



THE
STUTTERING
FOUNDATION®

A Nonprofit Organization
Since 1947 – Helping Those Who Stutter

SPECIAL EDUCATION LAW AND CHILDREN WHO STUTTER

A child who stutters may be eligible to receive speech therapy for free from the local school district. A federal law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 (IDEA, P.L. 105-17) mandates that state education agencies and local school districts provide special education services to children ages 3–21 who need them in order to receive a free, appropriate public education (FAPE). Speech therapy is considered to be special education. Even though IDEA is designed to provide a free, appropriate public education, children attending private schools are covered under the law too. There are several differences in how the services are provided; but even if your child attends a private school, he or she may be eligible to receive free speech therapy from your local school district. To help you better understand special education law, we provide a basic explanation on how children are identified, screened, evaluated, determined to be eligible for services, and how speech therapy plans are developed for each child. Other considerations are briefly addressed such as parental consent and your rights. Differences in these processes for children who are enrolled in private schools are discussed. Then, speech therapy options are presented for children who are ineligible for services from the schools.

GETTING STARTED The first step in the special education process is to identify children who need services. IDEA requires that school districts locate, identify, and evaluate children with disabilities. This process begins by screening children for potential disabilities. If your child attends elementary school, his or her teacher may recommend your child be screened if there are concerns about the way he or she talks. You may also ask the teacher to have your child screened. If your child is in preschool, you can contact your local school district and ask that your preschooler be screened for stuttering. In the phone book, look under “Special Education” in the listings for the school district’s administrative offices or superintendent’s office. Second, your pediatrician may make a referral to the local school district because of concerns about your child’s speech. Third, under IDEA, each school district has to have a specific plan for finding children who have disabilities so that they may receive appropriate services early. Some school districts meet this requirement by advertising in the local paper a regularly scheduled screening day once a month that you and your child can attend.

THE SCREENING If your child is a preschooler, you may take your child to a local screening day where several professionals may see your child. You will be asked about your child’s general development, your concerns about your child, and general information about your family. Then, the person or team will spend time playing with your child, listening to his talking, observing how he plays with toys, and how he interacts with others. If your child is school-age, the school may follow an approach called Response to Intervention, or RtI. This is a nationwide requirement for any child suspected of needing some type of special education such as speech therapy. There is wide variation, though, in whether a district uses the RtI process for identifying children who stutter. Some districts may allow your child to be evaluated following a general screening, while others will require your child to go through the RtI steps before being evaluated. In RtI, (1) all children are screened for academic and behavioral concerns; (2) children who are identified as “at risk” receive small-group intervention in the classroom using research-based strategies; (3) their performance is monitored for a specific period, usually 6 weeks, to see whether skills improve; (4) If unsatisfactory progress is noted, a child may receive a more intensive intervention within the classroom with ongoing monitoring. Depending on progress, the educational team will make a recommendation that the child be evaluated for special education services. For both preschoolers and school-age children, if the educational team decides that further evaluation is necessary, it will contact you to request your permission to schedule a comprehensive evaluation. Your child cannot be evaluated without your written consent.

THE EVALUATION IDEA requires that the school district conduct a comprehensive evaluation to determine whether your child’s stuttering makes her eligible for speech therapy. This means that the school district will have a speech-language pathologist (SLP) evaluate your child’s overall communication skills. The law also requires that school districts get input from parents and that parents be on the team that makes the final decision regarding eligibility. Plan on telling the speech-language pathologist when your child first started to talk, when you first noticed her stuttering, whether it has changed over time, how her talking changes in different speaking situations or with different listeners, and whether there is a history of stuttering in your family. Also be prepared to tell the SLP about your child’s interests, hobbies, and other activities outside of school.

IS MY CHILD ELIGIBLE FOR SPEECH THERAPY?

After the evaluation, a team will meet to determine whether your child is eligible for speech therapy. This is decided by comparing your child's evaluation results to guidelines developed by your local school district. The team making this decision consists of you, the speech-language pathologist who evaluated your child, and someone from your local school (either a preschool teacher, your child's classroom teacher, or an administrator). Other individuals may be involved as necessary and appropriate. The eligibility decision is based on (1) the testing results from the evaluation, (2) how these results compare to the eligibility guidelines used by the school district, (3) your input, (4) how your child's stuttering affects him in school, and (5) the team's opinions regarding whether your child would benefit from therapy. If your child is eligible, an Individual Education Plan (IEP) will be written within 30 days. If your child is not eligible, you must be notified why in writing. You must also be given information about what to do if you disagree with the team's decision.

THE INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLAN (IEP)

The IEP is a document developed by you and the school to lay out the therapy plan for your child. It also specifically states what services your child will be receiving. It is developed with your input, input from your child's teacher, and from the special education team member(s) who will be working with your child. For stuttering, this is typically a speech-language pathologist. Certain types of information must be included on every IEP: (1) a statement about your child's present level of educational performance, (2) your child's annual speech therapy goals, (3) what services will be provided and who is responsible for providing them, (4) the amount of time your child will receive services each week, and (5) how progress will be measured. The IEP is written one year at a time and is developed at a meeting that you attend with school personnel. You must also give consent for the IEP to be used—your child cannot be placed in speech therapy without your consent. At least once a year, a meeting will be scheduled to review your child's progress towards his goals and to determine whether new goals need to be written or services need to be changed. The IEP is a flexible document. If your child's needs change before a year has passed, the current IEP should be modified at a new meeting.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

If you do not agree with the team's recommendations regarding eligibility or placement, there are certain steps you can take to have the recommendations reviewed by an outside person or have your child independently evaluated by another professional. You can also take an advocate with you to any meeting. For example, if you are paying a speech-language pathologist in private practice to treat your child, you can bring her to school meetings to help plan your child's public school therapy.

CHILDREN ATTENDING PRIVATE SCHOOL

If your child attends a private school but needs speech therapy, the local public school district is still required by IDEA to identify, evaluate, and provide services that are provided to children attending public schools. The main differences for children attending private schools versus those attending public schools are in how services are delivered and the replacement of the IEP with a "Service Plan." For example, instead of a speech-language pathologist coming to your child's school to provide stuttering therapy, your child may have to walk to the closest elementary school for therapy. The Service Plan is similar to the IEP in many ways in that it will establish annual goals for your child and specify the kinds of services your child will receive. Personnel from your child's school are invited to help determine your child's eligibility for services and to help develop your child's Service Plan.

IF MY CHILD IS INELIGIBLE

Because guidelines vary from one school district to another, there's no guarantee that every child who stutters will receive free help. That's because most schools base the need on the severity of the stuttering problem; those with mild symptoms may not be entitled to free assistance. This does not mean that you cannot get therapy for your child; but, you will have to find a speech-language pathologist who works in a clinic or private practice to see your child. You will also have to either pay for therapy yourself or have it billed through your health insurance. For information on finding a speech-language pathologist who specializes in stuttering, contact the Stuttering Foundation at 800-992-9392 or info@StutteringHelp.org. For guidelines on obtaining insurance coverage for stuttering treatment, the Stuttering Foundation offers information that you can download at www.StutteringHelp.org.

