

A Parent's Guide to

# Early Childhood Intervention

and

# Early Childhood Special Education

May 2026



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The Texas Education Agency (TEA) developed this guide to help you, as the parent of a child who is or may be eligible for special education and related services, understand how your child moves from Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) to Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE).

## Introduction

Early childhood intervention (ECI) services are provided through the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C. IDEA Part C is a federal grant program that assists states in operating a comprehensive statewide program of early intervention services for infants and toddlers ages birth through age 2 with disabilities, and their families. At age three, services may shift to early childhood special education (ECSE), which is provided by the local school system under IDEA Part B. IDEA Part B covers special education services for children ages 3 through 21, focusing on a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) through an individualized education program (IEP). Both parts ensure legal rights for children with disabilities and their families. ECI (IDEA Part C) and ECSE (IDEA Part B) work together to support children with disabilities as they move from early intervention services into preschool programs.

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) developed this guide to help you, as the parent of a child who is or may be eligible for special education and related services, understand how your child moves from ECI to ECSE. It also provides key requirements, helpful resources links, and practical tips to support families through this process.

The table of contents contains links to each section, so you may click on a topic to skip directly to that area. Additional resources are linked within each section. If you have a question, concern, comment, suggestion, or find a broken link within this document, please email the TEA Division of Special Education Technical Assistance at [sped@tea.texas.gov](mailto:sped@tea.texas.gov).

## Definitions

Here are some common acronyms you will see in this guide. Please see the [Texas Legal Framework Glossary](#) for a full glossary of special education terms.

- **ARD** – admission, review, dismissal
- **ECI** – early childhood intervention
- **ECSE** – early childhood special education
- **IEP** – individualized education program
- **IFSP** – individualized family services plan



NOTE: Throughout this guide, when the term “parent” or “parents” is used, the term includes the definition aligned to [34 Code of Federal Regulations \(CFR\), § 300.30](#). That definition includes biological or adoptive parent, foster parent, guardian, an individual acting in the place of a biological parent with whom the child lives or is legally responsible for the child’s welfare, or a surrogate parent as defined in [34 CFR § 300.519](#).



NOTE: When the term “school system” is used, the term applies to both public school districts and open-enrollment charter schools.

## What is ECI?

[ECI](#), which stands for early childhood intervention, is a program in Texas run by the Texas Health and Human Services Commission or HHSC. It helps families with children from birth to 36 months who have developmental delays, disabilities, or certain medical conditions that may affect development. ECI services help families learn ways to support their child's growth and learning.

If you think your child may have a delay, your child can be referred to ECI right away, even at birth. Anyone who knows your child, such as a family member, caregiver, teacher, doctor, or friend, can make a referral by contacting the [nearest ECI program](#).

ECI works with different organizations across Texas to provide services. Some large cities have more than one ECI program. Each ECI program serves families who live in certain areas based on ZIP codes.

## What is ECSE?

[ECSE](#), which stands for early childhood special education, includes special education services for children ages 3 through 5 who are not enrolled in kindergarten. They are provided through your local school system. Children with disabilities who qualify for ECSE services have the right to receive a free appropriate and public education ([FAPE](#)). This means that your child has the right to a free, individualized education that meets their unique needs.

The IDEA says that children should learn in the least restrictive environment (LRE). This means that children should learn with peers without disabilities as much as possible, while still getting the support they need. ECSE services may be provided in different settings, such as childcare centers, preschools, Head Start programs, prekindergarten classrooms, and other early learning environments.



If you have a child birth to 36 months old with a developmental delay or disability, ECI may be able to help your family and child. Services are provided in your home and in other places where your child goes regularly, such as a childcare center, park, library, or other community setting. It is important to find the local ECI program that serves your area.

