

Educational Placement Evaluations

A diagnostic evaluation is an important process necessary to identify the presence or severity of learning disabilities including autism spectrum disorders. However, a diagnostic evaluation does not necessarily address questions regarding what, where or how to most effectively educate a child. It is often helpful to have an independent expert conduct a thorough assessment of a child's unique needs in relation to both the child's Individual Education Plan (IEP) and the actual implementation of that IEP. An evaluation designed to answer these kinds of question is often referred to as an Educational Placement Evaluation or an independent program evaluation.

In some respects, an educational placement is similar to a diagnostic evaluation. Evaluations should be conducted by experienced professionals working in the field of autism treatment and could include those with professional training in a variety of disciplines including psychology, behavior analysis, and special education at the master's or doctoral level.

An independent evaluator can provide useful information to parents and school systems about what is, and what is not needed, or educationally appropriate for a student. An independent evaluation can be helpful when there are concerns about program implementation, limited educational progress, or when there is a conflict between parent's and a school system's opinions and educational recommendations. Both parents and school districts can arrange for an independent evaluator and IDEA states that parents can send experts in to observe in school programs on their child's behalf to conduct an evaluation. The information derived from an independent assessment of a child's needs in relation to the services that are either proposed or provided can often help resolve conflicts between school personnel and families. In the event of a due process proceeding, independent evaluators can give testimony and their written reports can be submitted as evidence.

Evaluators should be knowledgeable practitioners in the field of autism education, but also have training and experience that would qualify them as experts in program design and implementation. Evaluators should also have experience that is relevant to the particular child in question. For example, those who primarily work in an academic setting may not have the clinical expertise to provide a detailed description of educational protocols, or those working primarily with adults may not be best suited to assess a very young child. Similarly, those with experience with young children may not be the ideal choice as an evaluator of a program for a young adult. Since there are currently no state or national standards that regulate the administration of this kind of evaluation, it is important to learn about an evaluators credentials, check references, and request sample reports prior to engaging the services of an evaluator.

Educational placement evaluations will vary in terms of the time required to complete them, and the evaluation protocol based on professional training of the evaluator, the age and disabilities of the child, and the referral question, i.e., the questions we hope the

evaluation will answer. Typically, evaluators will conduct a document review that may include review of medical records, diagnostic reports, IEP's, progress notes, report cards, data books, graphs, and other relevant student records. The evaluator may utilize standardized interview tools such as the Childhood Autism Rating Scale, but may also conduct informal interviews with parents, school personnel, and other professionals who have provided services to the child or who have evaluated the child in the past gain a better understanding of the child's needs and the educational services provided or proposed. The evaluator may conduct other norm referenced tests or may refer the child to other professionals for additional testing. The evaluator will interact directly with the child and observe the child engaging with other adults and children in home, neighborhood, school, community, or work settings as needed to best address the referral questions.

Once the evaluator has gathered all of the information and conducted their own direct observations of the child, a report is written. The report can include information about what specific activities the evaluator conducted, review of the diagnostic classification of the child, key information provided by those interviewed, results of any additional testing conducted, and specific educational recommendations that describe if and how the educational environment and educational programming is, or is not appropriate to meet the needs of that child. When the evaluator identifies important characteristics of the educational setting that are beneficial for the child, these aspects of the environment should be described to ensure that they remain in place. When the evaluator identifies areas where a child's needs are not being met by the educational plan or environment, then specific recommendations about how, when, where, and by whom different educational strategies should be implemented are needed to help the parents and educational team make effective changes.

Although written reports are valuable, evaluators will often meet with parents and/or have dialog with school personnel to ensure that everyone understands what the findings and recommendations are, and how to make meaningful changes to instructional settings to help the child achieve greater success.

An Educational Placement Evaluation can be a helpful tool when there are questions about the appropriateness of the services outlined in an IEP, the instructional methodologies implemented, or the specific goals and objectives selected. An Educational Placement Evaluation can help answer many questions that teachers or parents might have such as the following:

Is the child learning at an appropriate rate?

Is a child ready for, or benefiting from inclusion?

If a child is ready for inclusion, what activities or times of the day would the child be most likely to be successfully included with typical peers?

Is the IEP written in a way that the measurement of objectives relates to an adequate change in the child's performance?

Are the primary teaching methodologies and curriculum appropriate for the child, and effectively implemented?

Do the classrooms and other learning areas match the IEP, and is access to those environments sufficient to meet the child's learning needs?

Are the resources outlined in the IEP available and sufficient to meet the child's learning needs?

Are positive reinforcement and motivational systems in place and effective?

Is the child being taught skills that will enhance the quality of their life in adulthood?

Can the existing educational setting be sufficiently modified or is an alternative classroom or setting necessary to ensure administration of an appropriate education?

An educational placement evaluation essentially looks at the chain of events that starts with the identification of a student's unique strengths and areas of need, and ends with an informed, expert opinion on the ability of the IEP as conceived and implemented in particular educational settings to address that child's unique characteristics and generates recommendations for program modifications if changes are deemed necessary or other alternative educational environments considered.

For more information about Educational Placement Evaluations contact the Institute for Educational Planning, a subsidiary of the Connecticut Center for Child Development, Inc., 243 Broad Street, Milford, CT, 06460, or phone (203) 876-5917, or visit the CCCD website at: <http://www.cccdinc.org/ProgramsContacts/IEP/IEP.htm>.