

What is the difference between an IFSP and an IEP?

My 2-year-old son has an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP). We are told that when he turns 3, he will have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). What is the difference?

The major difference between an IFSP and an IEP is that an IFSP focuses on the child and family and the services that a family needs to help them enhance the development of their child. The IEP focuses on the educational needs of the child.

An IEP is an education document for children ages 3 to 21. It focuses on special education and related services in schools. An IFSP is much broader. It is used for children from infancy through age 2, involves the family more, and may include professionals from several disciplines in planning for the child.

An IFSP is based on an in-depth assessment of the child's needs and the needs and concerns of the family. It contains 1) information on the child's present level of development in all areas; 2) outcomes for the child and family; and 3) services the child and family will receive to help them achieve the outcomes.

Services available through the IFSP are usually provided in the child's home. The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) states that services are to be provided in the child's "natural environment." This could include a child care setting, Early Head Start, preschool, or other community setting in which young children without disabilities would typically be found.

An IFSP is a document or written plan. The term "IFSP" also refers to the process of determining what services a young child with developmental delays or disabilities needs. It uses an "interagency" approach by involving representatives of several agencies (usually education, health, and human services) and other resources that can help the child and family. This process provides an opportunity for sharing between families and staff so that families can make informed choices about the early intervention services they want for their child and themselves.

A "service coordinator" is assigned to assist the child's family with the IFSP process. The service coordinator convenes IFSP planning meetings after contacting professionals who should be involved in the child's plan and others the family would like to attend the meeting. The main purpose of the IFSP meeting is to offer information and resources to the family and talk about their concerns. A planning meeting must also define each agency's role and financial responsibility in the child's plan.

The chart on the next page illustrates the differences between an IFSP and an IEP.

Related Resources

For more information, see the PACER Center booklets, "Early Childhood Transition Guidebook," and "A Guide for Minnesota Parents to the Individualized Education Program (IEP)."

Features of the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) and the Individualized Education Program (IEP)

There are some significant differences between an IFSP and an IEP. This chart will help to inform you of these differences and avoid confusion as you discuss services for your child.

IFSP	IEP
Used in early intervention for children ages birth through 2 and their families	Used in special education for children ages 3 to 21
Includes information about the child's present levels of development	Includes information about the child's present levels of educational performance and participation in developmentally appropriate activities
With the family's approval, it may also include information regarding the family's resources, priorities, and concerns related to the development of their child	Includes information about the family's concerns for enhancing the child's education
After the team determines a list of priorities and concerns, the family determines which outcomes will be included on the IFSP	The IEP team, including the parents or guardians and related service providers who work with the child, determines the goals
Includes the major outcomes desired for the child and family, as well as the methods, timelines, and a plan to measure progress	Includes measurable annual goals, academic and functionally, designed to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enable the child to be involved in and make progress in the general curriculum; • Describe how progress will be measured and how often • Describe how progress will be reported to the family
Includes the natural environments where services will be provided	Describes services provided in the least restrictive environments (LREs) and an explanation of the extent, if any, that the child will not participate with typically developing children
Includes the early intervention services and supports necessary to meet the unique needs of the child and family in order to achieve the identified outcomes	Includes the special education, related services, supplemental aides and services, modifications, and supports to be provided to help the child make progress and participate in developmentally appropriate activities
Team membership includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A parent or parents of the child • Other family members as requested by the parent • An advocate or person outside the family, if parent requests that the person participate • Service coordinator • A person or persons involved in conducting evaluations and assessments 	Team membership includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A parent or parents of the child • Regular education teacher • Special education teacher • A representative of the school district who can commit resources • A person who can interpret results of the evaluations • Others who have knowledge or special expertise about the child