

# Special-education Assessment and the IEP

## *A Chance for You to Advocate for Your Child*

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It is universally recognized that a child's first five years of life are the most important in his or her overall development. As such, having your child assessed for special-education eligibility can be an intimidating and scary process.

If your child is going through the assessment process, someone — either you or your child's teacher or day care provider — at some point questioned whether or not your child has a disability requiring special education. However, knowing the basics of the assessment process can alleviate a great deal of this fear and help equip you with the tools necessary to advocate on behalf of your child.

The federal special-education law is the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which dictates how municipalities and state governments must provide early intervention, special education, and related services to those children who qualify. IDEA mandates that each child receive a 'free, appropriate public education.' This means that state and local governments must provide such services as determined to properly meet a particular child's needs.

The first step in the IDEA is the determination that your child should be assessed. The next step is the assessment process itself. This process involves your child and you meeting with a team of special-education professionals. IDEA provides that "the evalua-

tion must gather relevant functional, developmental, and academic information about the child, including information provided by the parent." As such, it is essential that you not only take part in the assessment, but also that you understand your role as a parent. Oftentimes, parents feel

for special-education services, an Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting is scheduled. IDEA mandates that the IEP meeting take place within 30 days of the eligibility determination. You play a very important role in the IEP process, because out of this meeting comes the IEP

of the outcomes of the re-evaluation process may be that your child is no longer eligible for services under IDEA, but you must consider each step an additional opportunity to advocate on behalf of your child.

It should be noted that you hold your child's educational rights until (1) your child reaches the age of majority; (2) parents' rights are terminated; or (3) one parent is awarded educational decision-making rights under a divorce decree or separation agreement.

In the end, knowing your rights, as well as your child's rights, as they apply to the special-education assessment and IEP process

will alleviate a great deal of stress and confusion. As a result, your child's needs and interests will be better served.

While the information outlined above is meant to serve as a broad overview of this very intimate and important topic, further information can be obtained by contacting an education-law attorney, special-education advocate, special-needs assessment professionals, and/or your city or town's school department. ❖

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After the evaluation process is complete, the evaluation team, including you, will determine eligibility. This point in the process is crucial in that, if the evaluation team determines that your child is not eligible for special services, the process stops and your child is placed in a traditional classroom. While a determination that your child is not eligible for special services may seem like the best possible outcome to some parents, the only better determination is that a child in need of services is eligible for those services, and ultimately receives them.

If the evaluation team determines that your child is eligible

plan, which is a written plan outlining your child's needs and goals as well as the strategies to be implemented to achieve these goals. Once again, your input is critical, because you are your child's best advocate.

Once the IEP is written, it becomes the road map by which your child's education is conducted. It is important to note that once written, the IEP is not set in stone. Instead, it is reviewed at least annually in order to ensure that your child's educational needs are being met and his goals are capable of being attained. If it is determined that your child's needs are not being met, modifications are made to the IEP. This provides an ongoing opportunity for you to assure that your child's best interests are furthered.

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