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# Advocating for Students on the Autism Spectrum

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Navigating today's educational system is not an easy or straightforward task for anyone, whether students, parents, teachers, or administrators. For parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/autism-spectrum-disorders-asd/index.shtml>), making sure your kids get a fair and useful education involves even more complicated considerations and decisions.

This guide discusses issues surrounding the education of students on the autism spectrum, including the rights and responsibilities of parties involved, plus governing laws, programs, and additional resources. The information also includes classroom concerns and accommodations, considerations for choosing an appropriate school setting, options for dispute resolution, and tips for further advocacy.

Whether you decide to homeschool or place your child in the public education system, it's important to know the available options and stay informed to advocate most effectively for your child's education and well-being.

## Acronyms, Terms, and Definitions

Educational policy, childhood disability advocacy, and the legislation governing both have produced terms and acronyms that might require clarification if you're new to the system. To better understand the points and tips that follow, here is a list of brief explanations and definitions. You can find elaboration on each term and topic further below in this guide.

- **Autism spectrum disorders.** Neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism (<http://www.autism-help.org/autism-overview.htm>), Asperger's syndrome (<http://www.autism-help.org/asperger-syndrome-overview.htm>), and pervasive developmental disorder (<https://www.ninds.nih.gov/Disorders/All-Disorders/Pervasive-Developmental-Disorders-Information-Page>) can cause issues in a child's verbal and nonverbal communication, social interaction, and sensory processing. Students on the autism spectrum may have difficulty communicating their needs, understanding classroom directions, and engaging in typical social interactions.
- **ADA.** The Americans with Disabilities Act (<https://adata.org/learn-about-ada>) is a civil rights law prohibiting discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including jobs, schools, transportation, and all places that are open to the general public. The purpose is to make sure that people with disabilities have the same rights and opportunities as everyone else. It guarantees equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities in public accommodations, employment, transportation, state and local government services, and telecommunications.
- **FAPE.** Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/504faq.html>) guarantees a Free Appropriate Public Education (

FAPE504.html) to students from ages 3 to 21 with disabilities. The acronym can be broken down as such (<https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/your-childs-rights/basics-about-childs-rights/at-a-glance-free-and-appropriate-public-education>):

- **Free** - All eligible students with disabilities are educated at public expense, with no cost to parents or guardians beyond standard incidental fees.
- **Appropriate** - Education for any child with a disability will be tailored and planned to meet specific needs as determined and stated in their Individualized Education Plan.
- **Public** - Any child with disabilities, regardless of the nature or severity of the disabilities, has the right to be educated under public supervision. (This can encompass either private or public school. Homeschooling is governed by different but comparable regulations; see below.)
- **Education** - Every eligible school-age child with a disability must be provided an education that prepares them for future education, employment, and independent living.
- **IDEA.** The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (<https://sites.ed.gov/idea/about-idea/#IDEA-Purpose>) is a law that makes available a free, appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation and ensures them special education and related services. The law also helps government and service agencies provide for this education as well as early intervention services for infants and toddlers, and protects the rights of children with disabilities and their parents.
- **IEP.** Every child who qualifies for special education must by law be provided an Individualized Education Program (<https://www2.ed.gov/parents/needs/spced/iepguide/index.html>), collaboratively devised by parents or guardians, teachers, administrators, and others invested in the child's education. An IEP first assesses achievement levels and the ways the student's disabilities affect academic performance, then specifies accommodations, modifications, and services necessary to address their individual needs. The IEP also sets measurable annual goals and recommends the services necessary to help the child meet them. Every faculty member, particularly classroom teachers, must follow this plan.
- **Least restrictive environment.** A student with a disability is considered in their least restrictive environment (<https://www.myeducationalolutions.com/least-restrictive-environment/>) when their learning is integrated with the general

education population — granting access to curriculum or extracurricular activities open to non-disabled peers — as much as is appropriate to yield progress in their educational program. Generally, the less opportunity a student has to interact and learn with non-disabled peers, the more their placement is considered to be restricted.



## Common Education Concerns

A public education environment can offer your child on the autism spectrum (<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/autism-spectrum-disorders-asd/index.shtml>) access to special education curricula as well as specialized resources and services tailored to address their needs. It can also provide opportunities to socialize and expand their horizons through contact with students in the general population. But public schooling can present many problems for your student with autism, too.

Your child with autism may be unable to understand or communicate their needs to teachers or fellow students. They can have trouble understanding classroom directions and instruction, especially as delivered by teachers with subtle vocal and facial cues. Underdeveloped social skills can lead to inappropriate social interactions or challenging behaviors (<http://www.autism-help.org/behavior-intro-autism.htm>), sometimes resulting in bullying or ostracizing. Difficulties with imaginative or creative play can obstruct your child's interactions with other children, also rendering some teaching strategies ineffective. Also, sensory issues (<http://www.autism-help.org/comorbid-sensory->

problems.htm) can make it difficult for your child to cope with noisy environments, endure being touched by others, or maintain eye contact (<http://www.autism-help.org/communication-eye-contact.htm>).