## Eligibility

ECI encourages families not to take a "wait and see" approach to their child's development. A referral to ECI can be based on professional judgment or a family's concern. A medical diagnosis or a confirmed developmental delay is not needed to refer. As soon as a delay is suspected, children may be referred to ECI, even as early as birth. To be [eligible for ECI services](#), your child must be younger than 36 months old and meet one of the following criteria:

### 1. Medically Diagnosed Condition

- a. If your child has a qualifying medically diagnosed condition that is likely to cause a developmental delay and they need services, they qualify for ECI. You will need to provide medical records to confirm your child's diagnosis.



You can find a list of medically qualifying diagnoses on the HHSC website using the [HHSC ECI Qualifying Diagnosis Search](#).

### 2. Deaf or Hard of Hearing (DHH), Blind, Deafblind (DB), or Visually Impaired (VI)

- a. If your child has been identified as DHH, blind, DB, or VI, as defined by the TEA, they qualify for ECI. This is determined by a team that includes certified staff from your local school system. Contact the Child Find coordinator for your local school system or your ECI program for more information.
- b. If your child has a vision or hearing impairment, specialists like a teacher of students with visual impairments (TVI) or a teacher of the deaf or hard of hearing (TODHH) will be part of the team. With your written consent, these specialists can talk with your child's medical providers to gather needed information. ECI will help coordinate all services for your child.
- c. In Texas, children who are DHH, blind, DB, or VI are entitled to FAPE from birth. Because of this, the ECI provider and the local school system work together to provide services in the area where your child lives.

### 3. Developmental Delay

- a. A child qualifies for ECI if the evaluation shows they are developing more slowly than expected for their age. Delays can happen in different areas of growth, such as social/emotional, adaptive and self-help, communication, motor, or cognition development. If the evaluation shows that your child is behind by at least 25% of what is expected for their age, they qualify for ECI services. If the only area of concern is how they use words to express themselves, the delay must be greater (at least 33%) to qualify.
- b. Your child will be evaluated to learn about their abilities and strengths, as well as any areas where they may have delays or difficulties.



If you suspect your child is eligible, [make a referral to ECI](#).

## What happens after the referral?

A team of trained professionals uses multiple sources of data, such as parent interviews, medical information, observations, and norm-referenced tools, to decide if your child is eligible for ECI services. If your child qualifies, the team looks at your child's strengths and needs in the family's daily routines.

Using the results of the evaluation, the team develops a plan for services, also known as an individualized family services plan (IFSP). Depending on your child's needs, the team may include early intervention specialists, speech-language pathologists (SLP), physical and occupational therapists (PT or OT), registered nurses, dietitians, social workers, and counselors.

## ECI services

Services are based on the needs and concerns of each family and child. ECI staff work with family members to incorporate helpful learning activities into daily routines to promote your child's development.

## Cost

The amount a family pays for services is determined using a sliding fee scale. This means that cost depends on family size and income after allowable deductions. No child or family is turned away because of an inability to pay. Some services are always free. These include the evaluation, case management, IFSP development, and translation and interpreter services. You will be asked for permission before ECI bills your child's insurance for these services.



Find the ECI program contact in your area by using the [ECI Program Search Tool](#).



# Transition from ECI to ECSE

When your child turns 3 years old, they are no longer eligible to receive ECI services. Before this happens, ECI creates a transition plan for every child exiting ECI. With your permission, a transition conference will be scheduled with your child's school system to discuss transitioning your child's services from ECI to the school system.

