

We get many questions pertaining to school-related issues at Milestones. Parents and professionals need help navigating the often confusing areas of FAPE (Free and Appropriate Education), IEPs (Individualized Education Programs), and how to work with your school to get the best opportunities for your child. Here are the answers to some commonly asked questions.

Milestones provides coaching services to all family members, professionals, and self-advocates. Services include connecting participants to resources and providing general information and assistance. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact us at (216) 464-7600 or info@milestones.org.

1. My child is old enough for preschool, but I don't think he/she is developing at an appropriate age level. What should I do?

If your child is under the age of 3, you can contact Help Me Grow, www.helpmegrow.org, and request an evaluation. If it is determined your child needs assistance, Help Me Grow offers many services, such as occupational therapy, speech therapy, and physical therapy. Your pediatrician can suggest a specialist to conduct an evaluation of your child.

Just prior to age 3, contact your school district's Office of Student Services. They will provide a free assessment and services, as appropriate, starting at age 3.

Take a look at our First Diagnosis Tool Kit; it will walk you through each step of getting an evaluation for your child and what to do after. View the tool kit at milestones.org/personal-planning/first-diagnosis-tool-kit-2/.

2. I think my school-aged child is falling behind other children the same grade. How can I get help?

Request a conference with your child's teacher to discuss your concerns. If the teacher has evaluated your child through statewide testing for reading and math, ask to see and discuss these scores.

In this conference, discuss possible reasons for your child's struggle. Is it behavioral, social or academic? Does your child have other problems in school? Determine if there are solutions that can be implemented, such as tutoring or working with a school psychologist.

If your child does not already have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), and your child needs more specific services, you should begin the process of requesting an IEP by having a Multi-Factored Evaluation (MFE) performed.

An MFE is the first step in the IEP process and determines if a child has specific learning disabilities or physical delays. You can request that your child's school administers an MFE by writing a request to the school.

Review this sample letter requesting an MFE: www.disabilityrightsohio.org/letter-writing-request-mfe.

Use this guide from Disability Rights Ohio: www.disabilityrightsohio.org/faq-child-evaluated#what.

Your school district has 60 days from the time of the written request to complete the MFE.

Invite people from outside of the school to MFE and IEP meetings who can help you advocate for your child.

After the MFE is conducted, you should be called in to discuss the results. It will then be determined whether your child qualifies for an IEP.

If your child currently has an IEP in place, and he/she is still having academic problems, you can request a meeting with your school team to discuss the situation and revise the current IEP. Perhaps you need to add additional assistance with an aide in the classroom, or an extended school year (ESY) program. Make sure the team offers several different solutions – you won't necessarily get the right one on the first try.

3. What services can be written into my child's IEP?

An IEP focuses on the services that your child needs to succeed in the school environment. In addition to speech, occupational therapy or physical therapy, your team can make other accommodations to help your child succeed, such as an aide, scheduled breaks throughout the day, or special arrangements for testing.

Writing your child's IEP requires you to truly advocate for your child and to work with your school team to make sure your child is learning.

Prior to the initial IEP meeting, make a list of your ideas of what services you would like your child to receive, as well as any questions you have.

It is important to remember that you do not have to sign the drafted IEP at the conclusion of your IEP meeting – you have the right to take the document home and review it further before signing. This will give you the opportunity to make sure that you understand everything in the report.

We have a dedicated section of our website that offers more suggestions and advice on drafting IEPs. View it online at milestones.org/families/school-strategies/#preparing-for-iep.

4. When should my team begin incorporating transition goals into my teen's IEP?

Ohio law dictates that transitional planning should begin when a child turns 14. Planning can begin prior to a child's 14th birthday, if necessary. The focus at this point is what areas of study and classes will best prepare him/her for the future, whether the plan is college, vocational school, or another plan. Transition services should be defined by age appropriate transition assessments (AATAs). For a guide on AATAs visit the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC) website at nstattac.org/content/age-appropriate-transition-assessment-toolkit-3rd-edition.

