

Your First IEP Meeting

A Parent's Guide by SchwabLearning.org



Your First IEP Meeting A Parent's Guide by SchwabLearning.org

Participating in your child's first Individualized Education Program (IEP) can be daunting. To help you confidently assume your key role on the IEP team, this guide explains the special vocabulary and procedures of an IEP meeting, your legal rights, and how to make sure IEP goals address your child's learning strengths and needs. Tips are also offered to help your child and family understand learning disabilities.

This guide includes:

Articles

- page **1** **Individualized Education Program (IEP) — An Overview**
By Jan Baumel, M.S., L.E.P.

- page **5** **Tips for a Successful IEP Meeting**
By SchwabLearning.org staff
- page **8** **• IEP Planning Form**

- page **9** **Individualized Education Program Goals**
By SchwabLearning.org staff

- page **12** **Frequently Used Educational Terms**
By Jan Baumel, M.S., L.E.P.

- page **15** **Talking with Family about Your Child's Learning Disability:
Challenges and Rewards**
By Ann Christen, M.A., M.F.T., and Kristin Stanberry

- page **18** **Talking with Your Elementary School Child about Learning Difficulties**
By Brian Inglesby, M.A., L.E.P.
- page **21** **• Ten Top Tips on Talking to Your Child about Learning Difficulties**

Resources & References

- page **22** **Books, Articles, and Websites**

A Parent's Guide to the First IEP Meeting

Individualized Education Program (IEP) — An Overview

You asked to have your child evaluated for special education services. Now it's time for the IEP meeting, but you're not sure what to expect. What's in an IEP? How can you prepare for the meeting?

What is an IEP?

The IEP, Individualized Education Program, is a written document that's developed for each public school child who's eligible for special education. The IEP is created through a team effort and reviewed at least once a year.

Before an IEP can be written, your child must be eligible for special education. By federal law, a multidisciplinary team must determine that (1) she's a child with a disability and (2) she requires special education and related services to benefit from the general education program.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a federal law, requires certain information to be included in the IEP but doesn't specify how the IEP should look. Because states and local school systems may include additional information, forms differ from state to state and may vary between school systems within a state. You can find out about your state laws and regulations through our state level resources. (See resources at the end of this guide.)

IEP Team Members

The members of the multidisciplinary team who write your child's IEP include:

- You, the parents, who have valuable insights and information about her strengths and needs, and ideas for enhancing her education
- General education teacher(s) who can share information about classroom expectations and your child's performance
- A special education teacher who has training and experience in educating children with disabilities and in working with other educators to plan accommodations
- An individual who can interpret the results of your child's evaluation and use results to help plan an appropriate instructional program
- A representative of the school system who knows about special education services and has the authority to commit resources
- Individuals with knowledge or special expertise about your child that are invited by you and/or the school district
- Representatives from transition services agencies, when such services are being discussed
- Your child, when appropriate, and whenever transition is discussed

Individualized Education Program (IEP) — An Overview

Contents of the IEP

The IEP is a document that's designed to meet your child's unique educational needs. It's not a contract, but it does guarantee the necessary supports and services that are agreed upon and written for your child.

At the least, the IEP must contain these pieces of information:

Present Levels of Educational Performance

Information about your child's strengths and needs is presented by teachers, parents, and the school staff who evaluated her. Comments will be made about how your child is doing in the classroom. Observations and results of state and district-wide tests and the special education evaluation, including individually administered standardized tests, are reviewed. Besides academic needs, any other areas of concern that have been identified, such as language development, behavior, or social skills, should be discussed, as well.

Goals

The next step is to write measurable goals that she can reasonably accomplish in one year. Goals are based on what was discussed and documented in present levels of educational performance and focus on her needs that result from the disability. **Goals should help her be involved and progress in the general curriculum and may be academic, social, behavioral, self-help, or address other educational needs.** Goals are not written to maintain skills or help her achieve above grade level.

The requirement for objectives and benchmarks — with which to measure progress toward goals — was eliminated from IEP requirements with the 2004 reauthorization of (IDEA). However, the law now states that the child's IEP must include "a description of how the child's progress toward the annual goals ... will be measured and when periodic reports on the progress the child is making toward annual goals will be provided" — for example, at the same time report cards are issued for all students.

Special Education and Related Services

Once the IEP is written, the team has to decide how to put it into action. The school district is obligated to provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). So the IEP team considers the way — to the maximum extent appropriate for both — to educate your child alongside kids without a disability. Special education is a set of services, rather than a specific place for your child to go. The services your child needs to reach the goals and objectives and how they'll be delivered are identified. For most kids, the general education classroom will be the preferred setting, but a range of options is available, including special day classes.

In addition to the above, the following are part of the IEP:

- The extent, if any, to which your child will not participate with nondisabled kids in the regular class and other school activities
- Whether she will take state and district-wide tests, with or without accommodations, or have an alternative assessment

“The IEP team considers the way — to the maximum extent appropriate for both — to educate your child alongside kids without a disability.”

Individualized Education Program (IEP) — An Overview

- When services will begin, where and how often they'll be provided, and how long they'll last
- Necessary transition services (age 16 or the first IEP that will be in effect when the child turns 16)

These special factors will be considered and addressed in the IEP, depending on your child's needs:

- Supports and strategies for behavior management, if behavior interferes with her learning or the learning of others
- Language needs as related to the IEP if she has limited mastery, or proficiency, in English
- Communication needs
- Assistive technology devices or services required in order to receive FAPE
- Necessary accommodations in the general education classroom

Your Role at the Meeting

Parents often feel overwhelmed when they attend an IEP meeting because so many people are there. The time goes by quickly, and you may feel rushed. Education jargon can be hard to understand, yet you're supposed to be a full participant in the meeting.