This inability to fully comprehend and participate in the surrounding world can make public education stressful for your child. Also, teachers often report that they find it difficult to meet the needs of students on the autism spectrum. Teachers need to be aware of your student's disorder, and ideally should have specific training in autism education, so that they are able to help your child get the best out of their classroom experience — however, school systems' limited resources often do not accommodate specialized training for teachers.

## Classroom Accommodations

Every child is different, and teachers must constantly adjust their techniques and modalities to accommodate each of them. Ideally — armed with the information from your child's IEP and techniques that have been proven to work — a teacher would become familiar with your child's particular needs and discern which method works best.

### Basic Classroom Strategies

Experimentation and close observation have brought forward several strategies for the classroom that work best to engage and instruct students on the autism spectrum. Some of these include:

- **Visual aids.** Some students learn more effectively from material presented visually. Many teachers create “visual schedules” for their students with autism, reducing stress by letting them see what upcoming activities they need to prepare for.
- **Structure and routine.** Chaotic environments or unpredictable events are difficult to navigate for children with autism spectrum disorders. By providing timetables and steps to prepare for activities, teachers can provide comforting support and structure.
- **Working in pairs.** Children on the autism spectrum often have trouble with socialization. Research has shown that working in pairs may offer classroom benefits, lowering the stakes and facilitating peer interaction. This can help students with autism make friends and become more integrated into the mainstream environment of the classroom.
- **Designated teacher's aide.** A teacher's aide often can give more elaborate directions than the teacher, who rarely has time to explain ideas as thoroughly as a child with autism might need. This one-on-one instruction can help the child to maintain an academic level equivalent to the rest of the class.

- **Reducing anxiety.** Students with autism sometimes have high levels of anxiety and stress (<http://www.autism-help.org/comorbid-general-anxiety-disorder.htm>) in social environments, sometimes resulting in aggressive or explosive behavior. Introducing social and emotional concepts through systematic cognitive behavioral approaches can increase students' ability to control excessive reactions.

## Choosing an Appropriate Learning Environment

In any educational setting, your child on the autism spectrum will require consistent advocacy from you and other adults to obtain the most appropriate and useful education possible. The right fit is dependent on a wide variety of factors, balancing your child's needs and abilities with the resources available.

### Influencing Factors to Consider

When you're trying to choose a learning environment, the first thing to do is get a clear picture of your child's abilities and needs (<https://www.verywellhealth.com/educational-options-for-children-with-autism-260393>). Ask yourself questions like these about your child:

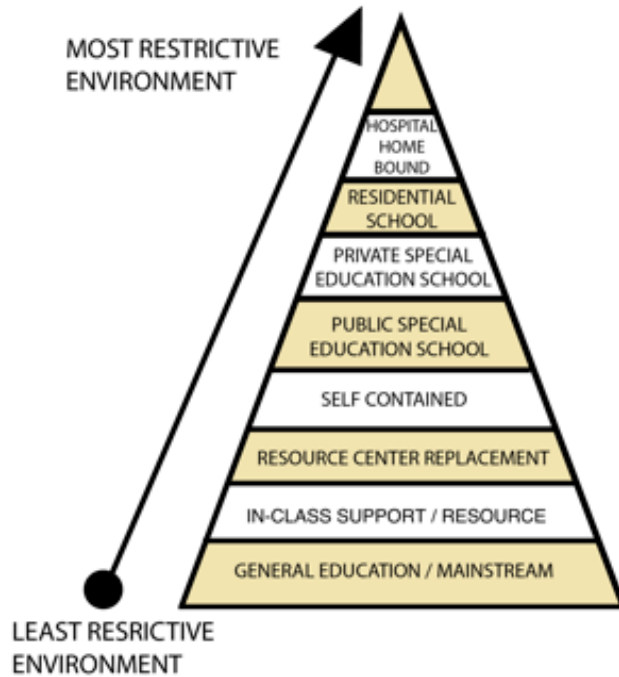
- How verbal and engaged are they?
- What can they routinely achieve academically?
- Can they handle being in large groups?
- How do they react to interactions with neurotypical children?
- How have they handled classroom experiences in the past?
- Do they handle a lot of sensory input well?
- Do they exhibit difficulties with focus?

Next, survey the resources and schooling options available (<https://www.verywellhealth.com/educational-options-for-children-with-autism-260393>) in your geographic area and income range. Consider questions such as the following:

- What programs can the local public school offer?
- Do these or other available programs address your child's needs and abilities?
- Are there local private or charter options that make logistical and financial sense for your family?
- Are there services in your community that could offer extra help or resources for your child's schooling experience?
- Are you interested in homeschooling your child?
- Do you have the time, commitment and willingness to learn all the strategies necessary to teach effectively?

- Are there resources locally available for homeschoolers, especially those with special needs?

The educational choices available may be limited. You might live in an area where nothing exists other than the regular public school system. Costs can also be a major factor if specialized schools or support need to be paid for. These are other elements to keep in mind when making this decision.



## Options for Schooling

Potential learning environments

(<https://www.verywellhealth.com/educational-options-for-children-with-autism-260393>) for children with autism spectrum disorder can cover a wide range, from a public school's general education classroom to one equipped with extra resources, a class focused on special needs or an autism-only setting. Your child might thrive in an inclusive or a segregated classroom situation, or be happiest in a private school that caters to particular teaching styles or to special needs students. Or you might find that teaching your child at home presents the most workable option.

