

Mental Health and Special Education Evaluation

Children with mental health disorders are just like any child: they need to be understood and appreciated for their strengths and talents. There may be times, however, when their mental health needs keep them from being successful at school.

As a parent, you are often the first person to recognize that your child is struggling in school. Sometimes the changes are subtle. Symptoms may include:

- Sleeping for longer periods
- Inability to sleep
- Loss of appetite
- Lack of interest in socializing
- Inability to complete tasks on time

Other times, the changes in a youth's mental health are more obvious. These may include:

- A significant drop in school performance
- Truancy
- Refusing to work or attend school

Connecting as soon as possible with the right services and supports at school is an important step to help your child.

How do I get help for my child?

School counselors and school social workers are good people to connect with first. Your child may also have a trusted teacher or coach who can connect with your child and offer support.

Sometimes, however, school staff cannot provide the help your child needs. If your child needs more direct support, consider having them evaluated for special education.

Evaluation for special education

To have your child evaluated, you will need to make a request for a special education evaluation (preferably in writing) to a school administrator. The school should then contact you to schedule a meeting. At this meeting, you and your child's educators will need to share information about your child's performance at home, in school, and in the community.

If the school does not have enough information about your child's needs, they may consider whether other interventions or additional assessments are needed. School staff and parents must decide together whether a child with a mental health disorder needs an evaluation for special education.

The school will propose an evaluation plan if there is a decision to move forward with an evaluation. You will need to understand the evaluation plan well enough to give informed

consent to the school. If you have any questions about how the assessments address each area of concern, ask school staff to thoroughly explain the plan before consenting.

The evaluation plan will include a variety of assessments. Assessments are ways of determining specific areas of strengths and needs for a child with a disability. An evaluation may include assessments of:

- Academic and behavioral performance
- Medical or psychiatric issues
- Psychological development
- Physical or mental health status
- Social skills
- Vocational skills

Interviews, observations, and information about your child’s ability to function at home or in the community will be included in the evaluation. The evaluation will also cover information and observations from school staff. If your child’s disability has been evaluated by outside mental health providers, you may request that those results also be included to determine eligibility and assist with educational planning.

**If the school team refuses to complete an evaluation for special education, parents can disagree with that decision and request a dispute resolution process or a due process hearing.*

Other considerations in evaluation

The assessments used in the evaluation should be completed in your child’s primary mode of communication. This may include a language other than English, including sign language and Braille.

Your child’s cultural background may affect behavior or responses to assessment questions. The evaluation process must also take cultural differences into consideration when relevant.

Determination of eligibility

Once the special education evaluation is completed, you will work with school staff to determine whether your child is eligible for special education services using federal and state guidelines. It is important to note that it is possible for a child with a mental health disorder to need special education services even if they achieve high grades in school.

You have the right to disagree with the school team’s interpretation of the evaluation or the evaluation results and the right to request an independent educational evaluation.

Determination of services

If your child is determined eligible for special education services, specially designed instruction will be developed to help them with the educational needs identified in the evaluation. An Individualized Education Program (IEP) will be developed based on these demonstrated needs. The IEP will include goals and objectives, accommodations, related services (if needed), and other considerations to support your child’s success in school.

The IEP should address all areas of identified need. This may include developing emotional regulation and coping strategies, behavior management skills, social skills, and self-advocacy skills. You should also consider what skills your child should be learning. This can include daily living skills, such as social and emotional development, job training, and postsecondary skills.

Parents are important

You are a key member of the IEP team and an important part of the evaluation, determination of eligibility, and IEP development processes. Many parents quickly learn that developing a positive relationship with school professionals is key to their child's success in school. While this can be difficult when there are conflicting points of view, keeping a focus on the strengths of children, families, and schools makes planning easier and problems simpler to resolve. In the end, your child's success benefits everyone involved.

For individual support, please contact PACER at pacer@pacer.org, call (952) 838-9000, or visit pacer.org.