Here are some ideas that may help to reduce your anxiety, increase your participation, and facilitate the process.

- Communicate regularly with school staff so that you'll have an idea of what the teachers may say at the meeting.
- Prepare your thoughts before the meeting by writing down the important points you want to make about your child. Download the IEP Planning Form to help you focus on major issues, especially for the initial IEP meeting. If you'd like, ask to have your information included in your child's IEP.
- Take someone with you to serve as your support system. If a spouse or family member can't attend, ask a trusted friend to go with you. If you decide to bring a friend or advocate, you should inform the school so they are aware of whom you're bringing. Be prepared for them to question who the person is and why you have decided to include them in the meeting. The school should tell you if they have a specific policy on other attendees at the IEP meeting.
- Ask questions if you don't understand the terms being used. If necessary, arrange to meet with individuals after the meeting to review their statements or reports.
- Try to stay focused and positive. If anyone becomes frustrated or angry, ask to have the meeting continued at another date. It's hard to develop an IEP when emotions have taken over the process.
- Remember that you can sign to show you participated in the meeting, but you don't have to agree to the goals or services at the meeting. You can take the IEP home to review, get input, and return later.

Individualized Education Program (IEP) — An Overview

What Happens Next

Written parent permission is necessary before the IEP can go into effect. If you agree with only parts of the IEP, let the school know so services can begin for your child. Once you sign the first IEP, you have granted your permission for the school to provide ongoing special education services for your child.

Although you may change your mind after signing the IEP and withdraw your permission, you should be aware that this action may have legal implications. (Consult with an advocate before taking this action.) Write a letter to the school that tells why you've changed your mind and which parts of the IEP you disagree with. Most likely, the school will want to hold another IEP meeting to discuss your concerns.

The IEP is reviewed at least once a year. However, **if you or the teacher believe that your child isn't learning or making progress or has achieved the goals sooner than expected, a meeting may be scheduled to revise the IEP.** If you feel that an IEP review meeting is needed, put your request in writing and send it to the school and/or district administrator.

Work collaboratively with the staff responsible for your child's IEP. Ask what you can do to reinforce skills at home.

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About the Author

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A Parent's Guide to the First IEP Meeting

Tips for a Successful IEP Meeting

As a parent, do you approach IEP meetings with fear and dread? If so, here are some suggestions to help you feel more at ease and able to participate as a full member of the team that plans your child's special education program.

Before the meeting:

- **Build a positive relationship with at least one person on the IEP team**, such as the classroom teacher, principal, or school psychologist, before the meeting. Such a relationship will help you feel more comfortable and know someone else hears your point of view.
- **Plan ahead and put your thoughts down on paper**, so you won't forget to mention what's important to you during the meeting. Complete the IEP Planning Form before the meeting. **Know the purpose and format of the IEP meeting and who will be there ahead of time.** That way you won't be surprised by the number of people around the table or the process being followed. IDEA 2004 contains new provisions that you should be aware of, including who can be excused from IEP meetings, and alternative ways to hold IEP team meetings.
- **If you wish to share the results of a private evaluation with the IEP team, send copies of the reports to the team ahead of time** so they can be familiar with the data before the meeting, rather than take valuable time during the meeting to review them. In some cases parents may feel that sharing this report (or particular aspects of the report) will not be of benefit to the IEP process; it's your choice whether to do so.
- **Review current reports, last year's IEP** (if applicable), and **Parents' Rights and Responsibilities** sent to you annually.

During the meeting:

- **Understand that, as the parent, you are an integral part of the IEP team.** In fact, federal law requires schools to insure that IEP teams include the parents of the child. Anything you can do to make yourself more comfortable in this meeting will help you to participate more actively.
- **Find a way to personalize your child.** When you talk about him, make him recognizable to all team members. Remember that you know him best — strengths, talents, interests, and needs, so take in what the professionals have to say, but add your perspective also. Some parents bring a photograph of their child to help keep the discussion student-focused.
- **Be prepared for district staff to refer to assessment data and their observations, to support their opinions** about what is appropriate for your child. This may be different from your input but is just as valid. It's important to "see the big picture" — understand your child from different professional points-of-view— to assist in educational planning.

Tips for a Successful IEP Meeting

- **Keep focused on what you want answered or provided for your child, not on how to get there** — that's the job of the professionals. For example, if you want your child to make more growth in reading, keep that foremost, and don't get stuck on asking for a specific method of teaching you heard about from a friend. However, do make sure that special education and related services are based on peer-reviewed research, to the extent that is practicable .
- **Don't hesitate to ask questions and seek clarification.** In any profession, people talk in jargon at times. Since understanding the discussion is essential to supporting your child, you can request at the beginning of the meeting that participants explain any acronyms or special vocabulary they use when they speak.
- **Bring a trusted person with you** — spouse, partner, relative, neighbor, friend — so you'll have a support system and another set of ears to hear what others have said. The law requires that this person have knowledge or special expertise regarding your child. If you decide to bring a friend or advocate, you should inform the school so they are aware of whom you're bringing. Be prepared for them to ask who the person is and why you have decided to include them in the meeting. The school should tell you if they have a specific policy on other attendees at the IEP meeting.

“Review current reports, last year's IEP (if applicable), and Parents' Rights and Responsibilities sent to you annually.”

