

Inclusion in School & School-Based Services for Children with Autism

What Families Need to Know

Inclusion in the Classroom & Beyond

In school, inclusion means students with disabilities learn and participate with their peers without disabilities. Inclusion can look different for each child. A child's needs should inform inclusion and include supports to promote success. Inclusion also includes the ability to be part of activities before, during, and after school with non-disabled peers (clubs, committees, or sports teams). Encourage inclusive opportunities where your child can succeed.

Definition of the Least Restrictive Environment

It is required by public law that children with disabilities are educated with their nondisabled peers when possible. Law also states that taking children out of regular classrooms and into special classes is only allowed if good progress isn't being made in the regular class setting.

Things to Consider

Special education is not a "place" but a coordination of services. Effective instruction is the most important part of learning, more than the "where". Consider your child's needs, determine the content and method of teaching, and then find the place where it should occur. Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may need specialized instruction or support, which should always be based on their individual needs.

The best instruction for children with ASD offers them many chances to practice skills while collecting data that measures their progress in learning those skills. This way, professionals can know if the teaching method is working for your child. Programs driven by data, that give your child structure and support to develop communication skills, are the most likely to result in success.

Inclusion as Students Get Older

The idea of inclusion is the same in middle and high school as it is in elementary school. Each year, it is important to consider whether inclusion is helping your child. Families and students can and should be part of determining the settings where the student can receive an appropriate education and support for their success as they grow. While there may be more educational opportunities for inclusion in high school, it's also important to consider classes that support the development of social and life skills. Education may become a part of their job training!

The bottom line is, inclusion should help your child learn and work well with others. Inclusion should also contribute to your child developing skills that will support them in becoming a more successful adult.



School-Based Services

In addition to inclusion, your child may need services in school or interventions. These interventions are provided by a teacher and/or other school staff. They may include:

1. Informal plan or steps to take to support your child in certain situations.
2. Response to intervention (RTI). This includes making a plan on how to help your child learn with a regular teacher.



RTIs are plans between you and the teacher, with no additional oversight from the school. These work well with very motivated teachers and when a child has only a few special education needs.

3. Section 504 plan. This is a more structured plan outlining extra help for your child in their regular classroom.
4. Individualized Education Program (IEP). This is a detailed plan for help outside of your child's regular classroom. IEPs are required for special education.

To get a Section 504 plan or an IEP, you or a teacher at your child's school must submit a written request. Your child's pediatrician can help with collecting information. For more details on IEPs and 504 plans, visit healthychildren.org.

Getting Formal Support

Children with ASD have protections under Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This is how schools are funded to create IEPs for children with disabilities. If your child's ASD is impacting their schooling, they may be eligible for school-based services. The family and school team have to agree on which services should be included in the IEP. Every child's needs are different, and your child's school may choose a Section 504 instead of an IEP. If your child has more needs or enough delays in learning, they may qualify for an IEP.

What to Expect from an IEP

A team of specialists in your school district will test your child and use the findings to work with you to write an IEP around your child's needs. IEPs should aim to provide services in the "least restrictive environment" whenever possible. IEPs can help your child get extra help in their classroom; receive services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, or behavioral supports during school; and/or have part or all of their day in a specialized classroom. IEPs may allow your child to get transportation, social work services, or other supports.

IEPs should be outlined for the current or coming academic year. If needed, the school district should provide your family with an interpreter to be part of the IEP process. If you disagree with the recommendations in the IEP, you can request a second opinion. You also have legal rights if you feel like your child's school district is not following federal education law. IEPs are reviewed each school year and may change as your child's needs change. *All children have a right to a free public education that meets their own learning needs. This means that children with disabilities can receive the education and services they need at no cost to you until they are 21 years old.*