In some cases, the education of a child on the autism spectrum can effectively be split between two environments — say, for part of the day in a special education program and for the other part of the day with typical students in a regular classroom. Or your child could receive specialized or home-based education while later being included in certain public-school classes, according to their ability to cope and keep up.

These integration models (<http://www.autism-help.org/autism-education-school-effects.htm>) are based on a growing trend to provide a 'continuum of care,' in which individualized support tapers off as a child learns the skills needed to study in regular schools. Ideally, your child could move through a school specifically designed for students with autism, then to special ed classes in the regular public school system, then to a regular classroom with support options like a teacher's aide or tutoring.

## **Inclusion and the Least Restrictive Environment**

The inclusion approach (<http://www.pbs.org/parents/education/learning-disabilities/inclusive-education/the-benefits-of-inclusive-education/>) is being increasingly supported in public schools, where students with autism or other disabilities are included in classes with typical children, but also may receive significant support to enhance their chances of classroom success. Support options can include a designated one-on-one teacher's aide, adapted curriculum, special social groups, and more.

Much research backs up the idea that inclusion yields positive results for all students (<https://inclusiveschools.org/together-we-learn-better-inclusive-schools-benefit-all-children/>), with or without disabilities. Teachers in inclusive classrooms must employ a range of learning modalities (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, etc.), addressing the reality that students at all levels learn in a variety of ways. Even children with moderate to severe disabilities can benefit from inclusive environments, studies have shown, learning behavioral and socialization skills in addition to the standard curriculum.

Inclusion can help place students on the autism spectrum in their least restrictive environment (<https://definitions.uslegal.com/l/least-restrictive-environment-lre/>). This term signifies that students with disabilities are entitled under IDEA regulations to be educated with their non-disabled peers, to the greatest extent appropriate. They are guaranteed access to the general curriculum, extracurricular activities, or any other program that non-disabled peers would be able to access. These students also receive any supplementary aids and services necessary to help them achieve educational goals while learning alongside non-disabled peers.

If the nature or severity of a child's disability prevents them from achieving these goals in a regular education setting, then the student would be placed in a more restrictive environment (<https://www.myeducationalolutions.com/least-restrictive-environment/>), such as a special school or a hospital program. Generally, the less opportunity a student has to interact and learn with non-disabled peers, the more the placement is considered to be restricted.





# Public Schooling

For many families, public school is the right choice for educating a child with autism. The first requirement in securing a public school education for your child is an understanding of the process that admits a student into the special education system, as defined under the Individual with Disabilities Education Act. (More detailed information on IDEA can be found below.)

Initiating your child in the IDEA special education process (<https://www2.ed.gov/parents/needs/speced/iepguide/index.html>) for public schooling requires numerous steps, including:

- **Identification.** The state identifies, locates, and evaluates children with disabilities in the state who need special education and related services. This can be achieved via a statewide “Child Find” process, or a parent’s or school’s request for evaluation.
- **Evaluation.** The state evaluates your child in all areas related to their suspected disability. If you, as parents, disagree with the evaluation, you have the right to take your child for an Independent Educational Evaluation, paid for by the school system.
- **Eligibility determination.** Qualified professionals use the evaluation results to decide if yours is a "child with a disability," as defined by IDEA. You may ask for a hearing to challenge the eligibility decision. If your child is found eligible for special education and related services, a team must meet within 30

calendar days to write an Individualized Education Program, or IEP, for them.

- **IEP creation.** The school system convenes a meeting between you, your child's teachers, administrators, counselors, and other interested parties – and, in some cases, your child as well – to write the IEP. This document must include your student's present levels of achievement, a statement of their needs, measurable goals, and the services and accommodations necessary to meet such goals. Sometimes the IEP team also recommends placement for your child. It is your right to agree or disagree with the plan or the placement. Once you give consent, your child begins to receive services as soon as possible after the meeting.
- **Service provision.** You, your child's teachers, and service providers will all have access to their IEP. The school monitors its execution, including any accommodations, modifications, and supports that must be provided to your child.
- **Measurement and reporting.** Your child's team reviews the IEP at least once a year and makes revisions if necessary. You have the right to agree or disagree with IEP goals or placement and make suggestions for changes.
- **Re-evaluation.** At least every 3 years, your student is re-evaluated to find out if they continue to be an eligible "child with a disability," as defined by IDEA, and to determine what their new educational needs might be.

### Criteria for Public School Success

Once your child is proven eligible and it's time to look at special education in your local public school system, you have the right to participate in research and planning for their future education. Below are some attributes of effective classrooms

(<https://www.verywellhealth.com/educational-options-for-children-with-autism-260393>) to look for:

- Your child's teacher/s should have training and experience working with children with autism spectrum disorders
- Teachers should have ready access to resources, training, and specialized materials as needed to help students with disabilities. This kind of support for teachers, both implicit and explicit, should be apparent within the school administration.
- Your child's teacher should be able (meaning both capable and allowed by school policy) to modify curriculum and approaches to address your child's needs and strengths as identified in their Individualized Education Program.
- You should be able to see evidence of varied teaching styles being

used in your child's classroom/s.

