

Programs Serving Children with Disabilities— IDEA as a Key Component of a State Early Childhood System

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This brief provides information and resources about the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act’s (IDEA) two early childhood programs, one serving infants and toddlers/early intervention services and one serving preschoolers or early childhood special education services. The brief also describes examples of how IDEA state staff and staff from other early care and education programs can work together to build a coordinated state system that will improve results for young children with disabilities and families. You will also find links to several helpful resources related to IDEA throughout the brief.

Children’s early years are critical for their learning and development. Young children with developmental delays or disabilities need specialized services and supports to optimize their development and prepare for later learning. Families of young children with disabilities also need support from a broad array of services. These services are most effective when coordinated with other services and programs in the community. All programs serving young children and their families need to understand IDEA and what it means for families and children with disabilities to access and benefit from all early childhood programs available in their community.

Building a statewide early childhood system is ongoing and complex work. IDEA Part C and Part B, 619 programs must be an integral part of each state’s early childhood system. IDEA programs have much to contribute to early childhood systems building because of their longstanding focus on coordinated service delivery. Staff from these programs can offer resources and expertise to help build, support, and sustain the broader early care and education system.

[What is the purpose and intent of IDEA?](#)

[What are IDEA Part C services \(early intervention services\)?](#)

[What are IDEA Part B, 619 \(preschool special education services\)?](#)

[How does the transition to preschool occur for young children with disabilities?](#)

[What IDEA data inform improvement in programs?](#)

[How are IDEA services funded?](#)

[How do IDEA programs contribute to an early care and education system?](#)

[Defining a high-quality system](#)

[Coordinating services](#)

[Supporting effective inclusion](#)

[Where are state IDEA contacts listed?](#)

[Additional Resources](#)



What is the purpose and intent of IDEA?

IDEA governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and related services to eligible infants, toddlers, and children. IDEA Part C addresses the provision of supports and services for eligible infants and toddlers with developmental delays and disabilities from birth through age 2 and to their families. IDEA Part B, 619 (also known as preschool special education or early childhood special education) addresses the provision of supports and services for children ages 3 through 5 years with identified delays disabilities.

IDEA also authorizes the provision of funding to states to pay for services and establishes programs for other necessary support for quality services such as professional development for providers and special educators. IDEA statute can be found in Title 20 (Education) of the [United States Code \(U.S.C\) Chapter 33 Education of Individuals with Disabilities](#).

What are IDEA Part C services (early intervention services)?

In 2019, about 3.5% of children ages birth through 2 years nationwide received early intervention services ([OSEP Fast Facts](#)). Federal funding provided through IDEA is intended to assist states in operating a comprehensive statewide program of early intervention services for infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families. The law identifies the minimum required components of a statewide early intervention system which are presented on the Early Childhood Technical Assistance (ECTA) Center's [IDEA Part C Components](#) page. One component addresses the responsibilities of the lead agency, which is designated by the governor. Different agencies are responsible for the implementation of Part C in different states.



IDEA identifies two Part C eligibility categories for whom all states are required to provide services: an infant or toddler with a developmental delay and an infant or toddler with diagnosed physical or mental condition with a high probability of resulting in developmental delay. Each state is required to establish eligibility criteria for developmental delay. Each state establishes its own criteria for developmental delay. The Part C eligibility criteria for your state and other states are listed on the ECTA Center's [Part C eligibility page](#). IDEA requires that states provide services to all eligible children and does not allow states to maintain waitlists.

After a child is found to be eligible, IDEA requires that the family of the child and the program team develop an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP). The IFSP is a written document that identifies the child's needs and specifies the services that will be provided. These services are designed to enhance the family's capacity to meet the special need of their child. The law requires that services are to be provided in a *natural environment* which are the settings that are natural or typical for a same-aged infant or toddler without a disability. These environments may include the family's home or in community settings such as child care centers, family child care homes, libraries, parks, or recreational programs.

What are IDEA Part B, 619 (preschool special education services)?

In 2019, nearly 7% of preschool-age children received early childhood special education. About 45% of these children attended regular early childhood programs and received the majority of their services in that location ([OSEP Fast Facts](#)). IDEA Part B, 619 requires that all children ages 3 through 5 with disabilities be provided a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) that includes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education. IDEA designates the state department of education agency as responsible for overseeing the implementation of Part B, 619 in all states. Regional education agencies or school districts determine if a child is eligible for preschool special education. IDEA Part B, 619 eligibility requirements for each state can be found on the ECTA Center's [IDEA Part B, 619](#) page.