When a child turns 16, the transition plan is revisited and revised as necessary by the IEP team. Transition plans need to address post-secondary education, employment, residential/independent living and community inclusion.

Transition Planning Resources

www.wrightslaw.com

disabilityrightsohio.org

www.autismhandbook.org/index.php/Transition_Planning_during_the_School_Years_Overview

General IEP Resources

Review this link on Wright's Law—Writing SMART IEPs: www.wrightslaw.com/info/iep.goals.plan.htm

Download FAQs about IEPs: fcsn.org/pti/topics/iep/tools/iep_faq.pdf

Review this page all about the IEP: nichcy.org/schoolage/iep

Watch this video about the IEP process: www.youtube.com/watch?v=FU3dGQWZzx8&feature=youtu.be

5. What is difference between an IEP and a 504 Plan?

An **IEP, or Individual Education Plan**, is part of an extension of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and was created for children who have special needs or disabilities and need to have their learning process modified in order to succeed in public school. It is “to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment and independent living”.

The program includes the list of supports and accommodations that a child receives from the school, as well as a list of goals for the child to work towards. The IEP is reviewed once a year. Your school team should meet and review these goals and tasks together with you.

Your school team will create a draft IEP and present it to you for review prior to the annual IEP planning meeting. Drafts may be passed back and forth between you and the school (through a working meeting or through email), adding input and refining goals, until everyone is satisfied with the IEP.

Read an in depth description from Special Education Advisor for further information on IEPs: www.specialeducationadvisor.com/special-education/what-is-an-iep/.

A **Section 504 Plan** refers to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act. It says that no one with a disability can be excluded from federally funded programs or activities, including attending school, and it protects individuals from childhood through adulthood. It can include accommodations such as preferential seating, additional time for testing and assignments, or modified textbooks.

According to Wrightslaw.com, there are fewer procedural safeguards with a 504 Plan. Schools are not required to include parents in the creation of the plan, or any meetings concerning the child's plan. Unlike an IEP, which is a detailed written document, a 504 Plan does not have to be in writing. However, a 504 Plan will follow the child after he/she leaves high school and into adulthood. IDEA only applies until a child graduates high school or turns 22.

Additional resources:

About.com

Wrightslaw.com

Use this chart to help you decipher further differences:

www.ncl.org/disability-advocacy/learn-ld-laws/adaaa-section-504/section-504-idea-comparison-chart

Further information:

Ed-Center.com

WrightsLaw.com

ncl.org

6. What does a “free and appropriate public education” mean?

A *free and appropriate public education*, or *FAPE*, means that all qualified persons with disabilities within the jurisdiction of a school district are entitled to a free appropriate public education. It is part of Section 504 of the *Rehabilitation Act of 1973*. All school-age children with a disability are entitled to FAPE.

An appropriate education can be comprised of a combination of scenarios, including education in a traditional classroom, a special classroom, or a combination of both. It may include aides, specially designed instruction, or related services such as physical, occupational, or speech therapies.

Additional resources:

www.ncl.org/parents-child-disabilities/ld-rights/what-is-fape-what-can-it-mean-my-child

www.wrightsLaw.com/info/fape.index.htm

www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/edlite-FAPE504.html

7. Our school says my child’s IEP is being implemented but I do not see progress being made. What can I do?

Observe your child at school at different times of the day, in different settings, and with different teachers.

Start a record, whether it’s a video or audio recording of your child, taking pictures, or starting a log or journal, documenting your child’s rate of progress. You can use this documentation with you to back up your concerns. You can also use an Antecedents Behavior Chart– it is a reliable way to record your child’s behavior. View this chart at www.behaviorbabe.com/abcsofab.htm.

You might also consider acquiring an independent assessment from a specialist who can observe your child in school and give his/her professional opinion on whether your child is making progress or not.

Request and schedule an IEP meeting with your team. Together, review your documentation and review your child’s IEP goals. Ask the teachers for a current progress report as well as any current test results. Discuss what needs to be done to achieve better results.

Bring outside therapists or others who can help you in the process.