If no one is available to accompany you, you may wish to audiotape the meeting so you can listen to the tape later. However, you'll need to notify the district ahead of time of your intentions; in that case, it's likely the district will also audiotape.

- **Involve your child in the IEP meeting to the extent appropriate for his age.** Federal law requires that the child be included in the IEP meeting whenever transition services are going to be discussed. Those discussions begin with the first IEP to be in effect when the child turns 16 — or younger if the IEP team finds it appropriate to do so. When he's 18, he'll be the adult making decisions about his own placement, so it's never too early to include him in the process.
- **Ask to take the IEP home to review** if you're unable to make a final decision at the meeting. You are not required to sign it if you disagree with the IEP, or even if you're uncertain about whether you agree with the IEP. However, you should agree to sign where it shows you attended the meeting.

After the meeting:

- **If you have serious doubts or concerns about the IEP, put those concerns in writing and return them to school with the unsigned IEP as soon as you have made your decisions.** You can then request another IEP meeting. **If you have agreed to the IEP, review the agreed upon IEP to make sure you understand it.** If not, talk to the trusted person you brought to the meeting, or contact one of the other IEP participants for clarification. Remember you can always change your mind and withdraw permission for any or all of the parts of the IEP you agreed to.

Tips for a Successful IEP Meeting

- **Talk to your child, in terms he'll understand, about what was discussed at the IEP meeting.** Be sure to discuss the progress he's made. Review goals and objectives so he'll know what he's going to be working on during the coming year.
- **Place the IEP in the binder or file where you keep other school notices and reports.** This makes it easy to access for future reference.
- **Note on your calendar the dates that you can expect to receive regular reports from the school of your child's progress toward his annual IEP goals.** Make sure that you're receiving the reports in a timely way and that they include data that document your child's progress. These reports need to be based on objective criteria.

Develop a collaborative relationship with the professionals who interact regularly with your child. Meet with his special education teacher to share observations and to learn how you can reinforce at home the skills and strategies being taught to him at school.

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About the Author

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 **A Parent's Guide to the First IEP Meeting**

IEP Planning Form

Child's Name: _____ Date: _____

This form provides a guideline for your input at the IEP meeting. Please plan to share this information at the meeting or with your child's special education teacher prior to the meeting. You may wish to submit the completed form or use it as a basis for discussion. If you submit the form, be sure to make a copy for your records.

My child's strengths are:

My child needs the most help with:

At this time, the most important goal(s) for my child for the next year are:

Effective rewards for my child are:

Homework assignments are done by my child

Where? _____

When? _____

With whose help? _____

Other information about my child that the school should know:

A Parent's Guide to the First IEP Meeting

Individualized Education Program (IEP) Goals — The Basics

Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings give you and the school a chance to work together to design an IEP for your child with learning disabilities who's been determined eligible for special education. The goals for academic achievement and functional performance set for your child are the core of the IEP. As a parent, you play an important role in developing these goals.

What Are Goals?

Goals represent what you and the other IEP team members think your child will be able to accomplish in his area(s) of disability—academic, developmental, and functional—in a year's time. Annual goals must be written in measurable terms. Here is an example:

Sample IEP Long-Term Goal in Reading*

Given randomly selected passages at the third-grade level, J. R. will read aloud 115 words correct per minute, by the end of the year (or in 35 weeks), as measured by a valid curriculum-based measurement.

**From the National Center on Student Progress Monitoring at www.studentprogress.org.*

To the degree practicable, both the specially designed instruction used to achieve the goals, and the evaluation tools used to measure your child's achievement, should be research based.

A Note on IEP Goals and Academic Content Standards

To meet the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), all states must set rigorous standards for student achievement in reading, math, and science, and test students using assessments that are aligned with your state's academic content standards, which define what children must know and be able to do at each grade level. Since your child will be tested based on these standards, it would seem logical that formulation of his IEP goals would be based on them, particularly if your child has a deficit in reading or math. As a parent, you can play a role in making sure that your child's IEP goals are aligned with these academic content standards, even if your child may not reach the standards for his grade level in a single academic year.

How Are Goals Developed?

The IEP team develops academic and functional goals based on your child's present level of performance. Reports from you and the teachers, as well as evaluations and performance on state assessments, provide the basis for deciding areas to focus on for your child. In addition, your state's academic content standards for your child's grade level can serve as a reference point for setting goals for your child. (See box above.) If you prepare some ideas before the meeting, you'll feel more comfortable participating in the process.

Individualized Education Program (IEP) Goals — The Basics

Goals must relate directly to the areas of need identified in the present level of performance. They should be prioritized in order of greatest need and be stated in objective, measurable terms.

Your child needs to understand what his goals (and objectives or benchmarks, if any) are. As he gets older, he should be involved in developing them, as well. The more he is aware of what he's working on, the better his buy-in, and the greater his chances of achieving the goals.

How Many Goals Are Enough?

Often IEPs include too many goals. This can be confusing to you and the teachers and put unrealistic expectations on your child. To keep the number manageable, consider setting one goal for each "big" area of concern, for example, basic reading skills, reading comprehension, math calculation, or study skills.

Who Carries Out the Goals?

The type of goals the team writes determines who will carry them out — the special education teacher, general education teacher, or support person (for example, speech/language pathologist) responsible. Often, a team works together, for example, the special and general education teachers and the speech/language pathologist may work to help your child improve skills in reading comprehension.

When Can You Expect Progress Reports on the Goals?

