

THE COMPLETE IEP PROCESS GUIDE FOR NEW PARENTS

A step-by-step timeline with deliverables from every party — so you always know what happens next.
 Published by IEP Guide | iepguide.org | May 2026

Introduction: What Is the IEP Process?

If your child has just been referred for special education services — or if you just received a notice saying your child may qualify for an IEP — you are probably asking the same question most new parents ask: what happens now?

The IEP process follows a predictable sequence of steps governed by federal law — the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Every state must follow the same basic framework. This guide walks you through the entire process in plain language, with specific timelines and a clear explanation of who is responsible for what at every step.

Key Terms

- IEP — Individualized Education Program: the legal document describing your child's special education plan
- IDEA — Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: the federal law governing special education
- LEA — Local Education Agency: your school district
- PLAAFP — Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance
- LRE — Least Restrictive Environment: children learn alongside non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate
- SDC — Special Day Class | RSP — Resource Specialist Program | ESY — Extended School Year

The IEP Process at a Glance

The complete 10-step process with timelines and responsible parties — all on one page.

Phase	Timeline	Responsible Party	Key Deliverable
Step 1 — Referral	Day 1	Parent or School	Written referral submitted for special education evaluation
Step 2 — Consent	Within 15 days	School (LEA)	Prior Written Notice + Consent to Evaluate sent to parent
Step 3 — Evaluation	Within 60 days of consent	School (LEA)	Full individual evaluation completed across all areas of concern
Step 4 — Eligibility	After evaluation	IEP Team	Eligibility determination meeting held — eligible or not eligible
Step 5 — IEP Development	Within 30 days of eligibility	IEP Team	IEP document written with goals, services, and placement
Step 6 — IEP Meeting	Before services start	IEP Team	IEP meeting held — parent reviews, asks questions, signs or not
Step 7 — Placement	As soon as possible	School (LEA)	Services begin in the agreed placement setting
Step 8 — Progress Reports	Per report card schedule	School (LEA)	Written progress reports sent to parent on each IEP goal

Phase	Timeline	Responsible Party	Key Deliverable
Step 9 — Annual Review	Every 12 months	IEP Team	Full IEP reviewed and updated for the coming year
Step 10 — Reevaluation	Every 3 years	IEP Team	Full reevaluation to confirm ongoing eligibility under IDEA

* 60 calendar days is the federal standard. Some states have shorter timelines. Always verify with your state education agency.

STEP 1 — REFERRAL

What Is a Referral?

The IEP process begins with a referral — a formal request for the school to evaluate your child. A referral can come from you as the parent or from the school.

Who Can Make a Referral?

- You (the parent or guardian) — submit a written request to the school principal or special education director at any time
- The school — a teacher, counselor, or administrator who has concerns about your child's performance
- A doctor or outside professional — they can recommend, but the formal referral must come from you or the school

What a Parent Referral Should Include

- Child's full name, date of birth, and current grade
- Specific concerns — academic struggles, speech delays, behavioral challenges, attention or motor difficulties
- Any outside evaluations or diagnoses already completed
- Direct statement: 'I am requesting a full and individual evaluation for special education services'
- Your signature and the date — send by email for a timestamp or hand-deliver for a date-stamped copy

PARENT DELIVERABLE — Step 1

- Written referral submitted — keep a dated copy
- School must acknowledge in writing and provide your Procedural Safeguards

SCHOOL DELIVERABLE — Step 1

- Written acknowledgment of referral
- Copy of Procedural Safeguards provided to parent
- If declining to evaluate: written notice with explanation

STEP 2 — CONSENT TO EVALUATE

What Happens After the Referral?

Within 15 days, the school must send a Prior Written Notice (PWN) and a consent form requesting permission to evaluate your child. The school cannot begin any evaluation without your written consent.

What to Look for in the Consent Form

- Which areas will be evaluated — academic, cognitive, speech, motor, social-emotional, adaptive behavior
- Which specialists will conduct the assessment — school psychologist, SLP, OT, PT
- The timeline for completing the evaluation
- Your right to decline or withdraw consent at any time

SCHOOL DELIVERABLE — Step 2

- Prior Written Notice and Assessment Plan sent within 15 days of referral
- Copy of Procedural Safeguards

PARENT DELIVERABLE — Step 2

- Review Assessment Plan carefully — ask questions before signing
- Sign and return consent form — the 60-day evaluation clock starts from your signature date
- You may request additional areas of evaluation be added

STEP 3 — EVALUATION

What Is a Full Individual Evaluation?