- Other school staff (librarian, gym coach, other special subject teachers) should have access to resources and support when working with your child.
- You should see evidence that learners are challenged and supported academically, behaviorally, and socially.
- Supportive therapies such as speech, physical, and occupational therapy should be free of charge and available on-site.

## Individualized Education Program

As part of the IDEA special education process, an Individualized Education Program (<https://www.autism-society.org/living-with-autism/academic-success/individualized-education-plan-iep/>) will be created for your child. Every student must have one of these documents to receive special education services, as the IEP is the cornerstone governing the public education of a child with autism spectrum disorder (or any disability as identified by the education system). Schools are required by law to teach each student in accordance with the specifications set out in their IEP.

You likely have many questions about the IEP (<https://www.parentcenterhub.org/iep-overview/>), as most parents do at the beginning. These questions can include:

### **What is the purpose of an IEP?**

(<https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/special-services/ieps/what-is-an-iep>)

The IEP identifies and sets reasonable goals for the education of a child with a disability. It also outlines the services and accommodations that must be made available to help the student achieve those specified goals, and specifies ways to evaluate and measure progress. The IEP must be designed to meet the student's special needs in the least restrictive environment appropriate to that child.

### **What's contained in an IEP?**

(<https://www.parentcenterhub.org/iepcontents/>)

An IEP outlines the student's initial levels of achievement, academic and social needs, measurable annual goals, the services and accommodations necessary for them to meet those goals, and methods of measuring the student's progress.

- the child's current academic achievement and functional performance in school;
- measurable annual goals structured with consideration of the child's special needs;

- the services, accommodations, assistive technology, or other forms of support needed to provide the child with the appropriate education;
- an explanation of the extent to which the child will/ not participate with nondisabled children in the regular class and in extracurricular and nonacademic activities;
- considerations of vocational, placement, and transitional needs for a child who is 16 or older;
- the projected date for the beginning of services and modifications, and the anticipated frequency, location, and duration of those services and modifications; and
- acknowledgment of the parents' or guardians' right to take any dispute with the child's school district to a neutral third party for a resolution.

**Who develops an IEP?** (<https://www.parentcenterhub.org/iep-team/>)

The team that devises a student's IEP consists of experts and people concerned about the welfare of the child, including:

- the student's parent/s or guardian/s;
- the regular classroom teacher;
- the special education teacher;
- a representative of a public agency qualified to provide specially designed instruction for children with disabilities;
- a person who can interpret the instructional implications of evaluation results;
- other individuals who have knowledge or special expertise regarding the child (this can include a physician, neighbor, or other advocate);
- and sometimes the child in question, if appropriate.

**When is an IEP developed?** (<https://www.parentcenterhub.org/iep-overview/>)

First the team and qualified professionals evaluate and determine that a child has one of the disabilities listed in IDEA and qualifies to receive special education and related services. An IEP meeting must be held within 30 calendar days after this determination. It's also required by law that a child's IEP must be reviewed annually to determine if the annual goals are being met; the document must be revised as appropriate.

**Resolving Disputes**

There will likely be moments when your judgment differs from that of your child's teachers or other members of the IEP team. At every step along the way, federal law has put in place specific procedural safeguards (<http://www.autism-society.org/living-with-autism/academic-success/rights-at-school/>) to protect yours and your child's rights. If you and the school disagree on placement, programming, IEP objectives, academic goals, or other aspects of your child's education, you have any of the following approaches at your disposal:

- **Utilize the option for a discussion or conference** with teachers, counselors or the principal.
- **Request an Individualized Education Plan review.** Once the IEP is completed, ongoing communication and teamwork between school personnel and parents are essential to a child's success. Either you or the school's representatives may request a meeting at any time if either of you feels the IEP needs to be adjusted to your child's changing needs.
- **Negotiation or mediation.** As described in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (<https://sites.ed.gov/idea/idea-files/osep-memo-and-qa-on-dispute-resolution/>), mediation is a voluntary process in which a neutral mediator would assist you as parents in resolving your dispute with the school. If a mutually satisfactory agreement is reached on some or all of the disputed issues, a written agreement is set forth.
- **Due process hearing.** You may request a due process hearing (<http://www.parentcenterhub.org/repository/details-dueprocess/>) if you do not agree with your child's identification, evaluation, or educational placement. This is a legal proceeding, and you should obtain legal advice before undertaking this course.
- **Complaint resolution procedures.** Any individual or organization may file a complaint alleging that the local educational agency has violated a requirement of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act.



# Laws Governing Public Schooling

National and state laws interact to govern the public education of children with disabilities, the providing of supportive services, measurement of the efficacy of related policies, and protection of the rights of these children and their families.

## ADA - The Americans with Disabilities Act

The Americans with Disabilities Act (<https://adata.org/learn-about-ada>) is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including jobs, schools, transportation, and places open to the general public. Its purpose is to make sure that people with disabilities have the same rights and opportunities as everyone else. The ADA guarantees equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities in public accommodations, employment, transportation, telecommunications, and state and local government services including public schools.

## IDEA - The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (<https://sites.ed.gov/idea/about-idea/>) is a central part of federal special education law that ensures a free, appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation. The law governs the way

that states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and related services to more than 6.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities.

