



SPECIAL EDUCATION RESOURCE HUB: What Families & Students Need to Know this Year

I THINK MY CHILD MAY HAVE A DISABILITY

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SPECIAL EDUCATION RESOURCE HUB: What Families & Students Need to Know this Year

I THINK MY CHILD MAY HAVE A DISABILITY

WHO TO REACH OUT TO FOR HELP

1

I HAVE CONCERNS ABOUT THE DEVELOPMENT OF MY CHILD YOUNGER THAN AGE 3. WHO CAN I REACH OUT TO FOR SUPPORT?

You, your family or your child's doctor may notice your child is developing differently than other children. This can be stressful, but there are resources to support you.

If you have any concerns, contact [Strong Start](#), DC's early intervention program, by calling (202) 727-3665. Strong Start is run through OSSE and offers free supports and services to infants and toddlers with disabilities or developmental delays and their families. Their team will explain your rights, determine if your child is eligible for early intervention services, and support you in building your confidence to use child interests and everyday activity settings to promote your child's learning. This [Strong Start Road Map](#) explains each step in the process.

Some examples of services available are:

- Developmental evaluations
- Speech, physical, occupational and developmental therapies
- Hearing or vision services
- Service coordination

For more information about young children, you can check out these resources:

- [Strong Start Brochure](#)
- [CDC's Developmental Milestones](#)
- [Families Have Rights: IDEA Part C Procedural Safeguards](#)

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I HAVE CONCERNS ABOUT THE DEVELOPMENT OF MY CHILD AGE 3-5. WHO CAN I REACH OUT TO FOR SUPPORT?

If you have concerns about your child age 3-5, [DCPS Early Stages](#) is here to support you. DC Public Schools Early Stages is DC's evaluation center for children ages 2 years, 8 months through 5 years, 10 months. They help identify any delays that your child may have and, with your consent and participation, arrange services to address them. Their services are free and open to all children who live in or attend school in DC.

If your child is attending a DC public charter school, you can ask anyone at the school for an evaluation.

If possible, please make requests for an evaluation in writing (email or a letter). DC Early Stages or the school in which your child is enrolled, however, is required to accept oral requests for an evaluation.

3

MY CHILD IS STRUGGLING IN SCHOOL. HOW DO I FIND OUT IF MY CHILD NEEDS SPECIAL EDUCATION RESOURCES?

It can be stressful to see your child struggle in school. **If you think your child might have a disability, there is a process to see whether special education services may help them. You can start this process by talking to your child's teacher.** Bring up your concerns and ask for an "evaluation" for your child. Your request starts the process as follows:

- 1) Referral:** The school will start by reviewing all of your child's information. This review is to determine if the information leads them to suspect that your child might have a disability.
 - If they do suspect your child might have a disability, they will ask for your consent for an evaluation. This means you move to the next step below.
 - If they decide the information does not raise concerns about a possible disability, they will send you written notice of that. This means your child will not move forward with an evaluation. If they decide not to evaluate your child and you disagree, you have options to dispute this decision.
- 2) Evaluation:** Your school will bring together a team to determine if your child has a disability that qualifies them for special education. This team will review the information they have about your child and may need to gather new information to complete the evaluation. They might gather new information by giving your child an education or psychological assessment.
- 3) Eligibility:** A team of professionals will meet with you to talk about the evaluation. They will discuss with you whether or not your child "qualifies" for special education services. Qualification is based on the law for special education. The federal law for special education is called the Individuals with

Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Whether or not your child qualifies, they will talk to you about next steps.

- 4) Create an Individualized Education Program (IEP):** If your child qualifies for special education, an IEP will be developed for your child. The IEP is a written document that includes your child's goals, strengths and unique needs. It will describe the services and supports your school will provide to help your child reach these goals. This document will be created by your child's IEP team. As a parent, you are an equal member of this team. It is your choice whether or not your child receives special education services.

