

## CHAPTER 11: SPECIAL EDUCATION REFERRAL AND IDENTIFICATION PROCESS

In the United States, every [local education agency \(LEA\)](#) must establish procedures for identifying the children in their district who may need special education services. This process is known as Child Find and must include procedures for discovering whether a child has a disability and for determining the type and amount of special education and related services that are required for the child to make educational progress. Generally, an LEA is a public school district, although some charter schools are also treated as LEAs. Child Find requires that each LEA make an active effort to locate the children in their district who have a disability and are in need of special education. The federal requirements for Child Find were added to IDEA in 2004; however, each state may still determine the specific procedures used by the LEAs in their states to meet this requirement ([NASET, 2024](#); [Lee, n.d.](#); )

Child Find places a priority on locating all the children with disabilities and ensuring they receive the special education supports they need. Some children are born with a physical or health condition that is known to affect educational performance. For these children, plans to provide educational supports and services may begin shortly after birth. For most children, however, the need for special education is not identified until after the child begins attending school. When a child's behavior or educational performance does not meet typical classroom expectations or is significantly discrepant from their peers, teachers can implement a variety of accommodations and interventions in the classroom without making a referral for special education. However, if the child continues to struggle despite these additional supports, a referral for special education may be the most appropriate next step ([NASET, 2024](#)).

The most common source of a referral for special education is the child's classroom teacher. The teacher may notice certain symptoms that could indicate a disability, or the teacher may simply be concerned about the child's ability to learn or the child's rate of academic progress. The child's parents may also have concerns and may make a request for an evaluation. Parents have a legal right to request such an evaluation and schools must respond to this request by either conducting the evaluation or sending written notice explaining why the school team felt that an evaluation was not needed. While classroom teachers and parents are the most common sources of a referral for special education, it is not unusual for the referral to come from other sources including from another member of the school staff or from an outside professional who suspects the presence of a disability ([NASET, 2024](#)).



## **STUDENT ASSISTANCE TEAM**

Prior to referring a child for special education, the teacher will usually bring the situation to the Student Assistance Team. This team can have a variety of titles, but two common names are the Child Study Team and the Pre-Referral Team. The work of this team is to assist the teacher in addressing

the challenges so that the child can be successful in the classroom and the need to move forward with a special education referral is eliminated. The team investigates the concerns, which could be academic, behavioral, social, or emotional, and identifies the child's strengths and areas of need. This information can be gathered from an array of sources which include reviewing the child's cumulative file, evaluating classwork and other permanent products the child has completed, and gathering direct observation data. Based on this information, the team then develops a plan to implement educational interventions that will hopefully address the identified challenges so that the student can begin making progress as expected. It is important to note that this process is not placement in special education. The special education teacher may be involved in designing and even implementing the interventions, but this is a general education process designed to address the concern and prevent the need for a special education referral ([NASET, 2024](#)).

Members of the Student Assistance Team typically include the student's classroom teacher, a special education teacher, a school administrator, the school psychologist, the school counselor, and the social worker. Depending on the nature of the concern, a speech therapist, reading specialist, additional teachers, other related service providers, paraprofessionals, and professionals from outside agencies may also be present. Additionally, parents, and sometimes even the student, are invited. While parents are not always invited, parent input is valuable and contributes to a better informed and more productive meeting. Even if a parent is not present at the meeting, parents must be informed that the meeting is going to take place. Whenever a child's progress is going to be discussed on an individual basis, as opposed to reviewing progress for groups of students, the parents should be informed ([NASET, 2024](#)).

At the meeting, the team will review the concerns for this student and how the difficulties are interfering with the child's educational progress. The goal is to try to determine why the child is having the challenges that have been identified. The team will also consider the child's strengths and interests, which often provides valuable information for planning the interventions to be implemented. Next the team will set at least one realistic goal for improvement and identify a method for monitoring progress toward that goal. It is important that this goal be written in observable, measurable terms so that student growth can be analyzed. Finally, the team will select one or more interventions to implement. It is important to identify who will carry out the intervention, the details of how the intervention will be implemented, and a timeline for when the team will reconvene to review progress. When the team meets to review the progress data, the members may decide to continue with the intervention, make adjustments to the intervention, try a different intervention, or possibly move to a special education referral ([NASET, 2024](#)).



