

Assistive Technology and the IEP



Understanding the IEP

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires public schools to make available to all eligible children with disabilities a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment appropriate to their individual needs.

The law requires that public schools develop appropriate Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for each child. The IEP is a written plan for educating a child with a disability. The IEP describes the student's specific special education needs as well as any related services, including assistive technology.

Where to Start

In order to determine if a child is eligible for special education services, an evaluation must be conducted. The school system is required to provide the evaluation at no cost to the family. The law requires that particular procedures be followed in the development of the IEP. Each student's IEP must be developed by a team of knowledgeable persons and must be reviewed at least once a year. The team usually includes the child's teacher, the parents, the child, if appropriate, a school system representative who is qualified to provide or supervise the provision of special education, and other individuals at the parents' or school's request.

As their child's strongest advocate, it is important that families insist that assistive technology devices and services be included in the written IEP. School districts are responsible for providing assistive technology devices and services if it is determined by an IEP team that the child needs them to benefit from his or her educational program. Lack of availability or cost cannot be used as an excuse for denying AT devices or services. In addition, a child is allowed to take a device home if it is needed to enable him or her to benefit from his educational program as determined by the IEP team. Training of teachers' aides and the student may also be listed in the IEP as AT services.

The term "assistive technology" may never appear on the IEP forms used by your child's school. Instead the form may use terms such as "accommodations, supports, program modifications or supplementary aids and services." No matter what form is used by the IEP team in your child's school, the law requires that the assistive technology needs of the child must be considered.

Determining Assistive Technology Needs

The IEP team determines the assistive technology needs of the child through an assessment process. It is important to consider the child's strengths as well as their weaknesses, their likes and dislikes, and what strategies are helpful in interacting with the child. A child's AT needs will change depending on their environment — at home, at school, or out in public at a library or at the mall— so the perspectives of family members and teachers, as well as the student, should all be taken into consideration.



Questions to Consider

The following questions should be taken into consideration in determining what AT devices will best suit your child:

- What does your child need to do but is unable to do because of his/her disability?
Make sure to consider these 5 areas of functioning: physical, communication, cognitive, social/emotional, academic.
- What are your child's customary environments?
(Classroom, playground, bus, gym, cafeteria)
- What are your child's biggest educational challenges?
(Communication, mobility, reading, writing, behavior)
- What assistive technology tools are available to help your child overcome these challenges?
Make sure to consider both high-tech and low-tech options.
- What criteria will be used to later determine if the AT has been successful in helping your child in his/her educational program?
- What are your child's preferences in areas such as color and style?
A child may resist using a piece of equipment that he/she thinks is "nerdy" and sets him apart from the rest of the class. A device that is less conspicuous may be preferred by the child in order to better "fit-in."

After listing possible AT tools that the team thinks might help your child, the team needs to decide which device to try first. Sometimes a number of tools will need to be tried before an appropriate one is decided upon. The IEP team should discuss the following:

- What are the specific features of the AT device that can help your child?
- How long will this device or program remain a suitable AT device for your child? — 6 months, 1 year, 5 years?
It is important to plan for important transitions in your child's life when considering AT options.
- What tools or devices are readily available from the school, the district, or a loan library?
- Who will need to be trained to ensure that your child gets the maximum benefit from the AT device?
Often AT devices go unused simply because the appropriate people are not trained on how to use the device. Find out who needs to be trained—teachers, aides, family members—and identify sources of training. Often the school system has people qualified to provide AT training. Other sources include AT vendors, parent training and information centers, and state Tech Act programs.
- Is the device compatible with other devices and/or programs?
- Can the device serve more than one purpose?

After deciding upon an appropriate AT device to try, the IEP team needs to acquire the device for the student to experiment with. During this trial period, the team—including the parents— should collect the following data:

- How often did the child use the device?
- Did it help the child do something he/she could not do before? Is it efficient?
- Is the child comfortable using the device?
- Is it convenient for use in the child's usual environments?
- How was the success of the device measured?

Sometimes a child may need to experiment with several devices before finding the right one. After trying different options the IEP team should come to a conclusion about what device is most appropriate for the child.

- Document in writing that the IEP team considered assistive technology.
- Document in the IEP what AT devices and services are most appropriate for the child.

Keep in mind that even if your child does not require assistive technology at the moment, he or she may benefit from using it in the future. Therefore, the law requires that your child's AT needs be considered continually as long as your child has an IEP.

Obtaining a Formal AT Evaluation for Your Child

If the IEP team is unable to determine what AT devices and services are best for your child, then a formal AT evaluation may be needed. The evaluation should be performed by a qualified professional in a timely fashion. This may present a problem, as there is a shortage of qualified AT evaluators in many areas of the country. The school system may choose to use its own personnel to conduct the evaluation, but if parents disagree with the recommendations, they have the right to an independent evaluation at district expense. Be aware, however, that parents may have to assume the cost of an independent evaluation if the results do not differ from the one provided by the school system and if the system can show that the original evaluation was appropriate.

Disagreeing with the school about assistive technology

You have the right to disagree with the school's decisions concerning assistive technology. Some situations in which parents and school personnel should meet to resolve disagreements include when:

- You disagree in writing with the IEP
- You believe your child is not receiving appropriate assistive technology devices and/or services
- You think additional devices and/or services are needed

When differences arise, try to resolve them informally first. If you can't work out a solution that is satisfactory, you can take more formal steps to reach a satisfactory resolution. The procedures for taking more formal action vary from state to state, but may include mediation, a due process hearing, or filing a formal complaint with the state.

You can get state-specific information from the Consortium for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (CADRE) at <http://www.directionservice.org/cadre/index.cfm>. You can also contact a Parent Training and Information Center, a Parent Advocacy Center, a Tech Act Center, or an Alliance for Technology Access Center (in some cases, these will be the same organization).

Parents are a child's most effective advocate. It is crucial that parents be prepared and informed when meeting with the IEP team. Learn about the AT choices available. Assistive technology can be an invaluable part of your child's daily life. AT can allow children to participate more fully with their peers and increase their functionality. It is important to advocate strongly for assistive technology in your child's IEP to ensure that he/she has every opportunity to reach their full potential.