## Transition steps

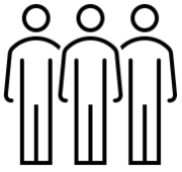
ECI and the local school system will work together to ensure that if your child is eligible for ECSE, they can move from ECI to ECSE without a gap in services. Here are the important steps:

- 1- **Transition plan:** The ECI team develops a transition plan for all children in ECI, who are at least 27 months old. This plan must be completed at least 90 days before your child turns 3.
- 2- **Transition notification:** ECI notifies the local school system that your child may be eligible for ECSE services. This notification serves as an initial referral. ECI must provide you with written notice about when and what will be shared with the school system at least 10 days before notifying the school that your child might be eligible for ECSE services. You must give written permission before ECI can share your child's records with the school system, and you can tell ECI not to send this notification if you do not want the information shared. If you agree, ECI will schedule a transition conference with you, ECI staff, and the school system to talk about next steps and possible services.
- 3- **Transition conference:** During the conference, the team talks about special education eligibility, the evaluation process, timelines, and ECSE service options. The team also discusses your child's development, strengths, areas of need, and current services.
- 4- **Parental consent:** The school system asks for your written permission to conduct a special education evaluation.
- 5- **Evaluation timeline:** After you give written consent, the school system must complete the evaluation by your child's 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday.
- 6- **Eligibility Determination:** After the evaluation, the admission, review, and dismissal (ARD) committee meets to decide if your child is eligible for ECSE services. If your child qualifies, the team creates an individualized education plan (IEP) and begins services by your child's 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday.



The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) [Policy Letter to Jennifer Nix](#) explains how schools help children move smoothly from ECI to ECSE services. It outlines planning, meetings, and timelines to prevent gaps in services. Families can read the policy letter for more details.

## Who will attend the transition conference?



- Parents of the child
- Family members, advocates, or others as requested by the parent
- ECI service coordinator
- ECI service provider, as appropriate
- School system representative/evaluation personnel

## Where can the conference be held?



- Family's home
- Location within the school system
- Live video conference
- Other mutually agreed-upon location

## What will I be asked to provide?

You will be asked to give permission for ECI to share your child's information with the school system. This makes sure everyone has the information they need to work together and support your child.

## Topics discussed at the transition conference

At the transition conference, the team will talk about your child and next steps. Topics may include:

- Your child's strengths, needs, and current services
- Whether your child may be eligible for special education and related services
- The evaluation process, including timelines and next steps
- ECSE program options (if your child is eligible for special education and related services)
- Your rights as a parent and how they are protected
- Answers to any questions you may have

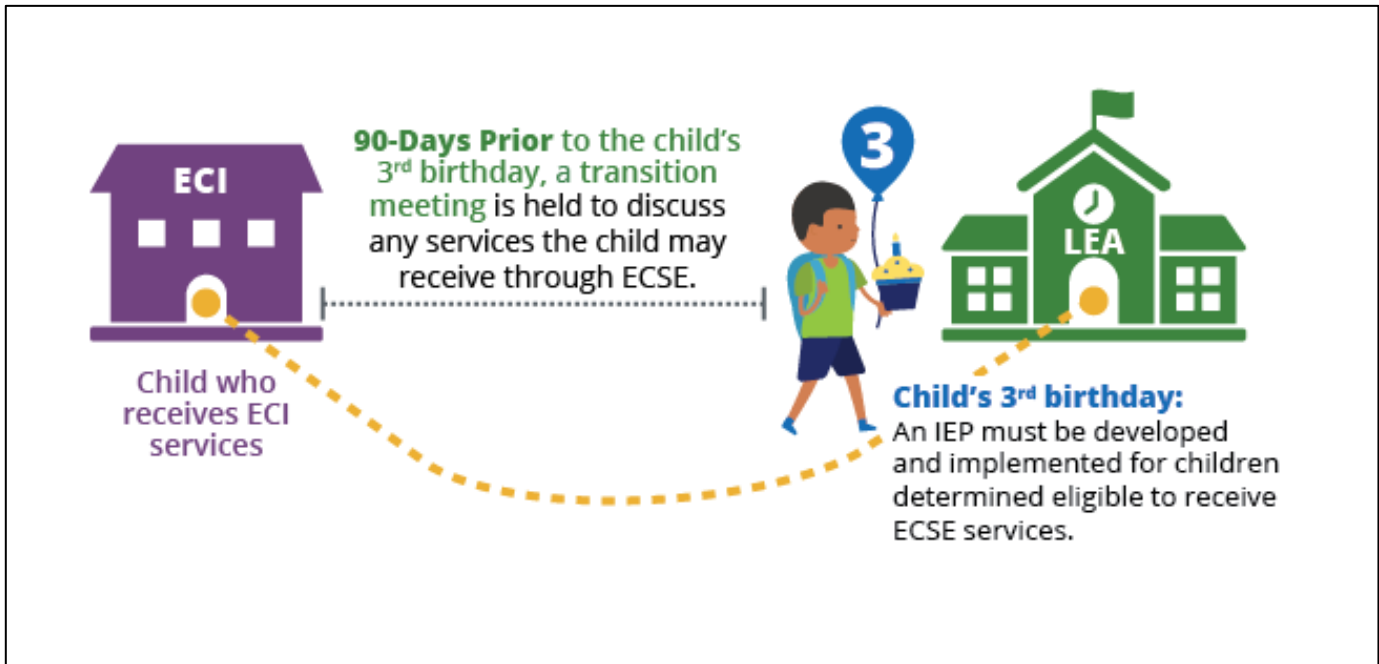
## Questions to ask at the transition conference



