



AFFIRMING IEP TOOLKIT FOR PARENTS

Understanding Your Child's Special Education Disability

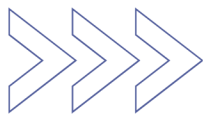
We encourage parents and advocates to share this resource. Please ensure it remains unaltered and properly attributes Dr. Kelsie Reed and Breea Rosas, both school psychologists, as the creators.



SBNA
COLLABORATIVE



Autism



IEP Paperwork Description



Autism is described as a developmental disability affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, often citing repetitive activities, resistance to change, or unusual responses to sensory input as deficits that negatively impact education.



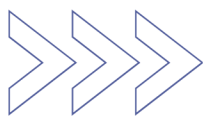
Affirming Parent Reframe



Autistic children have unique communication styles, passionate interests, and distinct sensory differences. They often have a strong need for consistency and may find joy through repetition. Their brain processes information and social dynamics differently than the majority, not incorrectly.

Equity Check

Black and Brown Autistic children are more likely to be misdiagnosed with behavioral disabilities (e.g., Emotional Disability) because their Autistic traits are viewed through the biased lens of noncompliance or defiance.



Essential Learning Supports



- Ensuring sensory needs are met, including a quiet space, a weighted lap pad, a fidget, or other regulatory tools that can be used without having to verbally ask permission.
- Encouraging and allowing all forms of communication and respecting the student's social preferences.



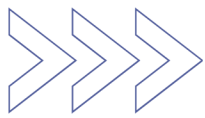
IEP Advocacy Example



"Instead of goals focused on making them look or act like everyone else, let's focus on how we can adapt the environment so their sensory needs are met and they can show what they know."



Deaf-Blindness



IEP Paperwork Description



Deaf-blindness is described as severe concurrent hearing and visual impairments that cause such significant communication and educational needs they cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for deafness or blindness.



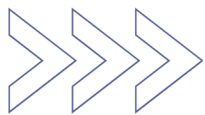
Affirming Parent Reframe



Children who are deafblind experience the world primarily through touch, proximity, and movement rather than solely visual/auditory modalities. They need tactile, experiential learning to build concepts, communicate effectively, and navigate their educational environment.

Equity Check

Because standard assessments rely heavily on sight and hearing, students are often deeply underestimated in their cognitive capacity and presumed to have intellectual disabilities before they are given access to appropriate communication tools.



Essential Learning Supports



- Providing consistent, predictable classroom routines and keeping the physical layout of the room identical so the student can navigate safely.
- Using tactile object schedules (e.g., handing the student a specific textured block to signal it's time for math) instead of just speaking or pointing.



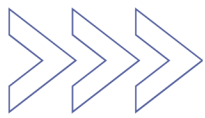
IEP Advocacy Example



"I want to ensure we are building their IEP around how they actually access the world through touch and routine, rather than testing them on things they physically cannot perceive."



Deafness



IEP Paperwork Description



Deafness is described as a hearing impairment so severe that the child is impaired in processing linguistic information through hearing, with or without amplification, which adversely affects their educational performance.



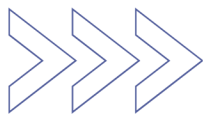
Affirming Parent Reframe



Children who are deaf are visual and tactile learners who navigate a predominantly hearing world. They process language, social cues, and instruction primarily through sight (sign language, gestures, visuals, lip-reading) and may also require assistive tools to communicate with others.

Equity Check

There is a historical bias toward oralism (forcing speech) over validating Deaf culture and sign language, which can strip marginalized deaf students of their primary mode of communication and community identity.



Essential Learning Supports



- The teacher enabling closed captioning on all videos shown in class by default.
- Arranging seating so the student has a clear, unobstructed sightline to the teacher's face and the primary instruction area at all times.



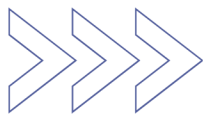
IEP Advocacy Example



"Let's make sure our accommodations prioritize their visual access to information, rather than spending instructional time only trying to train or fix their hearing."



Emotional Disability (ED)



IEP Paperwork Description



Emotional disabilities are described through characteristics like an inability to build relationships, inappropriate behaviors, or a general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression over a long period that hurts educational performance.