It is important to remember that the ultimate goal for everyone is to help your child. You should be firm but polite when addressing team members. Listen to the supporting arguments, and hopefully you can work together to make adjustments to your child’s IEP.

If the discussion gets off-topic, feel free to redirect. If things become heated, take a break. Losing your temper does not help your child.

Review these other negotiation skills for parents: www.disabilityrightsohio.org/negotiation-skills-communicate.

Ultimately, if your meeting does not give you the result you want, you will need to move to the next step, which is seeking the help of an advocate. There is a list of advocacy organizations in our Resource Center at milestones.org/resource-cat/advocates/.

8. How do I resolve problems with my child's school or school district?

Here is a checklist that can help. Follow in order, until you get results everyone can agree to:

1. Review this informative brochure from the Autism Society of Ohio: www.autismohio.org/images/stories/2011resolvingproblems.pdf
2. Make sure you know your rights by reading "Whose IDEA Is This?" This booklet is handed out at each initial IEP meeting. It is also available for download at www.edresourcesohio.org.
3. Meet with your child's teachers, and then the principal to see if there is a potential resolution within the school itself.
4. Contact a Parent Mentor or Director of Pupil Services in your district that can advise you.
5. Seek the help of a trained parent advocate or your Regional State Support Team.
6. Ask for an administrative review with your school superintendent.
7. If the situation has been unresolvable at a local level, you can file a complaint with the Ohio Department of Education, pursue formal mediation, or seek the assistance of an attorney.

Review more information about IEP meeting planning on our webpage at milestones.org/families/school-strategies/.

9. Things are working well at school but not at home, or things work well at home but not at school. How can I change this?

What specific problems is your child having at home? Are they behavioral? Related to homework completion? Reading skills? The first step is to speak to your child's teachers. Talk about the specific problems your child is having. Ask the teachers if they have strategies that lead to your child's success in the classroom.

Request a classroom observation so you can see what supports at school could be carried over to your home to achieve success.

If the problem is at school, a meeting with your child's teachers will keep you all on the same page. You might also consult with the school psychologist, to see if he/she will meet with your child during the school day.

Remember to notify your school team of any major changes at home that may be the cause of your child's different behavior. A new baby, a death in the family, divorce, a new home, or new medication can cause your child to behave differently.

Read this article on effective parent advocacy: www.wrightslaw.com/info/advo.do.dont.margolis.htm.

10. My child is going to be riding the school bus. What do I need to do to prepare my child?

Prior to the beginning of the school year, contact the transportation office to confirm your child's bus information, and to find out any particulars about procedures. Can your child's bus stop be at your driveway

rather than at the corner? Can your child bring a book or gum on the bus? Does your driver have experience with kids with autism?

If you feel you need to, disclose your child's disability personally to bus personnel. The staff may not have been told your child has special needs or autism – in some school districts, this information is not disclosed to the bus driver.

Make sure there is an aide on board, if necessary. (A bus aide would need to be written into your child's IEP.)

If your child has any medical needs, make sure the transportation staff is trained prior to the first day.

If riding the bus is a new experience for your child, see if he/she can be assigned a seat near or behind the driver so he/she knows when to get off.

Check with your school district to see if it offers a bus introduction event for young children, if your child has never ridden on a bus. It will give your child a chance to ride on a bus with you first.

Find books or YouTube videos from the library about riding the bus and read them together. This is called "priming".

Create a social story on how to behave on the bus and what to do when the bus gets to school. To learn more about social stories, read this article: www.thegraycenter.org/social-stories/what-are-social-stories.

Create a visual schedule for your child to carry in his/her backpack that goes through the bus riding experience, if you think it will help. To learn more about visual schedules, read this article: www.iidc.indiana.edu/?pageId=394.

Here is a helpful guide for bus drivers: www.autismspeaks.org/sites/default/files/documents/family-services/transportation.pdf.

11. How can I help my child handle transitions between classes during school?

It is entirely appropriate to request your child's need for assistance with transitions during the school day to be incorporated in his/her IEP. Transitions can be some of the most challenging moments of the day, especially when a student is asked to stop doing something he/she enjoys, in order to maintain a class schedule.