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that your child's IEP include a description of how the child's progress toward the annual goals will be measured, and when periodic reports of progress toward annual goals will be provided. Although short-term objectives are no longer required under IDEA 2004 for most students, parents may continue to request that annual goals contain additional information about the interim points of achievement that clearly indicate that the goal will be reached by year's end. Nothing in IDEA 2004 prohibits the development of short-term objectives. Periodic reports on your child's progress toward his IEP goals should be issued at least as often as those issued to parents of students without a disability, for example, at the same time report cards are issued. The two examples below show what a progress report on improvement of a child's math computation skills within a single grading period might look like:

- At the end of the first grading period, given 10 problems requiring two-digit plus two-digit addition without renaming (regrouping/carrying)(e.g., $14 + 11 =$), Sammy wrote the sums with 80% accuracy, as measured by a valid, curriculum-based assessment.
- At the end of the second grading period, given 10 problems requiring two-digit plus two-digit addition with renaming (e.g., $14 + 18 =$), Sammy wrote the sums with 80% accuracy, as measured by a valid, curriculum-based assessment.

Remember that you can also schedule an informal conference with the special education teacher to see how your child is doing. As the parent of a child with an IEP, you should communicate regularly with teachers and other school professionals, to ensure that your child is making measurable progress toward his IEP goals, so that you won't be in for "surprises" a few months down the road.

“Goals represent what you and the IEP team think your child will be able to accomplish in his area(s) of disability in a year's time.”

Individualized Education Program (IEP) Goals — The Basics

What if There's No Progress?

Sometimes parents and schools have different ideas about whether progress is being made toward a child's IEP goals or how quickly it's happening. Ideally, for academic deficits in reading and math, your child's IEP goals would be aligned with your state's academic content standards, but expectations must also be realistic. If your child is three grade levels behind his classmates in reading, he probably won't be able to catch up to them in a year, but he should make progress in closing the gap. If, after talking with the teacher about your child's lack of progress toward IEP goals you are still concerned, ask for an IEP review meeting. You can do this by writing a letter to the principal of your child's school or to the school district's special education administrator, and sending copies to the staff who work with your child.

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About the Author

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Frequently Used Educational Terms

As you address your child's learning or attention problems with teachers and other professionals, you will probably hear many terms that are new or confusing to you. Following is a guide to terms frequently used in educational settings.

Accommodations: Techniques and materials that don't change the basic curriculum but do make learning a little easier or help kids communicate what they know

Achievement Tests: Measures of acquired knowledge in academic skills, such as reading, math, writing, and science

Advocacy: Recognizing and communicating needs, rights, and interests on behalf of a child; making informed choices

Assessment: Process of identifying strengths and needs to assist in educational planning; includes observation, record review, interviews, and tests

Assistive Technology (AT): Any item, piece of equipment, or system that helps kids with disabilities bypass, work around, or compensate for specific learning deficits

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD): A neurobehavioral disorder that causes an individual to be inattentive or hyperactive/impulsive, or to display a combination of those symptoms

Auditory Discrimination: Ability to identify differences between words and sounds that are similar

Auditory Processing: Among kids with normal hearing, the ability to understand spoken language

Collaboration: Working in partnership on behalf of a child, e.g., parent and teacher, or special education teacher and general education teacher.

Compliance Complaint: Complaint filed with the state department of education or local school district by a person who feels that an educational law has been broken

Designated Instruction and Services (DIS): Sometimes called related services; specialized instructional, and/or support services identified through an assessment and written on an IEP as necessary for a child to benefit from special education (e.g. speech/ language therapy, vision services, etc.)

Discrepancy: Difference between 2 tests, such as between measures of a child's intellectual ability and his academic achievement

Due Process: Procedural safeguards to protect the rights of the parent/guardian and the child under federal and state laws and regulations for special education; includes voluntary mediation or a due process hearing to resolve differences with the school

Dysarthria: Disorder of fine motor muscles involved in speech; affects ability to pronounce sounds correctly

Dyscalculia: Problems with basic math skills; trouble calculating

Frequently Used Educational Terms

Dysgraphia: Difficulty writing legibly with age-appropriate speed

Dyslexia: A language-based learning disability. In addition to reading problems, dyslexia can also involve difficulty with writing, spelling, listening, speaking and math

Dysnomia: Difficulty remembering names or recalling specific words; word-finding problems

Dyspraxia: Difficulty performing and sequencing fine motor movements, such as buttoning

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE): Entitles a public school child with a disability to an educational program and related services to meet her unique educational needs at no cost to the parents; based on IEP; under public supervision and meets state standards

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): Federal law that provides for special education and related services to eligible children with disabilities

Individualized Education Program (IEP): Written plan to meet the unique educational needs of a child with a disability who requires special education services to benefit from the general education program; applies to kids enrolled in public schools

Informed Consent: Agreement in writing from parents that they have been informed and understand implications of special education evaluation and program decisions; permission is voluntary and may be withdrawn

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE): Educational instruction in a place that encourages maximum interaction between disabled and nondisabled kids and is appropriate to both

Learning Disability (LD): A neurobiological disorder which affects the way a person of average to above average intelligence receives, processes, or expresses information. LD impacts one's ability to learn the basic skills of reading, writing, or math

Modification: Modifications are changes in the delivery, content, or instructional level of a subject or test. They result in changed or lowered expectations and create a different standard for kids with disabilities than for those without disabilities

Multidisciplinary Team: Professionals with different training and expertise; may include, but not limited to, any combination of the following public school personnel — general education teacher, special education teacher, administrator, school psychologist, speech and language therapist, counselor — and the parent

Out-of-level Testing: When a student who is in one grade is assessed using a level of a test developed for students in another grade. Below-grade-level testing is generally what is meant when the term “out-of-level testing” is used.