After you sign the consent form, the school has 60 calendar days to complete a comprehensive assessment across all areas related to your child's suspected disability using multiple tools — not a single test.

Who Conducts the Evaluation?

- School Psychologist — cognitive ability, academic achievement, social-emotional functioning, behavior
- Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP) — receptive and expressive language, articulation, pragmatics
- Occupational Therapist (OT) — fine motor skills, sensory processing, daily living skills
- Physical Therapist (PT) — gross motor skills, mobility (if applicable)
- Special Education Teacher — academic skills, learning style, classroom functioning

SCHOOL DELIVERABLE — Step 3

- Full Individual Evaluation completed within 60 days of signed consent
- Written report shared with parent at least 1 business day before the eligibility meeting
- All assessments conducted in the child's primary language

PARENT DELIVERABLE — Step 3

- Share observations, outside evaluations, and medical records with the team
- Submit a Parent Concerns letter to be included in the evaluation record
- If you disagree after completion, you can request an IEE at the school's expense

STEP 4 — ELIGIBILITY DETERMINATION

The Eligibility Meeting

The IEP team meets to determine if your child has one of IDEA's 13 disability categories AND requires specially designed instruction as a result. If not eligible, the school must explain in writing. You have the right to request an IEE, mediation, or file a state complaint.

The 13 IDEA Disability Categories

- Autism | Deaf-Blindness | Deafness | Emotional Disturbance | Hearing Impairment
- Intellectual Disability | Multiple Disabilities | Orthopedic Impairment | Other Health Impairment
- Specific Learning Disability | Speech or Language Impairment | Traumatic Brain Injury | Visual Impairment

SCHOOL DELIVERABLE — Step 4

- Written Eligibility Report with all evaluation findings
- Formal eligibility determination in writing
- If eligible: IEP development meeting scheduled within 30 days

STEP 5 — IEP DEVELOPMENT

Building the IEP Document

Once eligible, the IEP team writes the Individualized Education Program covering every area of your child's need, what the school will provide, and measurable goals for the year.

Required Components of Every IEP

- PLAAFP — Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance
- Measurable annual goals — specific, observable, achievable within 12 months
- Special education and related services — type, frequency, duration, and setting
- Supplementary aids and accommodations in the general education classroom
- Participation with non-disabled peers and LRE justification
- State and district assessment participation with accommodations
- Transition plan — required beginning at age 16

SCHOOL DELIVERABLE — Step 5

- Draft IEP shared with parent before the IEP meeting
- PLAAFP written from evaluation data and teacher input
- Services grid listing all services with minutes per week
- Placement recommendation with LRE justification

PARENT DELIVERABLE — Step 5

- Use iepguide.org to research and compare school placement options BEFORE the IEP meeting. Search by city, district, or county to see SDC programs, severity levels served, specialist staff on-site, and SWD % at each school. Knowing this data before the meeting gives you a significant advantage.
- Review each goal carefully — **does it reflect what your child actually needs?** If a goal feels too easy, too vague, or missing an area, note it before the meeting.
- **Questions to prepare for school placement:**
- What is the severity level of students currently served — Mild/Moderate or Moderate/Severe?
- Which specialist staff are physically on-site at that school — full-time SLP, OT, psychologist, nurse — or do they travel between schools?
- How frequently will each related service be provided, and is that frequency written into the IEP?
- For students with severe needs: will service frequency be increased to reflect the higher support level required?
- Can I visit the proposed classroom and meet the teacher before agreeing to the placement?
- Write down all questions and submit concerns in writing before the meeting

YOUR RIGHT TO EVALUATE AND REFUSE A SCHOOL PLACEMENT — LEGALLY VALIDATED

- **You are NOT required to accept a school placement you are not satisfied with.** This is a federal right under IDEA (20 U.S.C. § 1415 and the stay-put provision at 20 U.S.C. § 1415(j)).
- **Before agreeing to any placement change, compare the proposed school against your child's current school:** specialist staff on-site, service frequency per week, class size and ratio, severity level served, and teacher credentials.
- **Only agree to a placement change if the new school offers a meaningfully more appropriate level of support.** IDEA's standard is whether the placement is 'appropriate' for your child — not simply different or convenient for the district.
- **If you refuse a proposed change:** your child remains in the current placement (stay-put right) while disagreement is resolved. The school must accept your decision or pursue due process.
- **Legal note:** Referenced to 20 U.S.C. § 1415, 34 CFR § 300.300, and stay-put doctrine. Consult a qualified special education advocate or attorney for guidance specific to your situation.