If your child does not need special education services, they still might benefit from other supports. These other supports may be part of a "504 plan." For more information, you can talk to your child's school or read more on [OSSE's Section 504 website](#).

The timeline for these steps in the process may be delayed due to COVID-19. For example, not being able to meet in person may make it difficult to complete an evaluation. Your school should work with you to consider creative and flexible options to complete evaluations when possible. If moving forward is impossible, you should receive written notice of this from your school. You may also work with your school to agree upon a new due date.

These resources have more information:

- [OSSE Special Education Parent Brochure](#)
- [Understood.org - 6 Benefits of Having Your Child Evaluated](#)
- [Office of the Student Advocate - Parent & Family Go-To Guide](#)

NEW TO SPECIAL EDUCATION

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MY CHILD HAS JUST BEEN DIAGNOSED WITH A DISABILITY. WHAT RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE TO HELP ME LEARN ABOUT WHAT THIS MEANS?

There are many resources available to help you learn more and support your child. Here are some that might be helpful:

Resources to review:

- [Questions Often Asked by Parents about Special Education Services](#)
- [Understood.org](#) is a resource to learn more about specific disability types and to connect with other families. Some helpful links on their website are:
 - [Understanding Special Education](#)
 - [The 13 Disability Categories Under IDEA](#)
 - [Understanding IEPs](#)
 - [List of terms and definitions](#)

People to talk to:

- [Advocates for Justice and Education \(AJE\)](#) is DC's parent training and information center for families of students with disabilities.
- The DC [State Advisory Panel on Special Education](#) (SAPSE) meetings are open to the public and are a great way to connect with other families.

YOUR CHILD'S RIGHTS

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MY CHILD HAS A DIAGNOSED DISABILITY. WHAT SUPPORT SHOULD I EXPECT FROM THEIR SCHOOL?

Your school will give your child a specially designed education at no cost to you that meets your child's unique needs. This will include:

- Your child will receive specially designed instruction. Depending on their needs, they may also qualify for services like speech therapy or counseling.
- A team made up of teachers and others, including you the parent, decides what services and support the student gets.
- The plan for providing this education must be written down in an individualized education program (IEP).
- Your school will provide you with reports or updates on your child's progress throughout the year. You can also discuss any concerns you have.
- You as a parent may be able to receive training as part of your child's IEP to help you understand and assist with your child's special needs.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a federal law, guarantees this right to a "free and appropriate public education" (also known as FAPE) for children with disabilities. This right applies whether your child is enrolled in a DCPS school or a DC public charter school, or attending a [nonpublic special education school](#).

The IDEA also guarantees many other rights, known as "procedural safeguards," to ensure that your child receives FAPE. OSSE's [Notice of Procedural Safeguards](#) has more detailed descriptions of these rights. **COVID-19 does not change your child's rights.** These are the same whether your child is learning at school or virtually. However, special education might look and feel different for your child this year. The question, "What support can I expect from my child's school in the upcoming school year, given COVID-19?" offers more information about this.

If you have questions, contact your child's teacher or special education coordinator.

WHAT TO EXPECT THIS SCHOOL YEAR

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WHAT SUPPORT CAN I EXPECT FROM MY CHILD'S SCHOOL IN THE UPCOMING SCHOOL YEAR, GIVEN COVID-19?

Your school has been hard at work planning for this school year. Below are key things to keep in mind about what you and your child can expect from your school. If you have any questions, contact your school.

- 1) **Your school must keep providing special education**, even if the school is not returning in person. This will include getting the special education required by your child's individualized education program (IEP) that can be delivered through a distance learning model, while balancing the health and safety needs of your family. However, some learning and services might look different during distance learning. For example:
 - Learning might involve [virtual ways to accommodate your child's disability](#)
 - You might meet with service providers over phone or video
 - Your child may need new technology to help them do work at home (called "assistive technology"). This is different from the device used for remote learning and may include software to enlarge text or read it aloud.

You should discuss with your child's school how any services that cannot be delivered will be recovered during this school year.