Primary Language: Language that the child first learned, or the language that's spoken in the home

Procedural Safeguards: Legal requirements that ensure parents and kids will be treated fairly and equally in the decision-making process about special education

Pupil Records: Personal information about the child that is kept by the school system and is available for review by legal guardians and others directly involved in her education

Frequently Used Educational Terms

Referral: Written request for assessment to see if the child is a “child with a disability” who needs special education and related services to benefit from her general education program

Resiliency: Ability to pursue personal goals and bounce back from challenges

Resource Specialist Program (RSP): Students receiving special education instruction can be “pulled out” of the regular education classroom for special assistance during specific periods of the day or week and are taught by credentialed resource specialists

Retention: The practice of having a student repeat a certain grade-level (year) in school; also called grade retention

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act: Federal civil rights law requiring school programs and buildings to be accessible to children with disabilities; protects from discrimination

Self-Advocacy: Child's ability to explain specific learning needs and seek necessary assistance or accommodations

Special Day Class (SDC): Students in Special Day Classes (SDC) are enrolled in self-contained special education classes. They are assigned to these classes by their IEP eligibility and receive support from the Special Day Class teacher and the support staff.

Special Education: Specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of eligible kids whose educational needs can't be met through modification of the regular instructional program; provides for a range of options for services, such as pull out programs, special day classes; available to kids enrolled in public schools

Transition: Process of preparing kids to function in future environments and emphasizing movement from one educational program to another, such as from elementary school to middle school, or from school to work

Visual Processing: Among kids with normal sight, the ability to interpret visual information

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About the Author

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Talking with Family about Your Child's Learning Disability: Challenges and Rewards

"I'm having a hard enough time coping with Jason's learning disability myself, so why do I have to talk to my family about it, too? They think I'm just being overprotective. I really don't think they'll understand. Couldn't it make things worse at home for Jason?"

Why Talk to Family Members?

Coping with a child's learning disability (LD) is stressful for any parent, and the last thing you need is another demand on your time and energy. But avoiding talk about your child's LD can send a message to well-meaning family members that you're hiding something — feeling ashamed, embarrassed, or guilty.

“Telling the 'secret' often produces great relief for everyone involved.”

How will family members take the news? Some will accept the problem and offer support right away. Telling the “secret” often produces great relief for everyone involved. And since learning disabilities are often inherited, it may even help other family members understand the reasons they may have had problems when they were in school. Others may disagree or deny there's a problem at all. And some may even blame you or your child. How you approach family members depends both on their current understanding of learning disabilities, and on their willingness to accept that your child has LD. Regardless of the approach you take to informing family members, there are many reasons why educating your family about LD can help your child and you personally:

- To break down barriers that separate families because of misinformation or misunderstanding
- To provide a common knowledge of how your child learns — his strengths, as well as challenges — and why he acts as he does
- To exchange harmful labels (eg., dumb, lazy, inattentive) for terms that describe his talents and help to build self-esteem (eg., creative thinker, star athlete, skilled at math)
- To help set realistic expectations for your child
- To reduce feelings of isolation for you and your child
- To expand the home support system for you and your child

Find Your Allies

Begin by talking to those in your family who understand and accept the situation. Together, you can decide how to work with resistant relatives. You and your child can depend on these “allies” to support you and reinforce the message with other family members.

Keep information simple, and avoid using educational jargon. Help family members identify some strategies to help your child succeed in his interactions with them. Remember how overwhelming even basic information was when you first began learning about learning disabilities? Give everyone a chance to think about what you've shared. It won't be easy if the person is in denial — doesn't believe or accept what you're saying. Then you'll need lots of patience and an outside support system to get you through the process.

Talking with Family about Your Child's Learning Disability: Challenges and Rewards

For most of the family, education isn't something that can be done effectively in one talk. As questions arise, take advantage of the opportunity to answer thoughtfully. Some people may want to learn more on their own, so be ready to provide resources for them — articles, educational programs, and support groups.

Remember to include your child in discussions so he has a chance to tell his own story, in his own way. It's probably better if you do this after you know how others will respond to him. Are they likely to doubt what he's telling them, or will they understand and be able to offer him support? Remember to have him talk about his strengths and talents, as well as his LD.

Talk with Siblings

Talking to the brother or sister of your child with LD may be the hardest job of all. Siblings often feel jealous of all the extra attention a child with LD needs — extra help on homework, tutoring, time spent at school — and may be quick to express anger or make comments that can hurt. Parents have to balance the demands of all their children, not just those with special needs.

When speaking to a sibling, consider the age of the child, use language that's easy to understand, and speak positively and factually. Reassure all your children that each one is special and loved and find ways to show them you mean what you say. The structure and positive discipline that help kids with LD function better can benefit all kids in the family. So have routines apply to everyone, and that way no one will feel singled out or left out!

Dealing with Denial

You may feel sure a certain family member loves your child. So why can't she understand his special needs? You may gain insight if you ask yourself some questions about the person who's in denial.

- Is she afraid for your child? Does she find it too upsetting to think about the problem and how it might affect your child's chances for success?
- Does she feel guilty because she wasn't sympathetic enough to your child's struggles in the past?
- How was she brought up as a child? How were individual differences recognized and addressed in her family?
- Did she have trouble learning as a child, too? Since LD often runs in families, will she now have to face her own problem?
- Did you overwhelm her with too much information? Some family members don't need to understand every detail in order to help.