If you have found ways to transition your child at home that are successful, let the teachers know so they might incorporate those methods. Likewise, if they find solutions you should encourage them to share those with you to try at home.

Examples include:

- Using a "time timer" to show the amount of time left before switching to a new subject.
- Adding the transition into a visual schedule.
- A verbal reminder a few minutes before the transition period.
- Allowing a "brain break", like a walk to the bathroom, getting a drink, or a walk down the hall in between activities.
- Using a handheld item such as a photo or card as a "transitional tool" to indicate what the child is doing next.

Additional resources:

www.iidc.indiana.edu

www.nationalautismresources.com

12. How can I help my child handle social exchanges during the school day?

During the school day, there are many opportunities for your child to be social with his/her classmates under a teacher or specialist's supervision. But how does your child learn social skills during unstructured times, such as lunch, recess and after school? And how can you help your child without being in the building?

One idea that many schools offer is a "lunch bunch" or friendship club during lunch hour. A designated teacher, specialty teacher or school psychologist coordinates a small group of special needs kids with typically developing kids to have lunch together once or twice a week. The students meet in a classroom or area separate from the lunch room, and while eating together they practice social skills. Typically, the kids do not know they are being singled out; rather they get the lucky privilege of having a private lunch club with that teacher.

During the IEP process, request that your child have an aide during recess, who can help facilitate social interaction with other kids.

Ask about starting a playground buddy program for your child's class or grade. Perhaps your child can have a buddy on the playground, someone who will play with your child, and potentially help your child join the rest of the group in a game.

Afterschool activities, whether conducted on school grounds or elsewhere, are a great opportunity to strengthen your child's social skills, while giving him/her the chance to get exercise or join a club that focuses on a favorite hobby or activity. Read Milestones' Afterschool Activities & Independent Leisure Skills Tool Kit for a list.

Additional information:

Strategize ideas for the playground: www.amaze.org.au/uploads/2011/08/Fact-Sheet-Playground-Strategies-Aug-20113.pdf.

One point of view on handling recess: autismparenthood.com/newsletters/43-treatments-for-autism-tips-for-recess-time/

A guide for teachers on what can help improve social interaction: www.autismspeaks.org/sites/default/files/documents/family-services/improve_social.pdf.

13. What is the best strategy for choosing a private school?

Some families make the decision to send their child to a private school that addresses their child's needs, whether the reasons are academic, religious, or social. Every school offers different programs and different teaching philosophies, and it is important to find the school that is the right fit for your child.

After selecting the school you are interested in, call and meet with the director of the school. Have a list of questions ready (see this list for examples of questions to ask).

Arrange for a visit to get a tour of the facility. Ask if you can sit and observe the class your child would be in while it is in session. Your first visit should be without your child, if possible, so you can devote your attention to the school. You can always arrange a second visit with your child at a later date.

Review the information below concerning autism scholarships available in Ohio.

If you have the opportunity, speak to other parents from the school you are considering. Getting as many points of view as possible can help give you perspective.

Additional resources:

Review a list of schools from our Resource Center at milestones.org/resource-cat/schools/.

View a list of schools from Autism Speaks at [www.autismspeaks.org/resource-guide/by-state/121/Schools%20%20Nonpublic%20\(Private\)/OH](http://www.autismspeaks.org/resource-guide/by-state/121/Schools%20%20Nonpublic%20(Private)/OH).

Here is one point of view on how to search for a school: www.thinkingautismguide.com/2010/07/choosing-school-for-children-on-autism.html

14. I want to send my child to a private school. Are there autism scholarships available in Ohio?

Yes, there are links to information on the three scholarships offered by the state of Ohio. Note that you may only apply for a scholarship for a private school. A family opts out of all services from their school district when they use one of these scholarships.