The IDEA also protects children with disabilities and their parents by ensuring parents the following rights:

- To be informed of procedural safeguards in writing (a booklet is available)
- To review all educational records
- To act as equal members of the IEP team, alongside the educational faculty
- To be a part of all aspects of their child's education plan
- To have their complaints heard by the state education agency
- To request mediation or a due process hearing
- To suggest an alternative IEP and call witnesses (experts and others) who support their case.

### **IDEIA - The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act**

Congress reauthorized the IDEA in 2004, instituting significant changes that resulted in the more inclusive Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (<https://www.theclassroom.com/similarities-differences-between-idea-ideia-8397136.html>). The IDEIA amendments required states to establish performance objectives for students with disabilities that align with those of their peers without disabilities. The update also mandated that schools report progress on standardized testing, and addressed the need to improve graduation and dropout rates among students with disabilities.

### **ESSA - The Every Student Succeeds Act**

Congress most recently amended the IDEA through the Every Student Succeeds Act (<https://www.ed.gov/essa>), in December 2015. The ESSA is a bipartisan measure reauthorizing the 50-year-old national education law that signals a longstanding commitment to equal opportunity for all students.

The ESSA includes provisions that help ensure success for students and schools. The law:

- Advances equity by upholding critical protections for disadvantaged and high-need students.
- Requires that all students be taught to high academic standards that prepare them to succeed in college and careers.
- Ensures that vital information is provided to educators, families,

students, and communities through annual statewide assessments that measure students' progress.

- Helps support and grow local innovations including evidence-based and place-based interventions developed by local leaders and educators
- Sustains and expands access to high-quality preschool options.
- Maintains an expectation of accountability and action to effect positive change in lowest-performing schools.

## State Laws for Special Education

Many states have their own disability rights laws

([http://adasoutheast.org/publications/ada/public\\_accommodations\\_disability\\_rights\\_state-by-state\\_Final.pdf](http://adasoutheast.org/publications/ada/public_accommodations_disability_rights_state-by-state_Final.pdf)) in place to govern eligibility criteria, standardized testing, graduation requirements, and other aspects of special education.

When the state laws enhance the mandates of the ADA and IDEA, then state laws take precedence. To the extent that a state law conflicts with the ADA, the state law is preempted by federal law.

Each state may use different criteria

(<https://autism.lovetoknow.com/about-autism/laws-about-autism>) to arrive at definitions of who is protected or what entities are required to comply, or they may stipulate different requirements or prohibitions. Some states provide an agency, either mandatory or voluntary, to assist with investigation and enforcement. States have their own policies governing the use of restraint and seclusion (<http://www.autism-society.org/news/autism-matters-advocacy-update-how-safe-are-the-schools-in-your-state/>) as disciplinary tactics and may provide different remedies, such as damages or criminal penalties, for violations.

If a state mandate is in conflict with the rights afforded under federal acts, then parents and family members of students with disabilities have the right to make sure their loved ones are served under the federal directives.

## Resources for Public Schooling Students with Autism

Governmental agencies, school districts, and nonprofit service agencies exist for the purpose of offering support to students on the autism spectrum and their families. For further help or information, consider any of the following:

- AutismAction.org's exhaustive listing of educational resources (<https://autismaction.org/resource-center/educational-resources/>) identifies federal, state, school, community and nonprofit entities that provide information and services for students on the autism



spectrum and their families.

- The Autism Society (<http://www.autism-society.org/living-with-autism/academic-success/>) provides information for academic success, intervention and therapy options, legal information, tips for navigating services, and much more.
- AutismSpeaks.org (AutismSpeaks.org) offers a School Community Toolkit (<https://www.autismspeaks.org/tool-kit/school-community-tool-kit>) for educating students with autism, as well as a comprehensive Resource Guide (<https://www.autismspeaks.org/resource-guide>).
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/links.html>) maintains a list of links useful to families, educators, researchers, health care providers, and others living and working with autism.
- The U.S. Dept. of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/aboutus.html>) supports programs that serve millions of children, youth and adults with disabilities.
- The National Association of Elementary School Principals (<https://www.naesp.org/autism-resources>) presents an extensive list of additional resources for parents of children with autism spectrum disorder.



## Homeschooling

Homeschooling your child on the autism spectrum is legal and viable – an increasing number of parents are choosing this option. A main reason: No one knows your child better than you do. Homeschooling can provide the opportunity to focus on your child’s unique strengths, interests, and abilities, compensating for weaknesses and allowing success to inspire more success.

When you homeschool, you can observe your child’s learning style and create an educational program that fits. You can incorporate repeated and simplified instructions, written or delivered visually rather than verbally. You can give clear expectations, immediate feedback, one-on-one instruction, a student-centered curriculum, and frequent breaks as needed. And your home can provide a learning environment free from the social stress, excessive noise, sensory overload, and other disadvantages of traditional school settings (<https://autismawarenesscentre.com/homeschooling-good-option-child-with-autism/>).

### **Considerations Before Homeschooling**

Even with all its potential benefits, homeschooling a child with autism is a challenging endeavor, even under “perfect” circumstances. How do you know if it’s right for you and your family? Begin by asking yourself the questions found in the Influencing Factors to Consider section, above. These will help you examine your child’s needs and abilities, and the resources available to you locally and online.

