiety in a student with autism. Strive to provide consistency in the schedule and avoid sudden changes.

**Create a balanced agenda.** Make a visual schedule that includes daily activities for students with autism. Some parts of the daily schedule or certain classes or activities should be monitored or restructured, as needed.

**Simplify language.** Keep your language simple and concise, and speak at a slow, deliberate pace. Students with autism have difficulty "reading between the lines," understanding abstract concepts like sarcasm, or interpreting facial expressions. Be clear and specific when providing instructions.

**Manage change of plans.** Make sure the student with autism understands that sometimes planned activities can be changed, canceled, or rescheduled. Have backup plans and share them with the child with autism.

**Be generous with praise.** Find opportunities throughout the day to tell the student with autism what he or she did right. Compliment attempts as well as successes. Be specific to ensure that the student with autism knows why you are providing praise.

### Step 2: Reach Out to the Parents

The parents of your student with autism are your first and best source of information about their child; they can provide you with information about their child's behavior and daily activities. Ideally, this partnership will begin with meetings before the school year. After that, it is critical to establish mutually agreed-upon modes and patterns of communication with the family throughout the school year.

### Step 3: Prepare the Classroom

Having learned about the individual sensitivities and characteristics of your student with autism, you now have the information you need to organize your classroom appropriately. You can manipulate the physical aspects of your classroom, making it more comfortable for children with autism without sacrificing your general plans for the class. *The Educator's Guide to Asperger Syndrome* contains information about specific approaches for structuring the academic and physical environment to address the needs of your student with autism.

### Step 4: Educate Peers and Promote Social Goals

Children with autism have social deficits that make it difficult for them to establish friendships. However, with appropriate assistance, they can engage with peers and establish mutually enjoyable and lasting relationships.

The characteristics of autism can cause peers to perceive a child with the disorder as odd or different. This can lead to situations that involve teasing or bullying. Children with autism often cannot discriminate between playful versus mean-spirited teasing. Teachers and school staff must be aware that students with autism are potentially prime targets of bullying or excessive teasing, and must watch for signs.

Many social interactions occur during unstructured times in settings outside the classroom where students with autism may end up isolated. You may want to create a "circle of friends," a group of responsible peers for the student with autism, who will not abandon him, serve as a model of appropriate social behavior, and protect against teasing or bullying. This tactic can also be encouraged outside of school.

## Six Steps to Success for Educators and Service Providers

continued...

### **Step 5: Collaborate on the Educational Program Development**

### **Step 6: Manage Behavioral Challenges**

School is a stressful environment. Commonplace academic and social situations may create extreme stress for students with autism. The stressors may include difficulty predicting events because of changing schedules, tuning into and understanding teacher's directions, interacting with peers, anticipating changes, such as classroom lighting, sounds/noises, odors, and so on.

Tantrums or meltdowns (terms that are often used interchangeably) typically occur in three stages that can be of variable length. Students with autism rarely indicate that they are under stress. While they may not always know when they are near a stage of crisis, most of their meltdowns do not occur without warning. There is a pattern of behavior, which is sometimes subtle, that suggests an imminent behavioral outburst. Prevention through the use of appropriate academic, environmental, social, and sensory supports and modification to environment and expectations is the most effective method.

There are many strategies that can be used to help your child avoid tantrums or meltdowns. By using a "functional behavior assessment," a professional trained in ABA, education, or psychology can help you determine what triggers the tantrum, change the environment to reduce the stress it is causing, and teach your child to express his or her desires or feelings in a more adaptive manner.



## Bullying and Autism

Unfortunately, children with autism are often vulnerable to bullying. In a 2012 study, the Interactive Autism Network found that a total of 63% of 1,167 children with autism, ages six to 15, had been bullied at some point in their lives. There are many tools and resources available to help prevent bullying of your child at school. Autism Speaks is proud to partner with National Center for Learning Disabilities, PACER's National Bullying Center and Ability Path, as well as the documentary film BULLY, to raise awareness about how bullying affects children with special needs.

**Information below as adapted from a Special Needs Anti-Bullying Tool Kit produced by the partnership. Learn more at [specialneeds.thebullyproject.com](http://specialneeds.thebullyproject.com).**

Sometimes children with autism may not realize they are being bullied. It is important to teach your child the differences between friendly behavior and bullying and to let him or her know that if another student's behavior is hurting or harming him or her, either emotionally or physically, it is bullying and needs to be addressed. If you suspect your child might be being bullied at school, do not be afraid to have an honest conversation with him or her in the most effective way you see fit based on his or her needs and behaviors. Be sure to emphasize that he or she is not alone and that you are here to help put an end to it.

Your child's IEP can be a helpful tool in instituting a bullying prevention plan at school. If you learn your child is being bullied, contact school staff right away. Documenting the incidents in writing is critical to getting the best response.