- 2) **Your school should partner with you, as needed, to review and update your child's IEP.** If necessary for your child, this process should consider how your child's needs may have changed and how they will be met if your child is learning from home or at school. It should also consider your needs as a parent for training to support your child. If your child attends a DCPS school, [DCPS has committed to creating a distance learning plan](#) for each student with a disability.
- 3) **Your school should test your child's learning levels at the start of the year and share those results with you.** This test, known as a "formative assessment," will help the school understand how your child's needs may have changed.
- 4) **Your school should help you support your child.** This includes providing training and resources for distance learning. They should also help you learn how to use new technology.

- 5) **Your school should communicate with you about how they are going to take these steps within the first two weeks of school.** Your school has been developing a plan called a "Continuous Education and School Recovery Plan." This plan should be shared directly with you. It will also be on your school network's website and [OSSE's website](#), once finalized. This plan will explain, among other things, how your school will:
 - Teach students at home and in person
 - Take attendance
 - Connect families with needed technology
 - Adapt academic, behavior and specialized supports for distance learning

Read more about these expectations in [OSSE's Guiding Principles for Continuous Education](#) and [OSSE's IDEA, Part B Provision of FAPE: Guidance Related to Remote and Blended Learning](#).

Here you can find school contact information:

- [DC Public Schools](#)
- [DC Public Charter Schools](#)
- [Nonpublic Special Education Schools](#)

SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD AND FAMILY THIS SCHOOL YEAR

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WHAT QUESTIONS CAN I ASK MY SCHOOL TO ENSURE MY CHILD IS GETTING THE SUPPORT THEY NEED AT HOME?

Your school has been planning how to support students with disabilities for this new school year. Your school should share their plan for supporting your child with you within the first two weeks of school. They should also put this information on their website.

Here are a few questions you can ask your child's teacher or special education coordinator to learn more:

School-wide plans for the school this year:

- What supports and services will be provided to all students at this school? Will additional supports be available to my child and family?
- How are you choosing technology? How are you making sure my child can use it?
- How much time will my child have with their teacher each day?

Learning expectations:

- What services in my child's individualized education program (IEP) will be online?
- How will my child's progress be reviewed virtually? What will this look like? How can I help at home?
- What is the school's timeline and plan for reviewing and, if needed, revising IEPs to account for student-specific needs, such as behavioral differences?
- What worked and didn't work well for my child this spring? How should we make adjustments based on that?

For more questions you can ask your school, see here:

- [Top Tips for Parents of Students with Disabilities during COVID-19](#)
- [National Center for Learning Disabilities](#)

Here, you can find school profiles, along with contact information:

- [DC Public Schools](#)
- [DC Public Charter Schools](#)
- [Nonpublic Special Education Schools](#)

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HOW CAN I ADVOCATE FOR SERVICES AND SUPPORTS FOR ME AND MY CHILD AT THEIR SCHOOL?

The DC school where your child is enrolled is the first point of contact for you to advocate for your child. If you have concerns, you should start by sharing them with your child's DC school. You can contact your child's teacher, special education coordinator or other school officials.

You can talk about this over the phone, email or video. Here are [sample resources and letters](#) that may be helpful.

Several organizations in DC can help you advocate. They can also talk to you about next steps if you are having trouble working with your school. These organizations are:

- [Office of the Student Advocate](#) - Supports DC students and families through parent education, coaching, resources and training.
- [Office of the Ombudsman](#) - A neutral office that uses mediation and conflict resolution to help families with concerns about public education in DC.
- [Advocates for Justice and Education](#) (AJE) - DC's Parent Training and Information Center. They help parents advocate on behalf of their children and provide parent training and resources.

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WHERE DO I GO IF MY CHILD AND I ARE NOT GETTING THE SUPPORT WE NEED FROM MY SCHOOL?