- How are ECI services different from school-based services?
- How will the school system determine if my child is eligible for services?
- If my child qualifies for services, what services are available?
- How will the school system provide those services?
- If my child qualifies for services, can I schedule a classroom visit?
- What is the best way to share my child's strengths and needs with the team?

## What happens after the transition conference?

The team will establish a timeline for the transition, including key dates and actions that need to be taken. This might include scheduling interviews, evaluations, and other important meetings.



# ECSE

## ECSE Eligibility

To receive ECSE services, your child must have a special education evaluation completed. This evaluation gathers information about whether your child may meet one of the 13 disability categories and whether they need special education services to learn and make progress in school.

After the evaluation is finished, the ARD committee (which includes parents) will meet to review the results of the evaluation and determine whether your child qualifies for special education and what kinds of support your child needs.

Texas uses the following list of disability categories to decide if children ages 3 through 21 qualify for special education and related services:

- Autism
- Deaf-blindness
- Deaf or hard of hearing
- Developmental delay
- Emotional disability
- Intellectual disability
- Multiple disabilities
- Orthopedic impairment
- Other health impairment
- Specific learning disability
- Speech impairment
- Traumatic brain injury
- Visual impairment



Visit [SPEDTex](#) (a website specifically created to help families to understand special education, with chat support and a phone hotline) to learn more about the [13 disability categories](#) identified under IDEA.



# The Evaluation Process



## Consent

Before evaluating your child for special education eligibility, the school system must tell you what they plan to do and provide the opportunity to gain your written permission for evaluation, which is called “consent.” This information must be provided in a language you understand.

You will receive an explanation of the evaluation process, including which areas of your child’s development will be assessed.

You will also receive copies of the:

- [Notice of Procedural Safeguards](#),
  - explains your rights as a parent in special education, including how decisions are made, how to participate in those decisions, and what to do if you disagree with the school,
- [Parent’s Guide to the Admission, Review and Dismissal Process](#),
  - helps parents understand what happens during ARD meetings, your role as a parent, and how decisions about your child’s special education services are made,
- [Overview of Special Education for Parents](#),
  - provides a general explanation of special education services, how students qualify, and what supports may be available to help meet a child’s individual needs, and if needed,



## Evaluation

The evaluation assesses all areas where your child has a suspected disability and may need support. The results help the ARD committee decide if your child qualifies for special education and related services.

The evaluation also gives starting or baseline information about your child’s skills. This information is used to create measurable annual goals and monitor your child’s progress over time.



## ARD Committee

The ARD committee includes you as the parent, the school staff, and any additional professionals needed. You are an important member of the ARD committee and play a key role in all decisions about your child’s services.