## PARENT CONSENT

Once the student assistance team has tried a variety of interventions without success, the next step is generally to complete a formal comprehensive evaluation. However, even though the team has determined that a student should be evaluated for a suspected disability, the parents must still give consent in writing before any assessments can begin. This is an informed consent process, which means the parents must be provided with a comprehensive description of the activities that will be conducted as part of the evaluation. If records will be released to a third party in the course of the assessment, parents must also give permission for that to occur. To help ensure that the parents understand the assessment plan they are agreeing to, this information must be made available in the language and mode of communication the parents normally use ([IDEA, 2008](#); [Lee, n. d.](#); [CPIR, 2021](#); [NASET, 2024](#)).

Parents must also receive notice of their rights and the procedural safeguards that are in place. The burden is on the school to ensure that the parents understand the activities they are giving consent for and are aware that consent is voluntary and may be revoked at any time during the process. Also, that this consent is only for the evaluation portion of the process. Consent for special education placement and services is a separate process. Once parent consent is received, the school has 60 days to conduct the initial evaluation. If consent is not given for any reason, the school may use mediation or due process to obtain permission to proceed with the evaluation; however, the school is not required to take this step ([IDEA, 2008](#); [Lee, n. d.](#); [CPIR, 2021](#); [NASET, 2024](#)).



## PROCEDURAL SAFEGUARDS

There are many safeguards in place to protect the rights of children with disabilities and their parents and give them a system by which they can resolve any disputes. Notice of these procedural safeguards must be provided to families. The Center for Parent Information and Resources provides this brief [summary of these safeguards](#)

- The right of parents to receive a complete explanation of all the procedural safeguards available under IDEA and the procedures in the state for presenting complaints
- The right of parents to receive a complete explanation of all the procedural safeguards available under IDEA and the procedures in the state for presenting complaints
- Confidentiality and the right of parents to inspect and review the educational records of their child
- The right of parents to participate in meetings related to the identification, evaluation, and placement of their child, and the provision of FAPE (a free appropriate public education) to their child

- The right of parents to obtain an independent educational evaluation (IEE) of their child
- The right of parents to receive “prior written notice” on matters relating to the identification, evaluation, or placement of their child, and the provision of FAPE to their child
- The right of parents to give or deny their consent before the school may take certain action with respect to their child
- The right of parents to disagree with decisions made by the school system on those issue
- The right of parents and schools to use IDEA’s mechanisms for resolving disputes, including the right to appeal determinations ([CPIR, 2021](#); [IDEA, 2019](#)).



## COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION

The determination of whether the child has a disability and is eligible for special education must be made by a multidisciplinary team. IDEA guidelines specify that “multidisciplinary” means that this team must have members from at least two different disciplines or professions. One of these team

members, often the special education teacher, will serve as the service coordinator and will help the child and their family access the appropriate services. The second professional can be from a variety of disciplines as long as it is a different discipline from that of the service coordinator. Because there are many members on the multidisciplinary team, there are many who can fill this role such as the educational diagnostician or a related service provider. Sometimes one member has the background to fulfill both roles. IDEA also mandates that parents be a part of this team. According to IDEA, the term parent can refer to a biological parent, a foster parent, a legal guardian, or any other individual who fulfills the role of parent for the child. This parent has an important role in providing the team with information about the child's experiences, developmental history, and cultural background ([NASET, 2024](#)).

Different states have different regulations establishing which other professionals must be on this team, but the makeup of the team is always determined by the needs of the child. One purpose of the multidisciplinary team is to ensure that there will be a team approach to the evaluation. The general education teacher can provide information on the child's current educational progress and the results of any pre-referral interventions that were implemented. The school social worker can work with the child and the parents to complete a social history of the child's past experiences. The special education teacher and school psychologist often work together to conduct various assessments of academic and cognitive ability. A school nurse may be needed to review medical records or consult with the child's medical providers. Physical and occupational therapists can conduct evaluations of motor functioning. A speech and language pathologist is often included to conduct assessments of receptive and expressive language. If behavior is a concern, a behavior specialist may be included to conduct a functional behavioral assessment. An audiologist can assess the student's



hearing and advise on hearing aids and other equipment to support learning for children with hearing impairments. Visual acuity may also need to be assessed. Every member of the team has an important role ([NASET, 2024](#)).