**Letters to inform your school can be found at [specialneeds.thebullyproject.com/parents](http://specialneeds.thebullyproject.com/parents).**

**PACER's National Bullying Prevention Center has put together Top 10 Facts Parents, Educators and Students Need to Know about Bullying and Harassment of Studies with Disabilities, summarized below:**

- 1. The Facts** – Students with disabilities are much more likely to be bullied than his or her nondisabled peers.
- 2. Bullying affect's a student's ability to learn.** When students with disabilities are bullied, it can directly impact their education.
- 3. The Definition** – Bullying based on a student's disability may be considered harassment.
- 4. The Federal Laws** – Disability harassment is a civil rights issue. Parents have legal rights when their child with a disability is the target of bullying or disability harassment.
- 5. The State Laws** – Students with disabilities have legal rights when they are a target of bullying.
- 6. The adult response is important.** Parents, educators and other adults are the most important advocates that a student with disabilities can have.
- 7. The Resources** – Students with disabilities have resources that are specifically designed for their situation – including their IEP, a 'Dear Colleague' letter, template letters from PACER.org and more.
- 8. The Power of Bystanders** – More than 50 percent of bullying situations stop when a peer intervenes.
- 9. The Importance of Self-advocacy** – Students need to be involved in the steps taken to address a bullying situation.
- 10. You are not alone.** When students have been bullied, they often believe they are the only one this is happening to, and that no one else cares. In fact, they are not alone.



## Transition Services

As your child enters his or her teenage years, you will begin to think about how you will approach the future. Some individuals with autism move on to college, some go right into the workforce and others have alternative plans. Regardless of the path chosen, making a plan to move forward after high school is the first step on the journey to adulthood.

Putting in place a transition plan for your child will allow you and your family to work with the school to plan for life beyond graduation. Investigating possibilities for the future will familiarize you and your child with different based on his or her unique skills and interests. You will work together with your child's educational team to identify long- and short-term goals. These goals will enable your child and your family to compartmentalize the steps to ensure future success. Playing on the strengths of your child will help you plan for the future successfully.

A successful transition will lead your child with autism on the path to a fulfilling life that enables him or her to learn and grow. This type of planning should take place around 14 years of age. The transition plan will begin with individuals assessing their own skills and interests with their families. This will allow them the time and space to reflect on the best way to hone their skills on things that interest and excite them.

Two great transition resources from Autism Speaks are the Transition Tool Kit and the Community-based Skills Assessment. The Transition Tool Kit is a guide for families of children between the ages of 14 and 22 to help with the road to adulthood. The Community-based Skills Assessment is designed to help parents and professionals assess your child's strengths, skills and challenges in order to develop a personalized and comprehensive transition plan so your child can achieve the greatest possible outcomes.



**These tools can be accessed at:**

[autismspeaks.org/family-services/tool-kits/transition-tool-kit](https://autismspeaks.org/family-services/tool-kits/transition-tool-kit) and [autismspeaks.org/csa](https://autismspeaks.org/csa).

Some individuals with autism may decide to move on to college as part of their transition plan. Making this decision will require research to find out which institutions of higher learning offer the best supports for individuals with autism. Since each individual's needs are unique, it will be important for these young adults to see what their strengths are and what type of environment they will thrive in. For young adults who go directly into the employment world, it will also be critical for them to focus on their strengths and what brings them the greatest joy. They will want to explore different areas of the job market. Different work environments may help different individuals to excel. Learn about options for postsecondary education and employment in the Autism Speaks Postsecondary Educational Opportunities Guide and our Employment Tool Kit which



## Conclusion

The time after an autism diagnosis is likely a difficult time for you. It is important to remember that you are not alone. Others have gone down this road before you. You are stronger than you think. You will learn how to overcome challenges and best meet your child's needs so that he or she can live as full and independent of a life as possible. You will also begin to experience the world in a new way; your priorities may shift and you will meet some incredible people who are dedicated to helping those with autism to succeed. Keep in mind that great strides are being made every day in the field of autism research, including many studies looking into new treatments and interventions.

There are a multitude of resources and tool kits on the Autism Speaks website to help you navigate this journey with your child. The 100 Day Kit is only the beginning. In addition, the **Autism Response Team** is available to answer your questions and connect you with resources. Please call **888-288-4762** (en Español 888-772-9050) or email [familyservices@autismspeaks.org](mailto:familyservices@autismspeaks.org) and they are happy to help you at every step of the way.

**Please do not hesitate to reach out.**

***Your feedback is important to us. To share your comments on the kit - What was helpful? What additional information could be included? please email your comments to [familyservices@AutismSpeaks.org](mailto:familyservices@AutismSpeaks.org) with the word "feedback" in the subject line.***