CALIFORNIA EARLY START

Special Education For Preschoolers

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

CALIFORNIA EARLY START for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities and Their Families

Early Intervention services system encouraging partnerships between families and professionals, family support, and coordination of services.

Notes:

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Names, Numbers and Dates to Remember:

Contacts:

Early Start Service Coordinator: _____

Phone Number: _____

Early Start Program Manager: _____

Phone Number: _____

SDRC Service Coordinator: _____

Phone Number: _____

SDRC Program Manager: _____

Phone Number: _____

Education Contact: _____

Phone Number: _____

Exceptional Family Resource Center Contact: _____

Phone Number: _____

Scheduled Evaluations/Meetings:

Medical Evaluation (if applicable):

Date: _____ Time: _____

Developmental/Psychological Evaluation:

Date: _____ Time: _____

Final Review of IFSP:

Date: _____ Time: _____

Other Meetings:

_____

_____

_____

Transition Year Timelines

Child turns 2 years old

- A goal is written on the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) that transition planning activities will occur.
- "Early Start Transition for Parents" booklet is offered to family.*
- Permission to share child information with district is signed.

Around 2 years 6 months

- IFSP periodic review
- "Special Education Services for Preschoolers" booklet offered to family.*
- Service coordinator schedules IFSP for transition conference meeting (as early as 2 years 3 months and no later than 2 years 9 months).

Around 2 years 9 months (or as early as 2 years 6 months)

- Transition Planning Meeting with representatives from school districts, Head Start, etc., to explain their services to family.

By 2 years 10 months

- Family receives an Assessment Plan from district. Family signs and returns Assessment Plan beginning 60 day timeline.

Before third birthday

- IEP meeting is held and, if child is eligible, IEP is written.

Third birthday

- Child begins services.

*Children referred between 2 years 10 months and 3-years-old are offered booklets at first meeting

Dear Parents,

This booklet is all about special education and what you need to know to make it a positive experience for your child. You will want to understand the processes and procedures that will occur, as well as your rights as a parent, in order to make decisions and actively participate in the meetings. There may be a number of new terms that you are not familiar with, but continue reading and the term will be explained in more detail.

During the last six months that your child is in Early Start, a specific timeline of procedures is required. There will be decisions you want to participate in that may lead up to a referral to special education and culminate in developing an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for your child. Your partnership with the professionals during this process is critical. As you are an important member of the team and know your child best, be sure to ask any questions you have and provide any information you feel is pertinent.

Moving from the Early Start program may be unsettling. Many things are changing at once. You will be learning new terms and beginning relationships with new people. Help your child to begin his/her new experience by staying positive and taking care of yourself. It may help to remember that the decisions you make now do not have to be permanent. It's okay to make plans and change them later if you need to.

In additional to reading this booklet, you may want to talk with someone who is familiar with the special education system. You can ask your service provider or staff at the school district for more information. You may also call the Exceptional Family Resource Center (EFRC) to speak to a parent who has been through the process with their own child. We all want your child to progress in the upcoming years and to support you through the educational process.

Your Early Intervention Team and EFRC

What Is Special Education?

Special education, part of the public education system, is instruction and related services designed, at no cost to you, to meet your child's unique educational needs, which cannot be met through modification of the general education curriculum. It provides a continuum of service options to meet the educational needs of children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment. Special education provides your child specially designed instruction to enable him/her to progress. Your rights and protection for these services are guaranteed under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, a federal law referred to as IDEA.

What Does IDEA Provide?

The six primary components of IDEA are:

1. **Assessment/Evaluation Procedures**
   Assessment/evaluation is the first step in determining if your child is eligible for special education. No assessment may be conducted without your written consent on the Assessment Plan.

2. **Parent Involvement in Educational Decisions**
   The law provides for your involvement in the assessment process and at the IEP meeting. You are an essential part of the IEP team. It is important to ask questions and share your perspective at all times.

