

When Your Child Turns Three: Moving from an IFSP to an IEP

If your child is under the age of three and qualifies for early intervention services, you are probably familiar with the Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP). An IFSP is used to plan and document the supports and services provided to children from birth through age two and their families. Many parents like the IFSP process and would like to see it continue after their child's third birthday.

Your child's IFSP team must address the transition to early childhood special education. Under the federal special education legislation (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004), transition planning may begin as soon as nine months before the third birthday, and no less than 90 days before the third birthday. The transition planning meeting will provide an opportunity to discuss your planning options and determine which process and plan is the most appropriate based on your child's unique needs.

The Individualized Education Program (IEP)

When children turn three, schools begin using an Individualized Education Program (IEP) process and plan. The focus of an IEP is on the child and the special education and related services to be provided at school. Preschool programs are not required to assess family strengths and concerns, priorities and resources, or to include family goals. The multidisciplinary IEP team will be made up of school personnel and the parent. An IEP manager will be assigned to coordinate school programming.

While other agency representatives, such as a county social worker, may be invited to attend meetings and share information that may be helpful to the school team, the resulting plan will be a single-agency school plan specific to special education.

For most families, the IEP is appropriate to their child's needs and is the only educational planning option available when their child turns three. Some children, however, may require a consistent, coordinated effort across several environments. Those with more complex needs may receive a variety of supports and services from the school and other public agencies. For example, a child who has a children's mental health case manager through the county may have behavioral needs that need to be addressed in the same way by in-home support workers and school personnel. If so, a coordinated interagency approach may be more appropriate and beneficial to the child and family. In such cases, the school district may offer, or the family may request, an Individual Interagency Intervention Plan.