



How to Get a Child Tested: Guidelines for Special Education Assessment

If you suspect a child may be having difficulties, the following guideline will help you understand the screening and assessment process. Only parents or guardians may initiate this process.

Children ages 0 – 3

Children birth to three who have or who are at risk of having a developmental delay may be eligible for early intervention services provided by a regional center or a local education agency (school district). School districts are primarily responsible for providing services to children who are blind, deaf, deaf-blind, or have a severe orthopedic disability (low-incidence disabilities). The parents or legal guardian should contact their local regional center for assistance or call 800-515-BABY (800-515-2229) for local California Early Start services and Family Resource Centers and Networks.

Early intervention services are provided based on the developmental needs of the child, the concerns and priorities of the family, and the resources available to them. Services are provided within the context of the child and family's daily activities and routines. Early Start services are provided at no-cost to eligible families. Early intervention services can:

- Improve both developmental and educational gains
- Reduce the future costs of special education, rehabilitation and health care needs
- Reduce feelings of isolation, stress and frustration that families may experience
- Help children with disabilities grow up to become productive, independent individuals
- Strengthen families' capacity to advocate and care for their children with special needs

Children ages 3 – 21

In order to determine whether a child 3 to 21 years old qualifies for special education services, she or he must be tested by the school district. Child care providers concerned about how a child moves, thinks, communicates,

hears or sees should talk to the parent. The parent then contacts the school district, as well as their health care provider if appropriate, since the parent or legal guardian may make the initial referral and must sign the forms.

1. To initiate the process the parent or legal guardian should contact their local school district, ideally in writing. If writing a letter, it should state specific concerns and if possible, include observations made by the child care provider. The parents should date the letter and make a copy for their records. The parent may also want to provide a copy of the letter to the child care provider.
2. The school district must contact the parent within fifteen calendar days to sign an assessment plan and any releases of information to talk to other professionals involved with the child. The parent may also want to sign a release of information between the schools and the child care program to enable open communication and input.
3. The assessment plan is the written permission to allow the child to be tested. It should indicate which areas of development will be tested and the types of tests that will be used. Once the assessment plan is signed, a legal timeline begins for the school district to test the child.
4. Testing can take several hours, and young children may need to be assessed in phases, over a period of days or weeks. Parents should encourage the school district staff to observe the child in all settings, including in the child care setting and the home. Testing should be done in the primary language of the family and at no cost to the family.
5. If the child qualifies for special education, the school district has 50 calendar days to develop an Individualized Education Plan. Generally, a pre-schooler must have a significant delay in one developmental area or a moderate delay in two areas compared to their chronological age, or have a disabling condition or established medical disability.

Assessment includes the following developmental areas and should identify strengths and abilities as well as delays:

Adaptive: how children take care of themselves, including toileting, feeding, and dressing.

Communication: how children understand, speak and use language.

Cognitive: how children think and solve problems.

Fine and gross motor: how children use their muscles, eye-hand coordination, and other large and small motor tasks, including walking, running, jumping, and writing.

Social-emotional: how children interact with adults and peers, how they feel about themselves, how they make their needs known.

The child's health history is also taken into account and vision and hearing screenings may be recommended depending on the child's needs.

6. The IEP team determines the most appropriate services to meet the child's needs. The parents can invite anyone to attend the IEP with them, including the child care provider. Participating in these meetings may help child care providers coordinate services for the child and better understand the child's strengths and needs.
7. Special education services can be provided in a variety of settings, including a child care center, family child care home or in the child's home. The IEP team determines the type and quantity of services.
8. Once the parents sign the IEP, services can begin.
9. Even if the child does not qualify for special education services, the parents can ask the school district to make recommendations as to how the parent and child care provider can help improve the child's skills—suggested programs, activities, etc. The child's health insurance or another agency may cover services that could help, such as occupational therapy or counseling.
10. Parents should always request and keep copies of all reports, test results, and any other completed forms. With permission from the parents, child care providers may also want to keep copies of these forms on record.

The assessment process itself may help answer questions about the child's development and how to work with him or her. Assessment should be an ongoing collaborative effort between professionals and parents to understand warning signs.

Resources

Handbook on Developing Individualized Family Service Plans and Individualized Education Programs in Early Childhood Special Education Programs, and Handbook on Developing and Implementing Early Childhood Special Education Programs and Services, California Department of Education, Sacramento (2001). These handbooks may be ordered at (800) 995-4099 or www.cde.ca.gov/cdepress.

Early Warning Signs, California Department of Education, in collaboration with the California Childcare Health Program. Free pamphlet describing indicators which suggest that a child may need help.

Special Education Resources on the Internet at <http://seriweb.com>. This site offers a collection of Internet accessible information for those involved in fields related to special education.

The National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities at www.nichcy.org. NICHCY is the national information and referral center that provides information on disabilities and disability-related issues for families, educators and other professionals.

Idea Practices at www.ideapractices.org. This Web site has technical information about the federal law that guides special education, including the process of assessment, IEPs, and services.

The Healthline at (800) 333-3212 is a toll-free number available to the child care community for consultation on a number of different health and safety issues, including children with disabilities and other special needs.

Early Start for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities and their Families at (800) 515-BABY.

Special Education Division, California Dept of Education at (916) 445-4613.

References

Handbook on Developing Individualized Family Service Plans and Individualized Education Programs in Early Childhood Special Education, California Department of Education, Sacramento, 2001.

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