STEP 6 — THE IEP MEETING

What Happens at the IEP Meeting?

The IEP meeting is where the team reviews the draft IEP, makes adjustments, and reaches agreement. You are an equal member — not a passive recipient of decisions others have made.

Required IEP Team Members

- Parent or guardian | At least one regular education teacher | At least one special education teacher
- School district representative who can authorize services
- Someone who can interpret evaluation results — often the school psychologist
- The child when appropriate (required for transition planning at age 16)
- Related service providers relevant to the child's needs

Key Questions to Ask During the IEP Meeting

- Goals: **Is each goal measurable with a specific number or observable behavior? What data is collected and how often?**
- Services: **Is every service written into the IEP in minutes per week? Verbal commitments are not enforceable.**
- Placement severity: **What is the severity level of the proposed classroom and what are the teacher's specific credentials?**
- On-site staffing: **Which specialist staff are physically at the school — not traveling from another campus — on the days my child needs services?**
- Severe needs frequency: **If my child has significant support needs, is the service frequency higher than for a Mild student, with data to justify it?**
- Progress monitoring: **What happens if my child is not on track at the 9-week progress report?**

What Your Signature Means

- **Signature acknowledging receipt** — you attended and received a copy. Does **NOT** mean you agree with the IEP.
- **Signature consenting to initial placement** — permission to begin services. Required for first IEP only. Take it home first if needed — this is your right.



IF A PLACEMENT CHANGE IS PROPOSED AT THE MEETING

- **You are never required to agree to a placement change at the meeting.** Take time to compare schools before deciding.
- **Use iepguide.org** to check the proposed school's SWD %, SDC program type, and specialist staff before saying yes.
- Only agree if the new school provides a **meaningfully more appropriate level of support** — not simply because it is more convenient for the district. If service levels are similar to or less than your current school, you have every right to decline.
- **If you decline:** your child stays in current placement (stay-put right). Document your refusal in writing and request a Prior Written Notice from the school.

SCHOOL DELIVERABLE — Step 6

- Written meeting notice at least 10 days in advance
- Copy of final IEP provided at or shortly after the meeting
- Prior Written Notice documenting all decisions made
- Procedural Safeguards provided at least once per year

PARENT DELIVERABLE — Step 6

- Attend or participate by phone/video
- Review every page before signing — use the questions above
- Sign receipt only to acknowledge attendance
- Sign consent to placement only when fully satisfied — take it home if needed

STEP 7 — SERVICES BEGIN

Starting Services

Once you consent, services must begin as soon as possible — typically within days of signed consent. The school cannot delay after consent is given.

Types of Placement Settings

- General education with accommodations only | General education with pull-out RSP support
- Special Day Class (SDC) for part or all of the school day
- Separate school or specialized program | Home or hospital instruction

SCHOOL DELIVERABLE — Step 7

- Services begin promptly — no unexplained delay
- Service schedule communicated in writing
- All teachers and providers informed of IEP responsibilities
- Baseline data collected on all goals within two weeks

STEP 8 — PROGRESS REPORTING

How Will You Know If the IEP Is Working?

IDEA requires progress reports on IEP goals at least as often as general education report cards — typically every 9–12 weeks. If progress is insufficient, request an IEP meeting immediately.

- Progress data must be objective — not just 'making progress' without specific numbers
- If a child is not on track to meet a goal, the report must say so explicitly
- You can request an IEP meeting at any time — do not wait for the annual review

SCHOOL DELIVERABLE — Step 8

- Written progress reports on every IEP goal per report card schedule
- Objective data showing current performance level on each goal
- Explicit statement if child is not on track to meet any goal

STEP 9 — ANNUAL REVIEW

The Annual IEP Review

Every IEP must be reviewed at least once every 12 months. The team evaluates progress, updates the PLAAFP, revises goals, and considers any changes to services or placement for the coming year. ESY eligibility must be considered for every student.