Consider personal factors, as well. If you suspect any of the following conditions are true, you might want to consider an alternative route to schooling:

- You don’t have the patience to teach your child;
- You are a perfectionist;
- You do not have an optimal home learning environment;
- Your family is coping with other major stresses such as health or emotional problems; or
- Your family relationships would become adversely affected by the stress of homeschooling.

Also consider the following pros and cons

(<https://www.time4learning.com/homeschooling/special-needs/autism/homeschool-vs-public-school.html>) to homeschooling your child with autism:

#### **Pros**

- The learning environment has fewer distractions, less sensory

input, and fewer stressors.

- If a student has been dealing with bullies in school, homeschooling provides a safe haven.
- All aspects of education can be individualized to fit the student's needs.
- Appropriate socialization can be modeled by parents and taught as part of the curriculum.
- A flexible schedule allows plenty of time to go to therapies and take frequent breaks.

## Cons

- Only some states offer special education services to homeschoolers. Check your state laws to find out if your state provides this service.
- Not every family has the availability or financial ability to homeschool.
- Some families find home education of a child with special needs to be overwhelming or emotionally draining.

Being well informed – about your child's needs, your own availability and capability, and the resources available to your family while homeschooling – is the key to deciding whether or not this is the path for you.

## Steps for Starting Your Homeschool

You've reviewed the pros and cons. You've asked yourself the hard questions. And you've decided to homeschool your child with autism. So how do you start? Here are some tips for building your homeschool foundations (<https://autismawarenesscentre.com/homeschooling-good-option-child-with-autism/>):

- **Begin by researching.** Read books, contact local homeschoolers, delve into websites for homeschoolers of children with special needs. A list of resources is provided at the end of this section.
- **Find out what your state requires** (<https://www.responsiblehomeschooling.org/policy-issues/current-policy/>) concerning notification of your intent to homeschool, and/or assessment of your qualifications to teach. Requirements can vary by state.
- **Review educational and medical records** to discern how your child learns best. Keeping a daily journal of activities can help you observe patterns and keep track of your observations. Note any sensory needs, strengths, interests, and weaknesses.
- **Provide materials** to nurture your child's interests and hobbies, and let them do their own learning.

- **Locate therapists** to work with you and your child on speech, social skills, and fine and gross motor skills. Don't be afraid to ask for help for your child.
- **Attend workshops** about social stories (<https://www.autismparentingmagazine.com/social-stories-for-autistic-children/>), learning styles and teaching modalities, applied behavior analysis (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapy-types/applied-behavior-analysis>), and anything else related to teaching children with autism.
- **Find other groups and professional resources** that offer support for your choice of education.
- **Community is important.** To enhance socialization, make sure you include your child in community activities. Slowly introduce homeschooling support activities. And enlist the support of family, friends, and other homeschoolers.
- **Find time to take care of yourself.** Too many parents neglect themselves when raising and homeschooling an autistic child. Seek counseling if you need it, use respite care for breaks, and develop your own personal interests that you find rewarding.

## Strategies for Home School Success

No two children with autism are alike. This means that there's no single "right" approach to educating a child with autism. Fortunately, plenty of curriculum tools, support communities, and information sources are available to help your family homeschool your child with autism. These concepts and strategies (<https://www.time4learning.com/homeschooling/special-needs/autism/homeschool-vs-public-school.html>) have proven beneficial, no matter where your child falls on the spectrum.

- Children on the autism spectrum do best with a regular, established daily schedule (and many prefer a visual schedule (<https://www.appliedbehavioranalysisprograms.com/faq/what-is-visual-scheduling/>)), complete with ways to track what's coming next. They often need extra time to adjust before and after switching to a new subject or activity.
- Many students with autism learn best with visual methods of instruction.
- Students can stay better focused on the lesson at hand when you minimize distractions in a room or teaching area.
- Responding to anxiety with calm is the likeliest way to de-escalate a child's tension. Try to always offer a calming presence, even when (or especially when) your child is out of control.
- Children on the autism spectrum need to be taught the social skills

other children seem to pick up naturally — how to make eye contact, how close to stand to someone, how to engage in conversation, how to play with a friend, etc.

- Kids with autism can often be intensely fascinated with a single activity, object, or phenomenon. Find ways to link lessons to topics your child is already fascinated with.

Going the homeschool route can offer you a variety of curricula and teaching methodologies, making possible an education plan tailor-made to fit the unique needs your child with autism. One-on-one lessons, interest-based learning, and technology-based instruction are all successful approaches (<https://www.autismparentingmagazine.com/value-homeschooling-child-autism-now/>) that can make the homeschool experience rewarding for everyone.

### **One-On-One Lessons**

Studies have found that low teacher-student ratios are beneficial (<https://nepc.colorado.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Mathis%20RBOPM-9%20Class%20Size.pdf>) in any educational environment, and specialized autism programs tend to be successful because they're usually structured 1-on-1 or 1-on-2. Such programs are resource-intensive and expensive to implement in schools; but in a homeschool setting, the teacher is already designated and doesn't need to share attention with a classroom full of other students.

