

Referring a Child with a Suspected Disability or Delay for Evaluation for Special Education

When there is a concern...

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a federal law requiring State education agencies to find children who may need early childhood special education.

Families should talk with their child's teachers and doctor about their concerns. Family members, medical professionals, and teachers—including those from Head Start or child care programs—can call the local public school to ask about the evaluation process and make a referral, but evaluation of a child cannot occur until a parent provides written permission.

Agreeing to an evaluation does not mean a family agrees to special education services.

Referral and Evaluation

Once a school district has received written permission for the evaluation from a parent, the school district must complete the evaluation in 60 days. Obtaining permission for the evaluation should occur within a reasonable time from a referral. Some states define what the reasonable timeline should be, others begin the timeline when a parent requests an evaluation in writing to school district officials.

A school district and family can also agree to implement additional strategies or activities before the evaluation occurs. [Response to Intervention \(RTI\)](#) is an approach that some schools may use to provide support and gather additional information about the child before an evaluation. An evaluation cannot be delayed if the school and family do not agree to try other supports or strategies first.



If a child is eligible for services, the school and parent work together to create an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for that child.

The school might decide the child does not need an evaluation, but must explain why to the parents in writing. Families can consider other services available for their child through their local health department, state, or community programs.

Questions and Support

Teachers and school administrators can help families understand the process.

Additionally, each state has a [Parent Training and Information \(PTI\) Center](#) or [Community Parent Resource Center \(CPRC\)](#) where most staff are parents of children with disabilities.

Center staff can answer questions, help parents prepare for meetings, and make informed decisions for their child. If parents disagree with a school's decision, they can also explain parental rights and potential ways to resolve the dispute.