After a child is found eligible, parents and professionals develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that indicates goals for the child and the specialized instruction and related services that will be provided to the child. Services may include special education as well as occupational, physical or speech and language therapy; vision services; assistive technology; and other services needed to meet the goals on the IEP. IDEA requires that preschool special education and related services be provided in the least restrictive environment (LRE) which means, that to the maximum extent that is appropriate, children with disabilities



should receive special education services along with children who do not have disabilities. Special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment are to be used only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. The LRE requirement has significant implications for state early childhood systems because it requires that the education agencies providing early childhood special education and related services coordinate with other early care and education programs such as child care, Head Start or public PreK.

How does the transition to preschool occur for young children with disabilities?

Transition is the process of a child moving from one location, program, or environment to another and is an important focus issue for state system building work. Transitions occur between settings (e.g., home-based to center-based, part-day to full-day), between groups within a program (e.g., moving from the infant room to the toddler room), or between programs (e.g., preschool program to child care program, Head Start or child care program to kindergarten).



The law recognizes the need for support for transitions from early intervention to early childhood special education and then to kindergarten. IDEA requires Part C and Part B programs to plan for these transitions and to work together to make them smooth for children and families. For children with disabilities, transitions are expected to be coordinated, well planned, and organized to promote a smooth transfer of a child from one program to another without an interruption in their services or education. For more information about how IDEA supports early childhood transitions, see ECTA Center's [Transition from Part C to Preschool](#) page and [Practice Improvement Tools on Transition](#) page.

Children with disabilities also make transitions from IDEA to non-IDEA programs. A child may no longer be eligible for IDEA Part B, 619 at age 3 and transition from Part C to a general early care and education program. Also, children may transition from early childhood special education services to no services in kindergarten. Coordination and collaboration between state agencies and programs providing Part C and Part B, 619 services are critical to ensure children receive the continuing supports and services needed to be successful as they transition from one type of program to another.

What IDEA data inform improvement in programs?

IDEA programs have long had a mandate for strong accountability. Part C and Part B, 619 are required to collect annual data on a set of performance indicators. Two of these indicators may be of interest to PDG B-5 grantees: the child outcomes indicator and the family outcomes indicator. Both Part C and Part B, 619 programs collect data to measure the child outcomes in three areas: social-emotional, knowledge and skills, and behaviors to meet needs. Only Part C programs collect data to measure the outcomes of families served. The child and family outcomes indicators provide data to demonstrate the results of programs and can be used to identify areas for improvement. For example, the child outcomes data provides information about how outcomes for young children with disabilities differ in programs or districts around the state.

Part C and Part B, 619 have a lot to contribute to an integrated early childhood data system. IDEA programs have been collecting data for many years including data on number and demographics of participating children and families, program performance, and outcomes for the children and families served. These data can provide a picture of the kinds and duration of services children and families are receiving and identify gaps in service delivery.

How are IDEA services funded?

The U.S. Department of Education awards IDEA funds to states annually to support Part C and Part B, 619 programs. Part C funds are provided to the early intervention lead agency and 619 funds are provided to the state departments of education. States are allowed to use federal funds to support administrative and service delivery costs.

Federal IDEA funds are not sufficient to support the full cost of IDEA programs. Many states use additional state-appropriated funds and other federal funds (e.g., Medicaid) for both Part C and Part B, 619. Additionally, IDEA allows states to access public and private insurance and charge family fees for Part C services.

Links to resources related to the financing of early intervention and early childhood special education are provided on ECTA Center's [Part C Finance](#) and [Part B, 619 Finance](#) pages.

How do IDEA programs contribute to an early care and education system?

[For the past 45 years](#), IDEA has provided support for the development of young children with delays and disabilities (birth through age 5) and their families. The supports and services required by the law are to be individualized to meet the unique needs of each young child with a delay or disability, promoting their developmental and educational outcomes. Here are a few areas where IDEA programs and other state agencies can work together to build the coordinated early childhood state system that is the vision of PDG B-5 and so important for young children with disabilities and their families. The information below illustrates some of the ways in which state and community leaders from Head Start, prekindergarten, child care, home visiting, and health services can work with IDEA program staff on statewide systems building.