3. **Placement in the "Least Restrictive Environment" (LRE)**
   IDEA requires that your child be educated in the LRE, that environment which is as close as possible to general education with children who are not disabled. LRE is determined by the IEP team, and may or may not be in a general education classroom setting.

4. **A Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)**
   IDEA ensures your child with special needs, between the ages of 0-22 years, receives an educational program specially designed to meet his or her unique needs, provided at no cost to you.

5. **A Written Individualized Education Program (IEP)**
   Before your child receives special education services, a written IEP is developed. It is reviewed at least annually at a meeting in which you attend and participate. Special education services begin only after you agree to and sign the IEP.

6. **The Right of Due Process, if there is a Dispute**
   This is a safeguard that protects your rights as a parent or guardian to disagree with educational decisions made for your child.

Differences Between Infant/Toddler and Preschool Programs

Early Start infant/toddler programs are based on a model where services are delivered in natural environments such as community settings or at home. Infants and their families receive early intervention services individually or in small groups. Emphasis is placed on providing support to the parent and child through the help of a "service coordinator." The focus of Early Start is on the child and family, while the goal is to assist parents in supporting the growth and development of their child with special needs.

When your child begins a preschool program, the emphasis shifts to an educational model which focuses solely on your child. The emphasis of the preschool program will be on meeting your child's unique needs. The preschool curriculum is based on the California Preschool Standards which focus on social interaction with children and adults, language development, and other pre-academic skills. Teaching activities in preschool generally occur in a large group, small groups, and/or at learning centers. Your child may receive some individual instruction and/or service to address goals developed in the IEP.

Length of Day and Number of Days Per Week:

The schedule for your child's preschool program will probably be quite different from the infant program. Generally, preschool programs meet two to five half-days per week. The amount of time your child spends in preschool is dependent on his/her needs and is not the same for all children.

Location of the Program:

Special Education is a service, not a location, therefore for special education preschool programs may vary. Your child will be provided opportunities to participate in a variety of activities with children without disabilities to the extent that is appropriate.

Assessment Procedures

The goal of the school district's assessment team is to obtain information about your child. This information is used to determine if your child is eligible for special education and to identify his/her areas of need. An assessment (sometimes referred to as an evaluation) is a way of looking at the whole child to learn about his or her strengths and areas of need. You are an important member of the team, and you can provide valuable information about your child. Remember, your child will be assessed only in the areas of concern. You may want to share with staff any assessments or developmental assessments completed by other agencies.

No testing will occur until you have been notified of the types of assessments to be done and you give your written consent for the assessment. A case manager from the school district will send you paperwork requesting you to give written consent for district staff to assess your child. The assessment plan (or evaluation plan) identifies the areas of need to be assessed such as communication, academic, motor, health, etc., and the specialist who will administer them. If you feel an area of need has not been addressed, be sure to contact the case manager to discuss your concerns. You will also be given a copy of *Parent Rights and Procedural Safeguards* that describes your rights in the assessment and education of your child.

Assessments typically include the following:

- Observations by staff who have worked with your child.
- Medical history, when it's relevant to your child's performance in school.
- Information you provide about your child's previous school experiences, abilities, behavior outside of the school setting, and feelings about school.
- When standardized tests are considered inappropriate for children ages three through five years, alternative procedures may be used, such as developmental checklists, observations and interviews.
- A variety of assessment procedures may be used to assess your child. Your child may be seen individually with different members of the assessment team, or you and your child may be involved with all of the team members during one appointment.

Remember, you've known your child longer than anyone, and you observe him/her in many different situations. You have important information to offer!

The assessment forms the basis for your child's educational program. For that reason, it is important that you, as the parent, participate to ensure that an accurate picture of your child is obtained. All tests are administered by qualified personnel, and a variety of assessments procedures will be used. Tests are an important part of
the assessment process and are comprehensive. Your child will be assessed in his/her primary language, or other mode of communication, in a way that doesn't discriminate in terms of disability or racial/cultural background.