This specialized attention can minimize distractions and maximize focus for a student with autism, decreasing the time it takes to teach new skills and practice acquired ones. It also helps facilitate immediate information processing, feedback, and correction — factors that also make home education programs successful.

### **Interest-Based Learning**

Individuals on the autism spectrum often develop an intense interest about a specific topic. Children with autism often prefer to engage solely with their object of interest to the exclusion of everything else, impeding their concentration on other subjects. While this poses a hindrance in traditional school settings, such focused interest can be used in a homeschool environment to introduce new concepts and skills.

For children on the autism spectrum, facing new information or experiences can be stressful. Parents can try to ease these transitions by employing the child's special interest (<https://www.suelarkey.com.au/media/Motivate.pdf?>) to get and hold their attention, exploring the subject deeply with them, then gradually

introducing new concepts that are related. Framing new subject matter in the context of what fascinates your child can expand their conception of their favorite topic and possibly spark eventual interest in other topics, as well.

This method can be used to teach skills in multiple scholastic areas. For instance, you can teach writing skills by showing your child how to write the word for their interest – “frog,” for example – and helping them practice writing while they tell you about their love of the subject. Or you can introduce counting and mathematical concepts using images of frogs as the units to be counted, added, or subtracted.

### **Technology-Based Instruction**

Students on the autism spectrum often gravitate toward technology, and digital innovations are paving the way in special needs education.

Augmentative and alternative communication apps can help improve speech and communication through images, videos, and audio-based content.

Working with tablets and apps offers an aspect of motivation and stimuli not found in other educational techniques. Many students on the autism spectrum are tactile or kinesthetic learners who find touch-screen functionality more interactive and engaging than speech. The visual aspect of apps also seems to hold the attention of children with autism for much longer periods, and many can provide the repetition needed to help these students assimilate and retain information.

Apps for students with autism

(<https://www.autismparentingmagazine.com/best-autism-apps/>) are now used in many school environments – but still to a limited degree, often due to funding, time, and availability issues. As a parent, though, you can easily implement many of these digital tools to enhance effectiveness and pleasure in your child’s homeschooling experience.



# Laws Governing Homeschooling

In America, homeschooling is legal in all 50 states, but laws governing the home education of students (at all levels) can differ by state. There also may be additional legal criteria involved in the care and education of students with disabilities in your state. To make sure you're familiar with the laws and fulfilling the necessary requirements in your state, consult these resources provided by the Home School Legal Defense Association (<https://hsllda.org/content/about/>):

Home school laws in your state (<https://hsllda.org/content/laws/>)  
(searchable by state)

In addition to listing the pertinent legislation for each state, the site also provides links to necessary forms, legal contacts, support organizations, FAQs, and other resources.

Special education provisions in the 50 states and territories  
([https://hsllda.org/content/strugglinglearner/sn\\_states.asp](https://hsllda.org/content/strugglinglearner/sn_states.asp)) (also searchable by state)

Most states with homeschooling regulations require nothing additional of parents who choose to homeschool their students with special needs, but some states impose additional requirements. These are noted in the summary of provisions for each state on this site.

About 90% of funding for public school special education programs comes from the state – not the federal government – so these states can distribute that money in any way they choose. For states that have enacted laws availing special education services to homeschool students, these provisions are also noted in the summary of states on this site.

The Coalition for Responsible Home Education

(<https://www.responsiblehomeschooling.org/>) also maintains a database of current homeschool laws by state

(<https://www.responsiblehomeschooling.org/policy-issues/current-policy/>) (searchable by state), along with information on student assessment and intervention, instruction and subjects, parental qualifications, record keeping, homeschooling history, and particular considerations for students who are at risk or have special needs.

### Resources for Homeschooling Students with Autism

- Autism Speaks (<https://www.autismspeaks.org/resource-guide>) offers a resource guide on topics of evaluation, education, health, housing, safety, services, therapies and support for students on the autism spectrum and their families.
- The Home School Legal Defense Association ([https://hsllda.org/content/strugglinglearner/sn\\_help.asp](https://hsllda.org/content/strugglinglearner/sn_help.asp)) maintains an immense list of books, newsletters, teaching materials, programs and therapies, and online resources. A designated subsite, Homeschooling a Struggling Learner (<https://hsllda.org/content/strugglinglearner/default.asp>), also offers specialized resources for parents educating children with disabilities.
- Khan Academy (<https://www.khanacademy.org/>) offers online courses on many academic subjects and topics, plus searchable articles and a discussion forum.
- Do2Learn (<http://do2learn.com/disabilities/Overview.html>) provides teaching aids and curricula along with info on evaluation, identification, characteristics, strategies, and support for those teaching students with special needs.
- The Autism Awareness Centre (<https://autismawarenesscentre.com/resources/>) presents an interactive resource page allowing users to find help and information by country/region or by topic. Topics include assessment, behavior, education, life skills, sensory integration, technology, social skills, and therapies, among others.
- A2Z Homeschooling (<https://a2zhomeschooling.com/>) has prepared a guide to the 100 top educational resources (<https://a2zhomeschooling.com/top-100-educational-sites-of->



2019/) for homeschooling, as well as an extensive resources page ([https://a2zhomeschooling.com/concerns\\_homeschooling/homeschool-resources-for-autistic-learners/](https://a2zhomeschooling.com/concerns_homeschooling/homeschool-resources-for-autistic-learners/)) for homeschooling students on the autism spectrum.