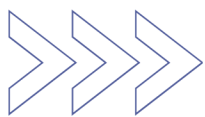
Affirming Parent Reframe



Children with EDs have nervous systems frequently experiencing distress, and are communicating their unmet needs or underlying trauma through behavior. Their reactions are self-protective responses to environments or demands that feel unsafe, overwhelming, or dysregulating.

Equity Check

This label is heavily weaponized against Black and Brown youth (especially boys), often framing their natural reactions, cultural expressions, or trauma responses as “dangerous” or “aggressive,” fast-tracking them into the school-to-prison pipeline rather than offering support.



Essential Learning Supports



- Establishing a predictable, silent morning check-in routine where the student can signal their stress level (e.g., pointing to a 1-5 scale) without needing to explain why.
- Allowing the student a private, designated safe space in the room to retreat to when escalated, without penalty or immediate academic demands.



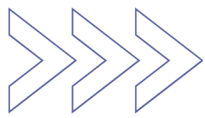
IEP Advocacy Example



“When we see these behaviors, we are seeing a stress response, so let's shift our goals from punishing the behavior to identifying the triggers and teaching self-advocacy.”



Hearing Impairment



IEP Paperwork Description



Hearing impairments are described as an impairment in hearing, whether permanent or fluctuating, that adversely affects a child's educational performance but is not included under the definition of deafness.



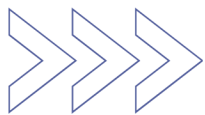
Affirming Parent Reframe



Children who are hard of hearing perceive auditory information differently and frequently experience listening fatigue from constantly working to filter background noise and piece together spoken language. They thrive when information is clear, direct, and supported visually.

Equity Check

Minoritized students with mild hearing differences are sometimes mislabeled as having ADHD or being "oppositional" when they simply did not hear or process the instruction in a noisy, chaotic classroom environment.



Essential Learning Supports



- The teacher using a microphone/FM system to amplify their voice evenly across the room.
- Providing a written outline or short bullet points on the board of the day's instructions so the student doesn't have to rely solely on auditory memory.



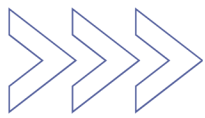
IEP Advocacy Example



"Listening takes tremendous cognitive energy for them, so what visual supports can we put in place so they aren't exhausted by lunchtime?"



Intellectual Disability (ID)



IEP Paperwork Description



Intellectual disabilities are described as significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior (like self-care or social skills), that adversely affects educational performance.



Affirming Parent Reframe



Children with IDs learn at their own pace, requiring explicit, repeated instruction to grasp abstract concepts and get their needs met. Their brains process concrete, lived experience best, and they are fully capable of growth and autonomy when support is individualized.

Equity Check

Culturally biased IQ tests historically over-identify students of color and emergent bilinguals as having intellectual disabilities, penalizing them for systemic language barriers or differing cultural knowledge rather than true cognitive differences.



Essential Learning Supports



- Tying abstract math concepts to concrete, everyday tasks, like using real coins for counting or sorting actual classroom supplies.
- Providing a daily visual checklist with simple icons for routine tasks (like packing a backpack) to build independence without adult nagging.



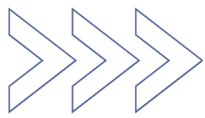
IEP Advocacy Example



"Instead of focusing on how far behind the standardized grade level they are, let's build goals around the functional, real-world skills they need for independence and self-advocacy right now."



Multiple Disabilities (MD)



IEP Paperwork Description



Multiple disabilities are described as concomitant impairments (such as intellectual disability-blindness), the combination of which causes such severe educational needs that they cannot be accommodated in programs solely for one of the impairments.



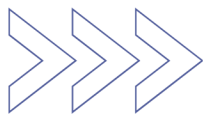
Affirming Parent Reframe



Children with MDs have complex profiles of needs that span cognitive, physical, or sensory domains, and learning must be deeply individualized. They engage with the environment through a combination of adaptations, specialized equipment, and supportive relationships.