If you agree with the Assessment Plan, as soon as possible sign, date and return it to the school district staff member who prepared and sent the materials. The assessment cannot proceed until it is received. Once the District receives your signed Assessment Plan, District staff will schedule the assessment. An IEP meeting must be held within 60 calendar days of receipt of your written consent (not counting school recess days in excess of 5 school days).

Determining Eligibility for Special Education

Eligibility for special education services at age 3 years is determined by the IEP team based on the results of the assessment of your child. Your child is eligible if, based upon assessment results, he/she meets the California Education Code eligibility criteria for one of the following 14 disabilities:

- Autism
- Deaf
- Deaf-Blind
- Emotional disturbance
- Established medical disability
- Hearing impairment
- Intellectual disability
- Multiple disabilities
- Orthopedic impairment
- Other health impairment
- Specific learning disability
- Speech or language impairment
- Traumatic brain injury
- Visual impairment

What Is The Purpose Of An IEP?

Once a child has been referred and an assessment completed, an IEP meeting is held. The IEP meeting has several purposes. The team shares the assessment information to determine if your child meets eligibility criteria specified by the state to be considered a child with a disability. If a child is eligible for special education, the second purpose is to develop measurable annual goals in the areas of your child's identified needs. The third purpose of an IEP meeting is to ensure that appropriate special education services are identified to address your child's needs. At the conclusion of the IEP meeting, you may request to observe the proposed educational program. If your child is eligible to receive services through the school district, you will need to register/enroll your child at the school.

What Is The Team Approach?

The team approach is the cooperative effort between you and the various specialists to develop the IEP that meets your child's needs. You are an important part of the team. At the IEP meeting, the IEP team reviews assessment results, determines eligibility, and develops the IEP. The meeting is held at the school at a time that is mutually agreeable to parents and staff. Teachers and other specialists keep records of your child's service and progress. You will be informed of your child's progress three to four times a year.

Who Participates in an IEP Meeting?

It is required that the following individuals participate at an IEP meeting:

- You, the parent or guardian
- A district designee
- A special education provider (such as a special education teacher, speech pathologist, etc.)
- A general education teacher
- The staff who have assessed your child, or someone who understands the assessment procedures used with your child and is familiar with the results
- Other members may include those determined by the school (e.g., interpreter, psychologist, counselor)
- Other individuals you invite to the meeting who have knowledge of your child (e.g., friend of parents, or a Regional Center representative if your child is a Regional Center client)

Parent Involvement In Education Decisions

It is important that you be an involved participant in the decision-making process at all phases of your child's education. You are an essential member of the team that helps to develop the services necessary and the goals your child will work toward to address his/her needs. Your knowledge of your child is essential in developing an educational plan.

The Individualized Education Program (IEP)

The IEP is a document that is written for each child with a disability between the ages of 3 and 22 years who is eligible to receive special education. It is developed by your child's team and guarantees delivery of appropriate services for children who meet eligibility requirements. It identifies the strengths and areas of need(s) of your child as well as the goals and objectives to address those needs. It also includes other information discussed during the IEP meeting. The IEP is a plan that is typically written for a year. A copy of the IEP will be given to you at the end of the meeting.

Each person who participates in the IEP meeting will be asked to sign the IEP. If you are unsure about the appropriateness of the team's recommendations you may:

1. Think about it for a few days,
2. Express your disagreement so that more discussion may occur; or,
3. Indicate the parts with which you do agree.

If you have concerns about the IEP and do not sign, you may sign that you were "In Attendance." If you disagree with any of the recommendations regarding your child's services and are unable to resolve the issue, your procedural safeguards (parent's rights) enable you to exercise your right to due process. If you need assistance, a district representative is required to help you with this process. Because districts prefer to work collaboratively with parents, you are encouraged to contact the District's Program Specialist or Director of Special Education if you feel that a disagreement cannot be resolved with the team. School districts may have personnel and/or services to help you resolve disagreements.