It is important that all materials and procedures used in the evaluation not be racially or culturally discriminatory and be administered by professionals with the appropriate training. Evaluations must also be conducted in the child's native language when the child has limited English proficiency. It is important that the assessments used have good validity and reliability. Validity is an indication of how well the test actually measures the skills and characteristics it is supposed to measure. Reliability is a measure of the consistency of the results. If a test has high reliability, scores should remain stable across time and administrators. Confidence in the accuracy of the results is higher when the assessment measures have good reliability and validity. It is also important to remember that a determination of disability cannot be based solely on the results of one measure. The evaluation process must use a variety of tools and strategies and gather relevant information on all areas of suspected disability. A comprehensive evaluation will generally include evaluations of cognitive ability, academic achievement, behavior, social skills, emotional well-being, developmental history, and physical health ([NASET, 2024](#)).



## ASSESSMENT METHODS

Assessment in special education is primarily a problem-solving process since the data is mainly collected for the purpose of making educational decisions. Several different professionals may be involved and there are many different methods that can be used in the assessment process. These methods include observations, interviews, portfolio and permanent product reviews, as well as administration of a variety of tests including curriculum-based measures, norm-referenced tests, and criterion-referenced tests ([NASET, 2024](#)).

Observation is likely to be an important tool in the assessment process. Observation can provide information about many areas of student development including academics, communication, behavior, social skills, motor ability, and self-management skills. Observations can be structured in a variety of ways, although anecdotal recording is a common place to start. With anecdotal recording, the observer simply records the behaviors that are observed. This observation record could simply be a narrative of what was observed; however, one useful method for organizing this type of observation is with an A-B-C record. To create an A-B-C record, when an incident occurs the observer first records a description of the child's behavior. This is the B or behavior portion of the record. Next the observer writes down what was happening right before the incident. This is called the antecedent or the A. Finally, the observer records what occurred immediately after the behavior. This is the consequence or the C. Sometimes the term consequence can be used to imply that a punishment or negative result occurred, but in this situation, a consequence can be positive or negative and only refers to the event that immediately followed the target behavior. The observer then repeats this process for each incident that occurs during the observation period. Evaluators can analyze this type of data to try to understand the reason for the behavior ([NASET, 2024](#)).

Rather than completing an anecdotal recording of all the incidents that occur, evaluators may only be interested in specific behaviors or types of behavior. This type of observation must start with a good definition of each behavior of interest. The observer needs to be able to recognize the behavior when it occurs. For example, if the observer is documenting tantrum behavior, what does a tantrum look like for this child? Is it just hitting and kicking? Does it include throwing items? Is yelling part of the tantrum behavior if it occurs without being accompanied by hitting and kicking? The information gathered during an earlier anecdotal observation can be helpful when writing this behavioral definition. Depending on the target behavior, the observer may simply record the number of times a behavior occurred, or the observer may measure the amount of time the child spends engaging in each particular behavior. These target behaviors could be positive behaviors, such as the amount of time the student is engaged in a learning task, or negative behaviors, such as the number of times the student interrupts the teacher during a lecture ([NASET, 2024](#)).

The advantage of completing an observation is that the evaluator gets to see the child engaging in spontaneous behavior in their typical learning environment. When this observation is conducted across many different environments, it is called an ecological assessment. Observing behavior across different settings allows evaluators to see how different environments influence the child's behavior in different ways. One disadvantage of conducting an observational assessment is that the evaluator has no control over the situation or the behavior of the peers that are present. Another potential disadvantage is that observation bias can creep in and contribute to misleading or inaccurate data. Observational bias occurs when the observer's own background and experiences influence their impression of the student and the student's behavior. This is particularly likely to occur when the student's cultural background and experience is different from that of

the majority culture. For this reason, it is important that the observer have an understanding of the student's cultural and language background and actively work to record the data in a nonbiased manner ([NASET, 2024](#)).