Equity Check

Students with multiple disabilities are frequently segregated into self-contained rooms by default, often denying them the basic civil right of interacting with general education peers and participating in the broader school community.



Essential Learning Supports



- Using simple adaptive technology, like a switch device the student can hit to turn a page in a digital book or say "hello" during morning meeting.
- Modifying group work so the student has a specific, manageable role (like holding the presentation poster or pressing the button for the next slide).



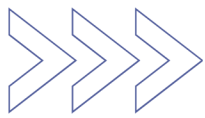
IEP Advocacy Example



"I want to ensure we aren't just housing them in a separate room, but actively finding ways they can authentically participate in the general education community with their peers."



Orthopedic Impairment



IEP Paperwork Description



Orthopedic impairments are described as a severe physical impairment (like cerebral palsy, amputations, or fractures) that adversely affects a child's educational performance by limiting mobility or motor function.



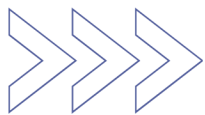
Affirming Parent Reframe



Children with orthopedic disabilities navigate the physical world differently and require a barrier-free environment to demonstrate their abilities. Their physical mobility or stamina does not dictate their cognitive capacity or their desire to learn.

Equity Check

Schools in underresourced neighborhoods often have older, less accessible infrastructure, meaning disabled students of color are disproportionately impacted by physical barriers like broken elevators or cramped classrooms that limit their autonomy.



Essential Learning Supports



- Arranging desks with wider aisles so a wheelchair or mobility aid can pass through smoothly without the student needing to ask peers to move.
- Allowing verbal responses or speech-to-text software for heavy writing assignments to prevent physical fatigue.



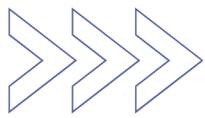
IEP Advocacy Example



"Let's focus the accommodations on removing physical barriers and reducing fatigue so their energy can go into learning, not just navigating the classroom."



Other Health Impairment



IEP Paperwork Description



Other health impairments are described as having limited strength, vitality, or alertness—including a heightened alertness to environmental stimuli (e.g., ADHD, epilepsy, asthma)—that limits educational performance.



Affirming Parent Reframe



Children with other health disabilities experience fluctuations in energy, attention, or physical stamina based on neurodevelopmental or medical realities. They require flexible environments that accommodate their needs without judgment or penalization.

Equity Check

For Black and Brown children, ADHD traits are frequently policed as deliberate defiance or disrespect, leading to disproportionate office referrals rather than support. The student's medical reality may also impact attendance, requiring meaningful home-school collaboration.



Essential Learning Supports



- Allowing movement, such as letting the student stand at the back of the room or use a wobble stool while working.
- Breaking down a long worksheet into smaller chunks, giving the student only one section at a time to reduce visual overwhelm and initiation anxiety.



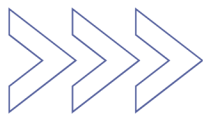
IEP Advocacy Example



"Since we know their executive functioning and stamina fluctuate, what flexible structures can we build into the day so they aren't penalized for characteristics of their disability?"



Specific Learning Disability



IEP Paperwork Description



Specific learning disabilities are described as a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language that manifests as an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do math (e.g., dyslexia, dyscalculia).



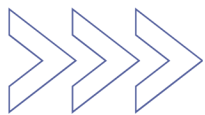
Affirming Parent Reframe



Children with specific learning disabilities process specific types of information (e.g., text, numbers, spatial relationships) in non-traditional ways. They are capable but need information presented or demonstrated in alternative formats to support their processing differences.

Equity Check

Emergent bilinguals and students with diverse dialects are heavily over-identified for SLD when schools fail to distinguish between second-language acquisition, cultural linguistic differences, and actual learning disabilities.



Essential Learning Supports



- Providing audiobooks or text-to-speech software by default so the student can access grade-level content without being defined by decoding challenges.
- Allowing the student to show what they know through alternative formats, like a verbal presentation or a graphic organizer, instead of a traditional essay.



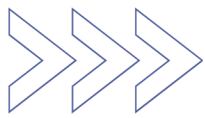
IEP Advocacy Example



"Their intelligence isn't the barrier here, the format is; let's figure out how they can bypass the decoding/writing struggle to show us what they actually comprehend."



