

The Five Most Important Concepts in Special Education

IDEA Basics for the Child Care Center

by Amanda Schwartz

Three-year-old Mary comes to school every day and immediately goes to her favorite toys, the baby dolls. While other children pick the babies up and pretend to feed them, Mary carefully places each baby in a row along the wall. After they are neatly placed she moves them around a little and puts them into another row. If the other children try to move or take a doll, Mary has a tantrum. But if she is allowed to organize the dolls on her own, she is able to move to morning circle easily.

Luckily Mary's teachers understand that this behavior is a symptom of autism and they have planned her morning transition around her needs. Through partnerships with the special education providers who work with Mary and her family, her teachers have created a positive, nurturing learning environment.

Every child in your setting is unique and deserves individual attention, but some children may require more support than others. These children may be at risk for developmental delays or have specific disabilities that make learning and interacting with others more challenging. Identifying these children and making sure they have the support they need are two of the most important services your program offers. The process for finding and individualizing for these children is defined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the legislation that guarantees all children and young adults with disabilities access to equitable educational experiences.

There are five key concepts that help you know how to make IDEA work for children and families in your program. When you understand and use them

in your own practice, you ensure all children have access to the best educational experiences.

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) is the idea that all children, regardless of their ability, have the right to attend school and engage in learning. In communities with large numbers of working families, the local preschool or child care setting is akin to the neighborhood school. You see a wide range of children in your program, from gifted to children who are struggling, and everyone along the ability continuum deserves the same right to be included.

The **Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP)** for infants and toddlers and the **Individualized Education Plan (IEP)** for preschoolers and school-aged children are the contracts used to identify a child's special education services. Created using child evaluation data, these written plans describe:

- a child's present level of performance on developmental tasks;
- goals or expected outcomes for growth;



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- services that will support that child's development;
- the location where services will be delivered; and
- supplementary supports and accommodations to help the child engage in learning.

A multi-disciplinary team including the child's parents or guardians develops the plan and monitors its implementation. Every year, the team reunites to review and update the plan and, in periods defined by age, the child is re-evaluated to identify whether he or she is still eligible for special education services. If still eligible, the team makes appropriate alterations to the plan.

The **Least Restrictive Environment** or **Natural Environment** is a setting where children with disabilities would attend regardless of whether they were disabled or typically developing. When the team developing the IFSP or IEP identifies where to deliver services, they must consider the setting that a child would typically attend first. A critical part of helping children with disabilities is understanding that special education is a service not a place. While there is a continuum of settings from the home/neighborhood environment to highly specialized settings, special education services can be delivered anywhere. The priority is to place the child as close to the typical setting as is appropriate.

Family-centered practices are at the center of IDEA. Family members are part of the process from the first referral through the re-evaluation for services. A child may not be evaluated without parental consent and parents are informed and engaged in decision-making every step along the way. Parents are a critical part of the team. They have the right to view child records, request changes in the IEP or IFSP, and pursue due process (a legal

complaint against the special education provider) at any time. Partnering with parents is an essential part of delivering services, so special education and child care partners build relationships from the first introduction.

Finally, IDEA is **outcomes-driven**, focusing on individually defined results. Once a child is identified as eligible for special education services, the team determines the expectations for what the child will do. Using feedback from parents about their own aspirations and professional knowledge of developmental milestones, the team creates SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented, Time-bound) goals or objectives. These allow team members to easily track a child's progress over time and reach toward an outcome that will support the child's growth and independence.

These five key concepts are integrated throughout the legislation to ensure that all children with disabilities and their families access equitable educational opportunities. You have a critical role in implementing them, too. Consider the following tips as you work to create inclusive child care environments.

1. **Build relationships with families.**

From the time you start serving families, establish an open dialogue about child development. This will ensure that all families are aware of their child's strengths and challenges so that they have no surprises.

2. **Connect with special education providers and related services providers.**

Including a child with disabilities (or at risk for disabilities) is easier when you have strong collaborations with special education and related services staff. If you have concerns about a child, those positive, trusting relationships can move referrals through the system faster.

3. **Get to know the children you care for.**

By reviewing child records (with parental consent), including evaluation data and the IEP or IFSP, and adding ongoing child assessment data, you have a way of getting to know the children in your care. Looking for commonalities in what you are seeing or digging deeper to know more about why they are struggling can help you find solutions.

4. Stay open-minded. When trying to serve children with disabilities and their families, it is important to meet them where they are. By staying open-minded and getting to know what their experience is, you have a chance to make real changes in their lives. You have the opportunity to help children and families reach outcomes simply by helping them make changes they can integrate into their day-to-day experiences.

5. Ask for help from others. Asking others for their perspective (also with parental consent) can help you get to know children with disabilities and their families from a different perspective. It may even guide you to find new ways of solving problems. There are generally many ways to examine a challenge, and asking for help can offer you a chance to think outside the box.

In the end, providing high-quality services to children with disabilities and their families is more than just meeting legal requirements. By providing the best care you can, you are helping each child reach their full potential. You set the stage to establish positive lifelong skills and knowledge that will support them as they continue through school and throughout their lives.



This is the first in a three-part series on the IDEA Act. Look for the next installment in the September / October 2019 issue of *Exchange*.