If your spouse or partner denies the problem, it can put distance between your child and him. Your child may feel rejected if a parent accuses him of being "lazy" or "stupid." Or your spouse may blame the problem on your family or your parenting skills. Either of these reactions can have a harmful effect on your child and your marriage.

If your spouse can't accept what you're telling him, perhaps another family member or a trusted teacher could help him understand. If communication about your child's problem doesn't improve, consider professional marriage and/or family counseling right away.

“Remember that you had to work through your own feelings ... to face your child's LD. Allow family members time and space to work through their feelings, too.”

Talking with Family about Your Child's Learning Disability: Challenges and Rewards

Once your spouse seems receptive, help him learn what LD is and what it is not. When he seems ready, help him discover ways to get involved.

As you reflect on possible reasons for each family member's reaction, you'll think of better ways to approach each of them. For instance, if your mother sometimes cares for your child after school, she may want to know some basic tips for helping him with his homework. But explaining your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) may overwhelm her.

Remember that you had to work through your own feelings — some of them painful — to face your child's LD. Allow family members time and space to work through their feelings, too.

Highlighting Your Child's Strengths

Would it be easier for certain family members to focus on what your child does well, rather than what he struggles with? If so, praise them for wanting to boost your child's self-esteem. Then ask how each person would like to support your child's skills, talents, and interests. For example:

- Does your child share a love of science with his dad? They might go to a science museum or build a project for the science fair together.
- Reassure aunts, uncles, and grandparents that showing interest in your child's hobbies and activities is a great gift. Simple gestures, such as showing interest in the child's opinions or sharing secret jokes, will help him feel special.
- Encourage your other children to cheer their brother on at games and remind him what he's good at. Some siblings resent this responsibility, so rewarding their efforts is very important.

Aiming for Acceptance

While it's important to educate family members about your child's LD as soon as you comfortably can, do it on your own timetable — when it feels right for you.

Communicating with your family about LD is an ongoing process. It will take time for each family member to feel comfortable in a new role with your child. Don't be discouraged if some never fully understand his LD. As long as they give him their love, acceptance, and attention, he'll feel special. In time, each person can find positive ways to support and interact with him.

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About the Authors

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In her role as Writer/Editor for Schwab Learning, **Kristin Stanberry** provides information, insight, strategies, and support for parents whose children have LD and AD/HD. She combines a professional background developing consumer health and wellness publications with her personal experience of coaching family members with learning and behavior problems.

A Parent's Guide to the First IEP Meeting

Talking with Your Elementary School Child about Learning Difficulties

Talking with your child about a sensitive topic like a learning disability (LD) is not easy. But it may be one of the most important things you can do to foster his learning and emotional development. When kids experience learning problems without understanding what's wrong, they're apt to imagine the worst.

Listen for Early Signs of Problems

If you notice a change in attitude when your child talks about school, don't ignore the signs. Since you know him better than anyone else, be sensitive to the clues he's giving you. Frustration may sound like, "I hate school" ... "Nobody likes me" ... "I can't draw" ... "Other kids make fun of how I talk." An older child might say, "School is so stupid; why do we even have to go?" or "See, Mom, I'm retarded...the teacher moved me to the dummy group in math."

Many kids aren't able to express their feelings with words, but they let you know that things aren't going well in other ways. They tear up their schoolwork, refuse to talk about their day, or overreact with outbursts of temper. They tell you that they don't have any homework or forget to turn it in the next day. They don't want to go to school and complain of illness so that they can stay home. They say that they have no friends.

How should you respond to such behaviors? Ask yourself if your child has been acting this way for several weeks. Is there another explanation, such as a new baby in the house, an illness in the family, a change to a new school? What does his teacher say about his behavior or performance in school?

Gather Some Facts

Getting a clear and complete understanding of the nature of your child's learning struggles is a first step. Talk with his teachers to find out the ways that his learning problems affect his educational progress in reading, writing, and math. You may also want to ask the teacher about his social and emotional development, since learning struggles often have an impact beyond academics.

Sort through Your Feelings

When your child struggles at school, it's completely normal to feel worried, frustrated, and even disappointed. However, kids quickly pick up on a parent's negative feelings about their school performance. So it's important to find an appropriate outlet for your feelings— with sympathetic family members, friends, or a professional therapist — to help you move toward acceptance of your child's learning problems. It might also be helpful to join a support group of parents of children with LD, either in your community or online. With adult support, your interactions with your child are likely to be more positive and optimistic.

Choose Your Words

Figuring out what terms to use when you describe your child's learning problems to him can be tricky. General statements such as "your brain is unique and wired differently" may help your child understand that each human brain is unique. Choose the phrase carefully and decide which words are most comfortable for you. Encourage other adults in your child's life to use the same description you have chosen so there's consistency.

Talking with Your Elementary School Child about Learning Difficulties

For some kids, it may be important to balance the “differences” statement with a more optimistic phrase like “differences in how your brain works may actually make you more skilled in certain areas than other kids.” Tell him about family members, friends, or celebrities with learning disabilities who are successful and/or famous.

Educators, clinicians, and researchers each have their own vocabulary to describe learning problems. In the public school setting, for example, special education law requires that kids be identified with a particular label in order to qualify for special education services. The eligibility category of “specific learning disability” (SLD) is a broad label used to describe a group of disorders that may affect reading, writing, and/or math skills.

Use the Correct Terms

If your child receives academic support from a resource teacher or in a special education classroom, it's important to use the proper term to describe the type of class he attends. For many kids, the terms “special education” or “special ed” are negative and upsetting labels, so be prepared for some resistance when he hears this term. But use the correct term when you talk with him because he's going to hear it sooner or later from teachers or peers. It may help to take the stigma away from the term “special education” if you use it interchangeably with a term like “resource help” or “reading help.”