SCHOOL DELIVERABLE — Step 9

- Written notice at least 10 days in advance
- Updated PLAAFP and new annual goals proposed
- Services and placement reviewed and updated
- ESY eligibility determination documented
- Copy of updated IEP provided to parent

PARENT DELIVERABLE — Step 9

- Review current IEP — note what worked and what did not
- Ask about ESY if your child regresses during breaks
- Use iepguide.org to compare school options if a placement change is proposed for the coming year
- Request any evaluations needed before agreeing to new goals

STEP 10 — TRIENNIAL REEVALUATION

The Three-Year Reevaluation

Every three years the school must conduct a full reevaluation to confirm ongoing eligibility. You can also request a reevaluation at any time if your child's needs have significantly changed. Your signed consent is required before any new assessments begin.

SCHOOL DELIVERABLE — Step 10

- Prior Written Notice and Consent to Reevaluate sent to parent
- Full reevaluation completed within 60 days of signed consent
- Reevaluation report shared before the eligibility meeting
- Updated eligibility determination in writing

Complete IEP Timeline — School vs. Parent Deliverables



Timeline	School / LEA Must Do	Parent Should Do
Day 1	Receive and acknowledge referral in writing	Submit written referral — keep a dated copy
Within 15 days	Send Assessment Plan and Consent to Evaluate	Review plan — sign and return to start 60-day clock
Within 60 days of consent	Complete full individual evaluation in all areas	Provide input — share records and observations
After evaluation	Hold eligibility meeting — share written report	Attend meeting — ask questions about findings
Within 30 days of eligibility	Schedule and hold IEP development meeting	Request draft IEP in advance — research schools on iepguide.org
Before services start	Hold IEP meeting — provide copy of final IEP	Sign receipt; sign placement consent only when satisfied
Within days of consent	Begin all services in the agreed placement	Confirm schedule — note start date in writing
Every 9–12 weeks	Send written progress reports on all IEP goals	Review reports — request meeting if progress is insufficient
Every 12 months	Hold Annual Review — update IEP for coming year	Compare schools on iepguide.org if placement change proposed
Every 3 years	Complete Triennial Reevaluation — update eligibility	Consent to reevaluation — share updated medical records

10 Things Every New IEP Parent Should Know

- **You cannot be excluded from any IEP meeting.** Schools must make every effort to include you.
- **Everything must be in writing.** Verbal promises are not enforceable. If it is not in the IEP, the school is not required to provide it.
- **You do not have to sign the IEP the same day.** Take it home and review it first.
- **You are never required to accept a placement change you are not satisfied with.** Your child has the right to remain in the current placement (stay-put provision) while any disagreement is resolved.
- **Use iepguide.org** to research and compare schools by SWD %, SDC type, severity level, and specialist staff before agreeing to any placement.
- **Only agree to a school change if the new school offers meaningfully better appropriate services.** Compare staff on-site, service frequency, class ratios, and teacher credentials.
- **If your child is not making progress, request an IEP meeting immediately.** Do not wait for the annual review.
- **You can request an IEE at the school's expense** if you disagree with any school evaluation.
- **You can bring anyone to an IEP meeting** — an advocate, attorney, family friend, or outside therapist.
- **All of these rights are federal.** They apply in every state, every district, and every school in the United States.

Final Thought

The IEP process was designed to be a partnership between families and schools. The law gives you rights, timelines, and protections precisely because your voice matters at every step. Use iepguide.org to research schools, compare placement options, and understand what specialist services are available in your district before walking into any IEP meeting.

Legal Disclaimer: This guide is for informational purposes only and does not constitute legal advice. Always consult a qualified special education advocate or attorney for guidance specific to your child's situation. Federal rights referenced include 20 U.S.C. § 1415 (IDEA), 34 CFR § 300.300, and the stay-put provision at 20 U.S.C. § 1415(j).

**iepguide.org | Free resources for families navigating special education
| Always verify timelines with your state and district**