The ARD committee meets to review the evaluation and decide if your child qualifies for special education and related services. If your child is eligible, the committee will create an individualized education program (IEP). An IEP is a written plan that describes your child’s strengths, needs, goals, and the special education services and supports the school will provide. Unlike an IFSP, which focuses on the whole family, the IEP helps guide your child’s learning and school experience, supporting them in learning with peers without disabilities as much as possible. This is called the least restrictive environment or LRE.

The ARD committee sets the start date for services and must develop and implement your child's IEP by their 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday. If your child's birthday is during the summer, services will start on or before the first day of school, based on the IEP. After that, the ARD committee meets at least once a year to review, update, and adopt your child's IEP.

## ECSE Continuum of Services

A continuum of services means there are different types of programs and supports available to meet a child's needs. The goal is to provide services in settings that allow children with disabilities to learn and participate with children without disabilities as much as possible.

There are different ECSE services for children aged 3 through 5 who are not in kindergarten. These services can be provided through public and charter school early childhood programs, collaboration with Head Start programs, and community preschools.

The ARD committee decides which services and supports your child will receive based on your child's IEP. Placement refers to the type of learning setting, not the exact building or classroom. The ARD committee chooses the setting that best meets your child's needs while following LRE requirements.

Here are some examples of the different types of learning settings where young children receiving ECSE services might learn, based on what best supports their needs:

- **General education classroom** – Example: A child attends a prekindergarten classroom where all children with and without disabilities participate meaningfully with a standard curriculum while addressing student specific needs.
- **Special education classroom** – Example: A child attends an ECSE program designed specifically for children with disabilities. This program may be located within a public school or an early learning childhood center. Services are provided in a structured environment tailored to the child's needs.
- **Community-based program** – Example: A child attends a community preschool or daycare that includes both typically developing children and those with disabilities.
- **Combination of settings** – Example: A child splits their time between a regular early childhood program and a special education setting. For instance, they might attend a community preschool in the morning and receive specialized services in the afternoon.
- **Home setting** – Example: A child receives ECSE services at home, where a specialist visits regularly to provide individualized instruction and support to both the child and their caregiver(s).
- **Separate special education school** – Example: A child attends a specialized school where the curriculum is specifically designed to address the educational and developmental needs of students with disabilities. It may include instruction in academic, social, and life skills.

- **Hospital or residential setting** – Example: For children with significant medical or behavior needs, ECSE services may be provided in a hospital or clinical setting. This ensures that the child’s medical and educational needs are both addressed.



For more information on ECSE continuum of services, see [Determining the Least Restrictive Environment \(LRE\) in Preschool](#).

## Who to Contact about ECSE

If your child is receiving ECI services, the ECI provider will notify your local school system at least 90 days prior to your child’s 3<sup>rd</sup> birthday.

If your child is not receiving ECI services or if you need additional information, you can contact the Child Find coordinator or school administrator at the local school system

Child Find is a federal requirement under IDEA to locate and evaluate children (from birth to 21) who may need special education services.

### Steps to Find and Contact the Child Find Coordinator:

- **Locate your district:** Use tools like the [Texas School District Locator map](#) to identify your local school system.
- **Search website:** Visit the district's website and look for departments labeled "Special Education," "Student Services," or "Child Find."
- **Make the call/email:** Contact the district's special education department and ask for the "Child Find Coordinator" or the person responsible for evaluating children for services.
- **Support:** If you need assistance, contact [SPEDTex](#).

[A Parent’s Guide to Special Education Referrals for Children Ages 3-5](#) outlines the process for requesting a special education evaluation.