## Tips for advocating effectively

Whether you educate your child with autism in public school or at home, you will at some point be required to advocate for their best interests. Opinions differ, resources are scarce, and the opportunity for misunderstanding abounds, so this will not always be easy. Consider some of these tips for advocating effectively for your student on the autism spectrum:

### **Stay current on special education law.**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is constantly changing. Changes can include the qualifications of teachers, teaching methods, transitional services, evaluation methods, and aspects of a student's Individualized Education Programs. You can research and read the main statute itself: U.S. Code Title 20, Chapter 33 (<https://codes.lp.findlaw.com/uscode/20/33>).

States are required to follow IDEA regulations, and many states list their current law changes on their websites. Search the U.S. Dept. of Education's website for an index of DOEs searchable by state, commonwealth, or territory

(<https://www2.ed.gov/about/contacts/state/index.html>). Or, if needed, your school district can give you the contact information for the state department of education. Another good resource for keeping updated is the U.S. DOE's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (<https://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers>).

### **Know yours and your child's rights.**

**In public schooling:** Federal law has put in place specific procedural safeguards (<http://www.autism-society.org/living-with-autism/academic-success/rights-at-school/>) to protect parents' and children's rights in public education. If you and school personnel disagree on placement, programming, IEP objectives, academic goals, or other aspects of your child's education, you have the right to ask for a conference, IEP review, mediation, due process hearing, or other federally sanctioned way to address the situation.

Also, there is a Protection and Advocacy Agency (<https://acl.gov/programs/aging-and-disability-networks/state-protection-advocacy-systems>) for people with disabilities in every U.S. state and territory. This network serves as the nation's largest provider of legally based advocacy services to people with disabilities. The National Disability Rights Network's page (<http://www.ndrn.org/en/ndrn-member-agencies.html>) is searchable by state and can link you with the agency to access state-sanctioned protections as well as services like case management and legal counsel.

**In homeschooling:** Homeschooling students with special needs is legal in all 50 states in the U.S., but your state may stipulate additional legal requirements beyond federal regulations. Different states accord homeschooling parents and children different rights. Make sure you're familiar with your rights, homeschooling laws (<https://hsllda.org/content/laws/>), and special provisions ([https://hsllda.org/content/strugglinglearner/sn\\_states.asp](https://hsllda.org/content/strugglinglearner/sn_states.asp)) in your state. Legal resources and advice can be found on the websites of the Home School Legal Defense Association ([https://hsllda.org/content/strugglinglearner/sn\\_klicka.asp](https://hsllda.org/content/strugglinglearner/sn_klicka.asp)) and A2Z Homeschooling ([https://a2zhomeschooling.com/concerns\\_homeschooling/special\\_needs/special\\_needs\\_legal\\_advocacy/](https://a2zhomeschooling.com/concerns_homeschooling/special_needs/special_needs_legal_advocacy/)).

### **If your child is in public school, learn to navigate the IEP process.**

When exercising your child's right to a Free Appropriate Public Education (<https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/your-childs-rights/basics-about-childs-rights/at-a-glance-free-and-appropriate-public-education>), everything revolves around the process of creating and

executing their Individualized Education Program. Know what to expect from and how to prepare for IEP meetings.

(<https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/special-services/ieps/iep-boot-camp-getting-ready-for-your-childs-iep-meeting>)

Once your child's IEP is set and they're enrolled in special education, keep a vigilant eye on how the team manages the execution of the IEP

([https://www.specialmomadvocate.com/12-warning-signs-the-iep-team-is-not-doing-their-job/?fbclid=IwAR1yQUU\\_Cuie1Cj4tBm--muUAgM8GdtvVmsB5rK6INC\\_DGKYf4c8Qh8LVUU](https://www.specialmomadvocate.com/12-warning-signs-the-iep-team-is-not-doing-their-job/?fbclid=IwAR1yQUU_Cuie1Cj4tBm--muUAgM8GdtvVmsB5rK6INC_DGKYf4c8Qh8LVUU)). Assert your right to participate in all IEP proceedings. Require written documentation, numbers and data to track your child's progress and fulfillment of benchmarks. And if you have grievances, never hesitate to ask for a conference, IEP review, mediation, due process hearing, or other federally sanctioned way to address the situation.

### **Make use of available resources.**

Whichever route you pick to educate your child on the autism spectrum, remember that there are governmental agencies, advocacy and support groups, nonprofit service agencies, and online resources that can help you on your journey. Consult the Resources sections above for good places to start.

### **Involve your community.**

Parenting and educating a child with autism spectrum disorder can be an isolating endeavor – and yet one that nobody should experience alone. For the health of yourself and your child, try to include them and yourself in community activities as much as possible. Enlist the support and involvement of family, friends, and parents of other students. Seek counseling if you need it, and appeal to your community to provide occasional respite care.

Equipped with the right information and knowledge of available resources, you can identify the right educational path for your child on the autism spectrum – one that yields the best possible experience for your child, the rest of your family and yourself.

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