If you try and are not able to come to an agreement with your school about special education issues, you have other options. If your child attends a DCPS school, you can contact the [DCPS Office of Integrity](#) to ask for support first. Otherwise, OSSE's [Office of Dispute Resolution](#) or [State Complaints Office](#) are the first places to go for these next steps:

- [Facilitated IEP Meeting](#) - an IEP team meeting led by a neutral person. This is likely the first step you should consider. It gives you a chance to solve problems quickly among the people who know your child best.
- [Mediation](#) - a conversation with the school led by a neutral third person. The goal is for you and the school to come to an agreement. This is often faster than due process.
- [Due Process Hearing](#) - both you and the school share their respective point of view through witnesses and relevant documents presented to a neutral hearing officer. The hearing officer makes the decision. This can be appealed to court.
- [State Complaint](#) - you file a written complaint to OSSE and an investigation takes place to see if the law has been broken.

The Office of Dispute Resolution [Parent's Guide](#) has more information.

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HOW CAN I BEST SUPPORT MY CHILD AT HOME DURING DISTANCE LEARNING?

You are doing so much by providing a safe and loving home for your child and encouraging them to engage with school. Supporting your child or children at home during this time can feel overwhelming, but your child's teachers care and are there to support you.

Your school should provide training and resources to help you support your child's learning at home. You can always ask your child's teacher for help.

Here are some suggestions for supporting your child(ren) at home:

Set up a space for them to learn. If possible, set up a space just for learning. Try to find a place that avoids distractions and can be organized. See [School Virtually](#) for more tips.

Help them structure their day. Distance learning provides less structure than being at school. Your child may benefit from help creating a schedule and staying on task. If possible, create a daily schedule that is similar to what it would be in school.

- Here is a set of [posters, printouts and other resources](#) you can use to build structure.

Help with teletherapy. Teletherapy is therapy provided virtually. Your child may be working with an outside therapist or counselor at home. [Family tips for teletherapy](#) include being ready to join video or phone calls if needed and ensuring your child's face is visible to the service provider.

Take Good Care of Yourself. Managing your own mental health is important. You can start by calling the Access HelpLine at 1(888) 7WE-HELP or 1(888) 793-4357.

Additional Resources:

- [Family Guide to At-Home Learning](#)
- [Distance Learning Resources for Learners with Disabilities](#)
- [Best Special Education Apps and Websites](#)
- [Remote Learning for Students with Significant or Multiple Disabilities](#)
- [Helping Students with Special Needs Cope with Remote Learning](#)

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WHAT CAN MY FAMILY DO TO MANAGE STRESS AND WELLNESS DURING THIS TIME?

We know this is a stressful time for families and students across DC. There are many resources available to help.

Attend a virtual training/ workshop:

- DCPS [Parent University Online](#) has virtual workshops for all families in DC. The [workshop schedule](#) and [past recordings](#) are available online.
- If you care for a child younger than age 6, you can participate in the online [Positive Parenting Program](#). This program is provided by the DC Department of Behavioral Health. This program will help you practice handling challenging situations. To access the program, enter "dcparents" as the enrollment key when you create an account.

Access support or resources:

- Resources from the Department of Behavioral Health:
 - You can call DC's Access HelpLine, 1(888) 7WE-HELP or 1(888)793-4357.
 - This one-page [behavioral health flyer](#) explains the types of supports available.
 - The [Department of Behavioral Health](#) has more information and resources.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has a [resource page](#) to help students and families.
- Interested in more support for your child? Call your school and ask to be connected with the "Behavioral Health Coordinator." They can help connect your student to services.

Connect with other families:

- The [State Advisory Panel on Special Education](#) (SAPSE) has open meetings where you can meet other families.
- The Family and Youth Engagement Committee on DC School Behavioral Health is a space for parents to share experiences, concerns, and ideas. The committee meets every third Friday of the month. You can email Dr. Chioma Oruh at chioma@drchibornfree.com for the virtual meeting link.
- [Understood.org's collection of stories](#) shares how families of students with disabilities are coping with COVID-19.