A comprehensive assessment will likely also include interviews with the parents, the student, and any others who can help the team gain a better understanding of the child's history and background. An interview is essentially "a conversation with a purpose." Most interviews include a combination of structured and unstructured questions. The structured questions are determined ahead of time and designed to collect information related to the child's educational progress and possible area of disability. Unstructured questions are not predetermined and are often follow up questions in response to information that arises during the course of the interview. Interviews can be conducted face-to-face, over the phone, or via video conferencing technology. The advantage of an interview is that it is personal, and a skilled interviewer can be flexible in which questions are asked and how the interview is conducted. Interviews are most valuable when the interviewer is able to establish rapport with the person being interviewed. The biggest disadvantage to conducting interviews is that they can be very time consuming. Language barriers between the interviewer and the person being interviewed can also have a negative impact on the value of the interview ([NASET, 2024](#)).



Typically, a review of the student's course work is an important part of the assessment process. This is called a permanent product review. The assessor will have the classroom teacher gather a selection of work samples that illustrate the student's strengths and challenges. If the teacher has implemented a portfolio system of assessment, the assessor can conduct a portfolio review. A portfolio is a purposeful collection of the student's work that demonstrates the child's progress and achievement in different academic areas. Classroom teachers generally use one of three different types of portfolio systems. A working portfolio contains both work in progress and final polished pieces. Alternatively, teachers may only keep a record portfolio which has tests and work selected by the teacher as a record of progress. Showcase portfolios only contain the student's best work and may be less valuable to the assessment process than the other two types. The work samples that have been gathered are then analyzed in order to identify academic deficits as well as areas of strength ([NASET, 2024](#)).

A comprehensive assessment is also likely to include some type of formal testing. There are a variety of standardized tests available for this purpose. A test is standardized when the test materials and procedures for

administering and scoring the test and interpreting the results are the same for all the children who take the test. Norm-referenced tests are a frequently used type of standardized test. These tests are used to compare the student's performance on various educational tasks to the performance of other students of the same age or in the same grade. The normative scores for the ages and grade levels that are covered by the test are derived from the results of administering the test to a large representative sample of test takers. Criterion-referenced tests are also standardized, but the student's performance is compared to a particular criterion or standard rather than to the performance of other students. These tests help the examiner determine if the student has mastered specific, clearly defined skills ([NASET, 2024](#)).

There are two different types of curriculum-based evaluations. Curriculum-based assessments measure a student's progress in the curriculum. These tests are typically quick and easy to administer and are based directly on the curriculum being used in the classroom. Often, these tests are teacher created and therefore, neither standardized nor evaluated for reliability and validity. Curriculum-based measures, on the other hand, are standardized measures of student achievement. These assessments also measure student performance, but they provide outcome measures rather than just assessing the concepts the student is currently learning. This means student performance is measured in comparison to the expected long-term outcomes over the course of the year. The student's progress toward these long-term goals can be compared to the results for others in the classroom, the school, or the school district. In this way, these measures can also be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the classroom instruction. Curriculum-based measures should be reliable, valid, and aligned to state content standards. They are designed to be quick and easy to administer and usually have multiple equivalent forms so that the measure can be given on a regularly basis to measure student progress ([NASET, 2024](#)).



## SCORING TERMINOLOGY

The assessment process has its own unique set of terminology and procedures. When administering standardized tests, it is important to understand how basals and ceilings are used. Many standardized tests are designed to be used with a wide range of ages or grade levels. For that reason, a particular student may only take a small portion of the entire assessment. The use of basals and ceilings allows the evaluator to administer only the most appropriate portions of the test, which saves time and helps avoid frustration. The basal is the point at which the student starts the test. The student is not administered the test items below this point because it is assumed that these would all be answered correctly. The instructions for administering the test will indicate where a student should start based on their age or grade. The student will need to correctly answer a set number of questions to establish the basal. If the student doesn't meet that criterion, the assessor will administer progressively easier items until the criterion is met and the basal is established. The ceiling is similar except it is the point where testing stops because the student has made enough

errors that the evaluator can assume all harder questions would also be answered incorrectly. ([NASET, 2024](#)).