Speech/Language Impairment



IEP Paperwork Description



Speech or language impairments are described as a communication disorder, such as stuttering, impaired articulation, a language impairment, or a voice impairment, that adversely affects a child's educational performance.



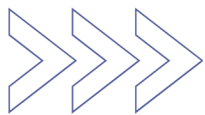
Affirming Parent Reframe



Children with speech or language disabilities communicate effectively when given the right tools, time, and environment. Whether they use an alternative communication device, need extra processing time, or are working on articulation, their voice and ideas have value.

Equity Check

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and other cultural dialects are frequently pathologized by speech evaluators as “incorrect” English or articulation deficits, leading to unnecessary or culturally erasing speech therapy.



Essential Learning Supports



- Implementing a standard 10-second wait time rule for the whole class, giving the student time to formulate and express their thoughts without feeling rushed.
- Never requiring the student to read aloud in front of the class without advance preparation and explicit consent.



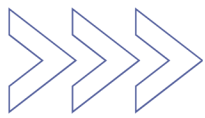
IEP Advocacy Example



“We need to make sure we are supporting their ability to express their ideas confidently, rather than focusing entirely on making them sound typical.”



Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)



IEP Paperwork Description



Traumatic brain injuries are described as an acquired injury to the brain caused by an external physical force, resulting in total or partial functional disability or psychosocial impairment that adversely affects educational performance.



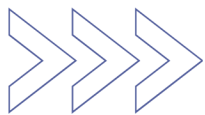
Affirming Parent Reframe



Children with TBIs have brains that are processing information in a new way, meaning their stamina, memory, language, and emotional regulation can vary wildly from day to day. They require grace, a highly adaptable environment, and explicit support for navigating this shift.

Equity Check

Minoritized youth experience higher rates of TBI due to systemic factors (like disparate access to safe environments), yet are significantly less likely to receive comprehensive, long-term cognitive supports at school.



Essential Learning Supports



- Providing a pass to reduce or drop homework assignments on days the student reports a headache or significant cognitive fatigue.
- Allowing the student to take a picture of the whiteboard notes with a device rather than expending precious energy furiously copying them down.



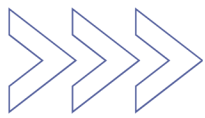
IEP Advocacy Example



"Because their cognitive stamina changes daily, let's build an IEP that emphasizes quality of work over quantity, and allows for immediate breaks when they hit a wall."



Visual Impairment



IEP Paperwork Description



Visual impairments are described as impairments in vision that, even with correction, adversely affects a child's educational performance, covering both partial sight and blindness.



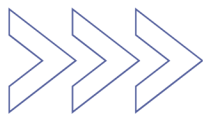
Affirming Parent Reframe



Children with visual disabilities and/or blindness access information through touch, hearing, and specialized visual supports. They learn best when the environment is verbally rich, physically organized, and when materials are proactively adapted to their specific sensory needs.

Equity Check

Students with visual impairments are frequently left out of peer social structures and group projects because systemic ableism assumes they cannot participate, rather than schools doing the work to make those spaces accessible.



Essential Learning Supports



- The teacher narrating what they are writing on the board out loud, every time, as a standard teaching practice.
- Providing high-contrast, enlarged copies of worksheets or ensuring all digital texts can be zoomed or read by a screen reader before the lesson starts.



IEP Advocacy Example



"Let's ensure that every piece of visual material presented to the class is simultaneously available in an accessible format for them, so they never have to wait to learn."



ABOUT

The Strength-Based and Neurodiversity-Affirming Collaborative

Strength-based and neurodiversity-affirming practice should be the default, not the alternative.

SBNA Collaborative is a partnership between Dr. Kelsie Reed and Breea Rosas, EdS, two school psychologists offering practical resources, consultation, and professional development for the adults walking alongside disabled and neurodivergent young people.

Our book, *Essentials of Strength-Based and Neurodiversity-Affirming School-Based Evaluations*, publishes Fall 2026 with Wiley.

Find more resources, work with us, or join our list at:
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