Remember: You may change your mind and decide you do not want Special Education services for you child without being concerned that district or Regional Center staff will object.

What Are The Components Of An IEP?

1. **Your Child's Present Level of Performance**

   These are statements describing your child's strengths and areas of need based on assessment results. These statements describe your child skills and likely match your knowledge of your child's abilities.

2. **Annual Long Term Goals**

   Goals are developed based on the assessment information to address your child's areas of need. They focus on skills and behaviors that your child and his/her teacher will target over the next school year (e.g., Mary will match the basic colors; Bobby will use 2 word phrases to communicate his wants and needs). Your input will help determine if these goals are appropriate based on what you know about your child.

3. **Educational Services**

   The IEP team determines the programs and/or services your child needs to benefit from his/her educational program. A statement of the extent to which your child will be included in the general education program is also in the IEP. Some meaningful contact with "typical" children the same age should be defined.

4. **Related Services**

   Related services will be provided to a child who is found eligible for special education if they are identified by the school district's IEP team to be educationally necessary for the child to benefit from his special education program. Related services include: adapted physical education (APE), audiological services, speech/language therapy, occupational therapy, orientation and mobility services, assistive technology, etc. Instruction may be provided at a local school or other community/education setting. The IEP will indicate the date the service begins, how long it will last, the location, and how frequently it will be provided.

5. **Evaluation and Review**

   The teacher(s) and other specialists who work with your child are responsible for designing learning tasks and activities to help your child achieve the goals. Although the goals are written, the IEP does not guarantee that the child will develop those skills. The IEP needs to be reviewed at an IEP team meeting at least once per year. At the annual meeting, you will receive information from your child's teacher and or specialists about the progress your child has made. Sometimes samples of your child's work will be brought to the meeting to share with you. You may request an IEP meeting before a year, and one will be held within 30 days of your request.

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

The federal and state laws that govern special education require that the IEP team provide programs and services in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). Least Restrictive Environment is defined as the setting that ensures your child is educated with typically developing children to the maximum extent appropriate. The concepts of "mainstreaming" and "inclusion" are based on Least Restrictive Environment, keeping in mind that special education is a service rather than a location.

Educational Settings

IDEA gives you the opportunity to decide, with the members of the IEP team, the least restrictive educational setting that will meet your child's educational needs. Options may include:

- Special instruction provided by a specialist in a public general education preschool classroom.
- Related Service only: the setting for your child's service may not always be a classroom. For example, if your child only receives speech therapy, the service may be provided at a local public school at scheduled dates and times.
- Preschool Special Education classrooms: a setting for children with significant disabilities who need the majority of their special education service provided in a self-contained classroom. These classrooms are typically located at schools in the district.

Community Public Preschool Options

Within the community, there are a variety of public preschool options:

Parent Participation Preschool Classes operated by the adult educational program are provided at some community colleges. These preschool classes allow parents or caregivers to participate with their child in a developmentally appropriate preschool program. A variety of class schedules are offered throughout the week. Parent participation in the program decreases as children get older so that the preschoolers have increasing experience in larger groups. Parents are able to learn skills for working with their child as well as get support from other parents in the program.

Head Start (HS) is a federally funded preschool program that primarily serves children from families who meet income eligibility. Head Start is required to make available at least 10 percent of all its funded slots to children with special needs. Some Head Starts provide transportation. Due to space limitations, Head Start gives priority to 4-year-old children who meet income guidelines and to children who have special needs. There is no cost to parents for this program; however, parents are strongly encouraged to volunteer time in the classroom or on various advisory committees. It is helpful to invite a Head Start special education coordinator to your child's transition IFSP meeting. If interested, have your Service Coordinator contact HS and arrange for their participation in the IEP.