The raw score is the total number of items that the student has gotten correct including all the items below the basal that the evaluator “assumes” the student would have gotten correct. The raw score has no real meaning until it is transformed into a value that is meaningful. Raw scores can be transformed to fit the normal bell curve and turned into a standard score. Standard scores typically have a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15. Given a typical distribution, 68% of scores should fall within 1 standard deviation of the mean. A standard score of 85 is 1 standard deviation below the mean and a standard score of 115 is 1 standard deviation above the mean. Approximately 95% of scores fall within two standard deviations of the mean. An IQ score below 70 is one characteristic of intellectual disability. Typically, only 2.5% of the population will have an IQ score below 70. Similarly, an IQ score above 130 is often required for acceptance into programs for students who are gifted as only 2.5% of the population meets this requirement. Scaled scores are similar and created in the same way only scaled scores generally have a mean of 10 and a standard deviation of 3 ([NASET, 2024](#))..

Percentile ranks are commonly reported and should not be confused with percentages. A percentile rank of 50 is not the same as getting 50% on a test. A percentile rank of 50 means the child scored as well or better than 50% of those in the same grade or who are the same age. This puts the child exactly in the center of average, which is much better than getting 50% on a test. Percentile rank indicates the percent of test takers who are the same age or grade and achieved the same score or lower than this student. Percentile ranks range from the 1<sup>st</sup> percentile to the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile. A person at the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile scored as well or better than 99% of those who took the test. Percentile ranks are important because they measure a



child's achievement in comparison to the norm for the test. Age equivalent and grade equivalent scores are also used to compare a student's performance to that of other students. An age equivalent score of 9-4 means the child performed as well as the average child who is 9 years and 4 months old. A grade equivalent score of 6.3 means the child scored as well as the average student in the 3<sup>rd</sup> month of 6<sup>th</sup> grade ([NASET, 2024](#)).

## ELIGIBILITY

Once it is determined that the child has a disability and is eligible for special education, another team will be formed to create an IEP for this child. Membership on this IEP team will again be determined by student need. Once the parents have given consent for the child to receive special education services, the IEP team has 30 days to put together the IEP. If a child is found eligible for special education, but the parent refuses to give consent for special education services, districts cannot use due process as a means to circumvent lack of parent consent. In this situation, the school is prohibited from providing special education services to the child ([NASET, 2024](#)).



## CHAPTER 11: SOURCES

Center for Parent Information & Resources (CPIR). (2021, October). *Parental consent in special education*.

<https://www.parentcenterhub.org/consent/>

Center for Parent Information & Resources (CPIR). (2021, October). *Parental rights under IDEA*. <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/parental-rights/>

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. (2008, December 1). *Sec. 300.300 Parental consent*. U.S. Department of Education.

<https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regsb/d/300.300>

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. (2019, November 7). *Sec. 1415. Procedural safeguards*. U.S. Department of Education.

<https://sites.ed.gov/idea/statute-chapter-33/subchapter-ii/1415>

Lee, A. M. I. (n.d.). *Informed consent in the special education process: What you need to know*. Understood.

<https://www.understood.org/articles/en/informed-consent-what-it-is-and-how-it-works>

Lee, A. M. I. (n.d.) *What is child find?* Understood.

<https://www.understood.org/en/articles/child-find-what-it-is-and-how-it-works>

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASSET). (2024). *Early childhood intervention program – National Association of Special Education Teachers*. NASSET. <https://www.naset.org/professional-resources/exceptional-students-and-disability-information/early-childhood-intervention-program-national-association-of-special-education-teachers>

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASSET). (2024). *Assessment in special education series*. NASSET.

<https://www.naset.org/publications/assessment-in-special-education-series>

**Recommended citation:**

VanTol, K. (2024). Special education referral and identification process.

*Foundations of special education* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Dordt University.

<https://manifold.open.umn.edu/projects/foundations-special-education>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Unless noted, images from <https://www.pexels.com/>