Make the Problem Concrete

Simply telling your child that he has a learning disability in reading doesn't really help him understand the problem, nor offer any clues about how to manage it. On the other hand, if you tell your child that he has “trouble remembering the details of a story” or that he “needs to work on increasing reading speed,” the problem is clear, specific, and suggests a goal for improvement. It also lets your child know that his learning struggles are limited to one aspect of reading, and that he can be successful in other areas of school which are less dependent on reading, such as science, math, art, or physical education. Show him examples of his work that illustrate both strengths and weaknesses. Ask him if he can think of ways to make specific, challenging subjects easier and to learn the skills that are hard for him.

Listen Carefully to Your Child's Response

Each child is unique; your child's reaction to a conversation about his learning problems may be unpredictable. Your child may be upset or angry about being “different.” It's important to recognize his right to these feelings. When he seems able to listen, offer him reassurance that, through his own efforts and some adult help, he can learn. Back off a little if he's looking overwhelmed. He may need time to process the information about his learning issues and then return with some questions. Or, he may be inquisitive from the start and ask more questions than you can answer. Listen to his questions and give him honest answers. If you don't know the answer, assure him you will find out.

Follow Up Regularly

After you've had your first talk with your child about his learning struggles, you will likely want to have several follow-up conversations. It's good to begin these talks by asking your child to describe in his own words how he currently understands or experiences his learning difficulties — and his progress. You may need to repeat your explanation of his learning difficulties several times before he is really able to grasp what it means. Once he has internalized some of the language and ideas, he may feel more comfortable talking about these issues with peers. In so doing, he is laying the foundation for self-advocacy at school.

“Be honest about his difficulties, but provide factual information about his intelligence and the things he does well.”

Talking with Your Elementary School Child about Learning Difficulties

Take Age and Maturity into Account

Below is some general information about kids' needs for information about LD at various ages. You are the best judge of what your child is ready to hear, and his preferred ways of getting the information.

Grades K-3

Even young children worry about their performance in school. In the primary grades (K through 3), most kids begin to identify what they do well and what they have trouble with. Whether it's school work or athletic ability, kids begin the process of self-assessment and peer comparison. When you address your child's learning struggles, assure him that you and his teachers are working together to help him do well in school, that he doesn't have to do it all alone! If you feel it's appropriate, have him participate in informal meetings about learning challenges and goals with you and the teacher. If he's directly involved in the solution, it's more likely he'll be committed to improving.

Grades 4 and 5

By the upper elementary grades (4 and 5), kids should have a good sense of their academic strengths and weaknesses. If your child identifies himself as a "poor" or "slow" student, help him understand the difference between a specific learning difficulty and a general lack of intelligence or ability. By legal definition, kids with LD have average to above average intelligence, so they're smart enough to learn. Let him know that, for some academic subjects, he just needs some very specific strategies to help him learn. Be honest about his difficulties, but provide factual information about his intelligence and the things he does well. Help him understand that his learning problems are just one part of who he is. ("Yes, you have trouble reading; but you're an amazing soccer player, a really great older brother, and a champion at Pictionary®. Reading problems are just one part of you.") This will help him to stay motivated and develop resilience for the long haul.

Fourth- and fifth-graders are experts at the "yeah, but" statements that can undermine success: "Yeah, but I got an 'F' on this spelling test, so I'm never gonna go to fifth grade." If you hear something like that, refocus him on the smaller picture — "Seems like you had a really hard time with that spelling test. Let's see how we can make next week's test better." Talk about what he could do differently and identify ways you can help him. And remember, it's essential to follow through on any promises of assistance.

Keep Up the Good Work

When you can talk to your child about his specific learning difficulties in a knowledgeable and caring manner, there's a greater likelihood that he'll maintain his self-esteem, develop effective coping strategies, and learn to appreciate the diversity of his talents, both in and out of school. Ultimately, self-awareness, self-advocacy, self-respect, and hard work will be the keys to his success.

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About the Author

Brian Inglesby, M.A., L.E.P., is a school psychologist who enjoys the challenges of working with students who possess a broad spectrum of learning issues. Of special interest to Brian is the opportunity to provide teachers, parents, and students with the ability to better understand and manage a student's unique learning profile.



A Parent's Guide to the First IEP Meeting

10 Top Tips on Talking with Your Elementary Child about Learning Difficulties

- **Engage your child regularly** in a conversation to find out how he currently understands his learning difficulties.
- **Listen actively and carefully** to draw out your child's thoughts and uncover any misunderstandings: "I'd like to hear a little more about how 'things get all messed up' when you try to copy words off the blackboard."
- **Acknowledge honestly that your child is having a difficult time:** "Yes, I know reading is very hard for you; and when school work takes that much effort, it can make you feel really tired."
- **Accept his feelings** of anger, frustration, or anxiety as an understandable response to his learning struggles: "I know that math is really frustrating for you; I don't blame you for getting angry."
- **Be specific about the identified learning problem** so that it feels manageable: Rather than saying, "You have language problems," try, "You have a hard time answering your teacher out loud in class."
- **Let him know you and the teacher will work together** to help him succeed: "You and your teacher and I will be talking together every week so we can make sure you're doing okay."
- **Describe concrete goals** and reassure him that he will take a series of small steps to achieve them: "Your teacher and tutor are going to help you memorize your multiplication facts through 5 by winter break; this week and next, they're going to show you a way to remember the 2's."
- **Recognize your child's progress** and give him praise and encouragement along the way: "Remember when you didn't think you could even read one page of that book? Now look at you!"
- **Balance the discussion of his challenges** with reminders about his strengths and talents: "Yeah, I know you missed a couple of spelling words this week, but you're improving. And your teacher says you're doing a really super job on your science fair project; you can be very proud of that."
- **Reassure him that learning problems are just one part of who he is.** "You're great at making people laugh, and you can always get the kids on your baseball team to try their hardest. Your reading problems can never mess up those strengths."