The Jon Peterson Scholarship: education.ohio.gov/Topics/Other-Resources/Scholarships/Special-Needs-Scholarship

Ohio's Autism Scholarship Program: education.ohio.gov/Topics/Other-Resources/Scholarships/Autism-Scholarship-Program

The Ohio Department of Education offers an easy-to-navigate website with lots of information about all Ohio scholarships available: education.ohio.gov/Topics/Other-Resources/Scholarships

15. Who is in charge of maintaining my child's IEP if he/she is attending a private school or if we have an autism scholarship?

It is the responsibility of your child's home school district to create and maintain his/her IEP, regardless of whether he/she is in public or private school, or on scholarship.

Beware: Private schools are not required to provide services listed in the IEP if they are not available at the school. It is your job as the parent to make sure a private school is meeting the goals as specified on the IEP.

Additional information:

education.ohio.gov/Topics/Other-Resources/Scholarships/Autism-Scholarship-Program

16. What can I do with my child after school?

Take a look at our Afterschool Activities Tool Kit and our Camp, Social & Recreation Tool Kit. Both offer a wealth of information on recreational and other structured activities. Available at milestones.org/personal-planning/.

17. Where can I find a qualified afterschool tutor?

Use recommendations from your school or from other families (sometimes teachers are willing to tutor, especially during the summer).

Check our Resource Center for tutors and aides at milestones.org/resource-cat/tutors-aides/.

Post a job through a local college career center.

Talk to a psychology, special education or Speech–Language Pathology professor at your local college to see if they can recommend a qualified student.

18. What are some tips to help with homework?

Decide on what time to start homework and make sure to stick to that time every day, as best you can. Keep in mind that some kids need to decompress after a long school day so taking a walk or other physical activity is ideal. Others might enjoy a fun activity for a short time before tackling homework. Still others may benefit from doing homework right away, while still in “school mode”. Experimentation will help you determine what works best for your child.

Make a list of all assignments to be worked on. It may be helpful to estimate how much time each will take, or how much time you will spend on it before moving on. Allow your child to pick the order and discuss wise choices. Finally, check off each assignment when it’s done.

Once homework time has started, offer simple rewards such as a drink of water, a piece of gum, or even doing jumping jacks to keep your child on track. Using a time timer gives your child an idea of how much time is left until the next break. Or, simply offering a break after successfully completing 5 math problems could keep him/her focused.

Review our Afterschool Activities & Independent Leisure Skills Tool Kit for additional homework tips, as well as tips on independent leisure skills and other after-school activities at milestones.org/personal-planning/afterschool-activities-independent-leisure-skills-kit/.

Additional Homework strategies:

www.autismtherapies.com/uploads/media_items/homework-strategies-for-children-with-autism.original.pdf

www.autismsupportnetwork.com/news/autism-homework-beyond

www.myaspergerschild.com/2010/11/helping-aspergers-children-with.html

19. What should I do if I am concerned that my child might regress over summer break?

If your child has IEP goals or acquired skills that could regress over the summer, you can discuss adding Extended School Year (ESY) into your child's IEP. This can be especially helpful for children with behavioral issues. ESY can include (but is not limited to) tutoring, home instruction, behavior modification services, and transition services. These services must be provided at no cost to parents through your child's current school district.

In order for a student to qualify for ESY services, the student must have evidenced substantial regression during the previous IEP year and/or there is evidence of emerging skills, often referred to as "breakthrough" skills. The focus of the services provided to the student as part of an ESY program is not upon learning new skills or "catching up" to grade level, but rather to provide practice to maintain previously acquired or learned skills.

During school breaks, keep a record (either by video or in writing) of your child's apparent regression of particular behaviors and skills. This will help support your case when you present it to your school team.

It is important to discuss ESY with your IEP team long before the school year is over – bringing it up in May will not get your child enrolled. There needs to be documented evidence that your child will need these services, so start discussing implementation of an ESY program during the first half of the school year if not sooner.

Review this overview of your legal rights concerning Extended School Year: www.wrightslaw.com/info/esy_standards_barlev.htm

How to get ESY for your child? www.disabilityrightsOhio.org/faq-esy

The Ohio revised ESY code: codes.ohio.gov/oac/3301-51-02