Defining a high-quality system

To support states in building a high-quality system for Part C and Part B, 619, stakeholders developed a framework that addresses the question, “What does a state agency need to put into place to encourage/support/require local programs to provide evidence-based practices that result in positive outcomes for young children with disabilities and their families?” The [System Framework](#) provides a guide for state Part C and 619 Coordinators and their staff in evaluating their current systems, identifying potential areas for improvement, and developing more effective, efficient systems for the provision of early intervention and preschool special education services.

Much of the content in the Systems Framework is also relevant to other state agencies for building and evaluating their systems. The Part C and Part B, 619 program staff in your state are charged with continually working to strengthen their statewide systems. As a key partner in the PDG B-5 work, IDEA program staff can contribute their lessons learned and expertise in statewide system building to the development of a comprehensive and coordinated early care and education system.

Children with disabilities and their families continue to experience challenges in accessing inclusive high-quality programs. Research has shown that inclusion benefits young children with and without disabilities. Through a national initiative, partners across early care and education developed indicators that address inclusive policies and practices that further define a high-quality system. These [indicators of high-quality inclusion](#) address inclusive policies and practices at the state, local program leadership, and early care and education environments level. The indicators support state and local program leaders to examine and implement strategies that strengthen their capacity to provide high-quality inclusive options in their communities.

Coordinating services

Local IDEA Part C programs are expected to leverage existing early childhood and other community services and supports to meet the needs of infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families. Part C provides service coordination to support the family in accessing community-based services such as education, child care, recreation, and social services. Part B, 619 programs support general early childhood teachers in including children with disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate. This includes supporting these teachers in addressing the cognitive, preacademic, social, and emotional skills required for school readiness.



IDEA program staff often know of community resources to support all families and especially those with young children with disabilities that can be shared with general early childhood programs. IDEA staff can bring valuable expertise around supporting families with comprehensive services through existing community programs to cross-agency planning teams.

Supporting effective inclusion

IDEA provides strong support for including young children with disabilities in all facets of their community. Effective inclusion begins in early childhood, setting the stage for inclusion and participation for children with disabilities throughout their lives.

In 2015, the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services released a [Joint Policy Statement on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Early Childhood Programs](#) that emphasizes the importance of inclusion. The statement sets expectations for high-quality inclusive early childhood programs and provides recommendations for states, local education agencies, schools,

and early learning programs. Inclusion benefits all children and demonstrates the need to individualize programs and services to meet the unique needs of each child. This policy statement highlights that children with disabilities are children first. They go to the grocery store, the park, the library, and should attend early childhood programs like child care and preschool in their communities just like all other children without disabilities. To make this vision a reality, all early childhood programs must create policies and implement practices that support programs working together. Research clearly demonstrates that inclusion benefits all children. Building a high-quality early childhood system requires full inclusion and participation of IDEA programs.

A [report](#) from 2010 by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services summarized the progress made since the beginning of IDEA passage in 1975 and emphasized: "...children with disabilities are achieving at levels that would not have been imagined in previous decades".

Where are state IDEA contacts listed?

- Each state has a Part C and a Part B, 619 Coordinator who manages the program in their state. The coordinators can play an important role in PDG-5 work, providing information and support to the development of comprehensive early care and education that is inclusive of young children with disabilities.
- Follow the link to find the IDEA Part C contact in your state, [Part C Contacts](#)
- Follow the link to find the IDEA Part B, 619 contact in your state, [Part B, 619 Contacts](#)

Additional Resources

- DEC/NAEYC. (2009). *Early Childhood Inclusion: A Joint Position Statement of the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Institute.
https://fpg.unc.edu/sites/fpg.unc.edu/files/resource-files/DEC_NAEYC_EarlyChildhoodInclusion.pdf
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004. § 1400 (2004).
<https://sites.ed.gov/idea/statute-chapter-33/subchapter-i/1400>

There are national technical assistance centers that support state IDEA early intervention and early childhood special education programs.

- Follow the link to access the Center for IDEA Early Childhood Data Systems (DaSy) [website](#)
- Follow the link to access the Early Childhood Technical Assistance (ECTA) Center [website](#)

For more information on this and other early childhood topics please visit The Office of Child Care's Technical Assistance webpage at <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/> and the Office of Head Start's Technical Assistance webpage at <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/about-us/article/training-technical-assistance-centers>.

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