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Special Factors: Understanding Your Child's IEP

Your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) should address needs that affect learning and participation. Special factors help the team consider support for language, communication, vision, behavior, and technology.

What are special factors?

Special factors are needs your child's team considers when developing or reviewing the IEP. Not every factor applies to every child. When support is needed, the IEP should explain what will be provided.

Language needs. For a child learning English, the team considers language needs related to the IEP. Share which languages your child uses and understands at home and school.

Communication. Discuss how your child understands others and expresses ideas. Supports may include pictures, sign language, or communication devices. For children who are deaf or hard of hearing, consider direct communication with peers and staff and instruction in their language and communication method.

Vision and Braille. For a child who is blind or visually impaired, the team provides Braille instruction and use unless an evaluation shows it is not appropriate. The evaluation considers current and future reading and writing needs.

Behavior. When behavior interferes with your child's learning or that of others, the team considers positive supports. These may include preventing difficulties, teaching replacement skills, and encouraging progress. Ask whether a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) would help explain patterns and the purpose of behavior.

Assistive technology. Tools range from pencil grips to communication devices. The school provides devices and services needed for your child's education at no cost to families. The IEP should describe their use and any needed training.

Physical education. Discuss adapted activities, changed rules, or individual teaching to help your child participate. Consider physical, social, and emotional needs.

Hearing-aid checks. If your child uses hearing aids, clarify who checks that they work, handles battery needs, and responds to problems.

Why are special factors important?

A child may understand a lesson but have difficulty hearing directions, communicating an answer, or staying ready to learn. Addressing these needs helps your child use their strengths, take part with classmates, and become more independent. Supports should connect to the needs described in the IEP and be reviewed to see whether they help.



What is my role on the IEP team?

Share what your child does well, what is difficult, and what helps at home and in the community. Bring examples about communication, behavior, language, movement, or using tools. Include your child's ideas about what helps and what feels difficult.

Work with school staff to compare observations and decide whether more information or an evaluation is needed. Ask the team to explain how identified needs will be addressed in the IEP, who will provide support, and how you will know it is helping. Not every need requires a separate goal; some are addressed through services, accommodations, or other supports.

For example, if your child has trouble asking for help, the team might teach a way to request help and make sure a picture card or communication device is available throughout the school day.

Questions to Ask

- Which special factors apply to my child, and what information supports that decision?
- Do we need more information or an evaluation to understand a need?
- What skills will staff teach, and what supports will be provided?
- Where are these supports described in the IEP, and who is responsible?
- What training will my child, family, or school staff need?
- How will support be available across classes and school activities?
- How will we check whether the supports are working?

Parent tips

- **Prepare a few examples.** Write down strengths, concerns, and strategies that help. Share patterns you notice and invite staff to share theirs.
- **Ask for everyday words.** Ask the team to explain unfamiliar terms and show how a support would work during your child's day.
- **Look beyond one setting.** Discuss support during transitions, lunch, recess, PE, and other activities as well as classroom lessons.
- **Review the written plan.** Check that the IEP explains the agreed supports, when they will be used, and who will provide them. Keep a copy.
- **Stay connected.** Agree on how to share updates. If a support is not helping or needs change, contact the team rather than waiting for the annual meeting.
- **Watch the companion session.** This brief accompanies Special Factors in South Dakota Parent Connection's IEP Journey learning series. Watch the recording for explanations and examples: **https://youtu.be/CnvznRV8NR8**.

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