Child Development Centers are state and federally funded preschool programs provided by public, private and parochial agencies. These programs primarily serve parents who require child care because they are working or in training for work. Eligibility is based upon the family income. A fee may be charged depending upon the family's income level. Centers generally open at 6:30 a.m. and close between 5:30 and 6:00 p.m. Children who are 2½ through preschool age are eligible. The facility must be licensed by the state department of social services community care licensing division.

State Preschool Programs are operated in some local school districts. These programs are half-day preschool programs that provide developmentally appropriate instruction for children. Some state funded preschool programs have income requirements for families. Parent involvement is encouraged. More information about state funded and other district preschool programs is available from your local school district.

Private Preschool and Child Care Programs are operated by religious organizations and other private corporations. If your child is enrolled in a private preschool by your choice, you, as the parent, are responsible for your child's tuition to attend that school. If it is determined that your child needs special education services, your school district representatives will provide you with information about special education service delivery for preschool-aged children enrolled in private preschools.

Planning ahead is very important when public or private schools is desired, as many have waiting lists or enrollment periods that do not match your child's birthday. It is recommended that you contact the program at least 6 months before your child's 3rd birthday.

Special Education Preschool

Special education preschool classes are for children with disabilities who meet eligibility criteria specified by IDEA and whose needs require a self-contained class. Preschool programs may be provided up to five half-days per week, depending on the child's individual needs. Classrooms are staffed by one certificated special education teacher and one or more paraprofessionals. Activities in the classroom are designed to help children reach the goals specified on their IEPs as well as to provide a stimulating, developmentally appropriate preschool program. Related services are provided as determined by the IEP team. There is no cost to parents.

Families may find it desirable to use a combination of programs for their child. Some children attend a special education preschool program two or three days per week and a community preschool program on other days. Some families choose to use other community resources, such as recreation or gymnastic classes, religious schools or informal social groups to provide for their child's needs in addition to the school program. Because children have different needs, developing a combination program is a way to individualize and personalize services for a child with special needs.

Talk with your school district's representative if you have questions or would like more information about preschool options in your community.

Parent Rights And Procedural Safeguards

At the beginning of the assessment process, the District provides you with a copy of the Parents' Rights and Procedural Safeguards. It is important for you to read and review them as they inform you of the process (from evaluation through IEP implementation) and the rights of your child as a special education student.

The following is a very brief summary of your rights, although you will want to read them in their entirety. You have the right to:

- Participate in the assessment and development of the IEP,
- Be informed of continuum of program options,
- Receive prior written notice when the district requests to initiate a change in the IEP,
- Decide if your child will be assessed or receive special education (you may refuse to consent),
- Inspect, review and/or obtain copies of your child's school record, and
- Exercise due process, and, in such situations, are encouraged to participate in a resolution and mediation session.

You Have Responsibilities, Too...

It is important for you to understand basic information about your rights and protections under special education law. It is also important for you to understand you also have responsibilities.

You have the responsibility to:

- ❑ Ask questions when you do not understand terms or reports
- ❑ Become and remain an active member of the team
- ❑ Share your perspective with accurate information about your child
- ❑ Make suggestions about your child's educational setting and services
- ❑ Help your child grow and develop

For more about parent rights and procedural safeguards, contact:

Name: _____

Title: _____

Agency: _____

Phone: _____

Phone: _____

Other: _____

Acknowledgements

The San Diego **Early Start Guides for Parents on Early Start Transition and Preschool Special Education** were developed by members of the **San Diego Countywide Early Start Transition Committee** with input from the **San Diego County Early Start Administrators Team** and representatives from the **Exceptional Family Resource Center (EFRC), San Diego Regional Center, and personnel from local school districts.**

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SAN DIEGO COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION

Exceptional Family Resource Center

SAN DIEGO REGIONAL CENTER

CALIFORNIA EARLY START for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities and Their Families

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