A Parent's Guide to the First IEP Meeting

Resources

Individualized Education Program (IEP) — an Overview

Websites

ERIC (Educations Resources Information Center):
Creating Useful Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs) (pdf)
http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/16/d3/23.pdf

U.S. Department of Education
A Guide to the Individualized Education Program
<http://www.ed.gov/parents/needs/speced/iepguide/index.html>

U.S. Department of Education
Model IEP Form (pdf)
http://idea.ed.gov/download/modelform1_IEP.pdf

Related SchwabLearning.org Articles

Understanding Special Education Laws and Rights
<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.asp?r=78>

How to Get Your Child's School Records — and Why It's Important
<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.asp?r=861>

SchwabLearning.org's State Level Services
<http://www.schwablearning.org/resources.asp?g=6&s=2>

Individualized Education Program (IEP) Goals

Related SchwabLearning.org Articles

IDEA 2004 Close Up: The Individualized Education Program (IEP)
<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.asp?r=978>

Accommodations, Modifications, and Alternate Assessments:
How They Affect Instruction and Assessment
<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.asp?r=306>

Quiz Getting to Know the IEP
<http://www.schwablearning.org/quiz.asp?q=4>

Tips for a Successful IEP Meeting

Websites

LD Online
Seven Habits of Highly Effective IEP Teams
<http://www.ldonline.org/article/6360>

National Center for Learning Disabilities
IEP Meeting Conversation Stoppers
<http://www.ncl.org/content/view/974/456131/>

Resources

Tips for a Successful IEP Meeting (*continued*)

National Center for Learning Disabilities
IEP Meeting Planner
<http://www.ncl.org/content/view/973/456130/>

Frequently Used Educational Terms

Related SchwabLearning.org Articles
Specialists in the Field of Learning and Attention Problems
<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.aspx?r=41>

Talking with Family about Your Child's Learning Disability: Challenges and Rewards

Related SchwabLearning.org Articles
Coming to Terms with Your Child's Learning Disability
<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.asp?r=291>

Can't We All Just Get Along? — Three Moms on Surviving Family Gatherings
<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.asp?r=1058>

Talking with Your Elementary School Child about Learning Difficulties

Books
All Kinds of Minds
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0838820905/schwabfoundation/>
By Mel Levine

Keeping a Head in School
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0838820697/schwabfoundation/>
By Mel Levine

Websites
All Kinds of Minds
<http://www.allkindsofminds.org/>

Related SchwabLearning.org Articles
How to Help Your Child Understand Learning Disabilities
<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.asp?r=330>

Things Kids Say About Living With Learning Disabilities
<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.asp?r=50>

Resources for Kids

Books
The Don't-Give-Up Kid and Learning Differences
By Jeanne M. A. Gehret
An elementary school student figures out how to cope with his learning disability at home and school.
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/1884281109/schwabfoundation/>

Resources

Resources for Kids (*continued*)

Hank Zipzer, World's Greatest Under-Achiever series

By Henry Winkler

A hilarious series of books about a fourth-grader who copes creatively with his dyslexia and other challenges.

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0448439778/ref=nosim/schwabfoundation>

Beacon Street Girls series

By Annie Bryant

A series of books, about and for pre-teen girls. Among several main characters, one has a learning disability.

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0974658766/ref=nosim/schwabfoundation>

Websites

Sparktop.org™

A fun website for kids ages 8 to 12, with learning difficulties or disabilities, featuring games, activities, and creativity tools, created by Schwab Learning.

<http://www.sparktop.org>

SchwabLearning.org

Andrew's Journal: Growing Up with Dyslexia

One boy's touching story, in his own words, about growing up with dyslexia and attention problems.

<http://www.schwablearning.org/articles.asp?r=529>

KidsHealth:

Learning Disabilities — Kids' Health for Kids

Kid-friendly information about what learning disabilities are and how to cope with them.

http://www.kidshealth.org/teen/diseases_conditions/learning/learning_disabilities.html



Visit Schwab Learning's Online Resources



SchwabLearning.org is a a parent's guide to helping kids with learning difficulties.

We'll help you understand how to:

- **Identify** your child's problem by working with teachers, doctors, and other professionals.
- **Manage** your child's challenges at school and home by collaborating with teachers to obtain educational and behavioral support, and by using effective parenting strategies.
- **Connect** with other parents who know what you are going through. You'll find support and inspiration in their personal stories and on our Parent-to-Parent message boards.
- Locate **resources** including Schwab Learning publications, plus additional books and websites.

SchwabLearning.org—free and reliable information at your fingertips, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.



Sparktop.org™ is a one-of-a-kind website created expressly for kids ages 8-12 with learning difficulties including learning disabilities (LD) and Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD). Through games, activities, and creativity tools, kids at SparkTop.org can:

- Find information about how their brain works, and get tips on how to succeed in school and life.
- Showcase their creativity and be recognized for their strengths.
- Safely connect with other kids who know what they are going through.

SparkTop.org is free, carries no advertising, and is fully compliant with the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA).

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