## Parent tips to help your child transition to ECSE

- **Keep copies of the child's records.** Keep digital or paper copies of your child's records for future reference and improved coordination between the ECI and ECSE teams. [This article](#) explains how to create an organized binder for your child's IEP.
- **Consider adding your child to the waiver interest list(s).** If your child has a disability or developmental delay, getting on the [Texas Medicaid waiver](#) lists early can help them access long-term supports when needed. Some interest lists are very long, so it is a good idea to add your child to the interest lists as soon as possible. [Connect with your Local Intellectual and Developmental Disability Authority](#) (LIDDA) to learn more. This [video](#) from the Straight Talk parent video series explains why signing up early is a good idea.
- **Stay informed and ask questions.** Always ask questions and ensure you fully understand the process.
- **Incorporate pretend play.** Use play to practice activities your child may see at school, such as circle time, cleanup routines, and taking turns.
- **Visit the classroom ahead of time.** Arrange a visit to meet the new teacher and see the classroom before the first day. If possible, take a photo of the teacher to help your child feel more comfortable and make the transition smoother.
- **Read books that support your child's growth.** Choose stories that help your child feel comfortable with new skills and experiences, such as getting ready for school. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) "Amazing Books for Children" collection includes great options to support your child's development.
- **Share your child's preferences.** Provide the new teacher and other educators or professionals with information about your child's interests, likes, and dislikes so the teacher can better understand and support your child. Explore [this webpage](#) to learn more about how to create a one-page profile and view several sample portfolio pages.
- **Help your child build self-determination skills.** [This video](#) from the Straight Talk parent video series talks about the importance of building your child's independence. [Next Steps to Independence](#) suggests practical ways you can support your child's independence at home.
- **Bring a comfort item.** Ask if your child can bring a small favorite toy or a family photo to school on the first day for comfort and reassurance.



# ECI and ECSE Side by Side Comparison

This table shows the main differences between ECI and ECSE. It can help you understand how services change as your child gets older.

ECI		ECSE
Part C of IDEA	 <b>Law</b>	Part B of IDEA
Texas Health and Human Services Commission	 <b>Agency</b>	School System also known as your local educational agency or LEA
Birth to 36 months	 <b>Age</b>	Ages 3 through 5 years old (not in kindergarten)
Medically diagnosed condition  Deaf, hard of hearing, blind, deafblind visually impaired  Developmental delay	 <b>Eligibility</b>	Meets one of the thirteen disability categories defined by IDEA
Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) (family-focused)	 <b>Plan/Program</b>	Individualized Education Program (IEP) (education-focused)
Where the child lives, learns, and plays	 <b>Location of Services</b>	Within general education classrooms, special education classrooms, community-based programs, or a combination of settings
Sliding-scale fees (evaluation and service coordination provided at no cost)	 <b>Cost</b>	No costs

Children who are deaf or hard of hearing (DHH), blind, deafblind, or have a visual impairment (VI) are entitled to FAPE from birth. ECI and the school system coordinate services.

# Resources

For more information on ECI and ECSE services, visit the resources below.

You may also contact the ECSE representative at the [Regional Education Service Center \(ESC\)](#) that serves your area.

- [CDC's Amazing Books for Children | U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)
- [Connecting to Community Supports | Texas SPED Support](#)
- [Determining the Least Restrictive Environment \(LRE\) in Preschool | Texas SPED Support](#)
- [Early Childhood Family Resources | Texas Education Agency](#)
- [Early Childhood Intervention \(ECI\) Services -Information for Families | Texas Health and Human Services](#)
- [Early Childhood Special Education \(ECSE\) | Texas Education Agency](#)
- [Early Childhood Texas: Resources for Raising Kids](#)
- [Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center \(ECTA\) - For Families](#)
- [How to Create an Organized Binder for Your Child's Individualized Education Program \(IEP\) | Navigate Life Texas](#)
- [Next Steps to Independence: Skills and Strategies | Texas SPED Support](#)
- [Notice of Procedural Safeguards | SPEDTex](#)
- [Overview of the Special Education Process | SPEDTex](#)
- [Special Education Information Center | SPEDTex](#)
- [Special Education Acronym Quick Reference Guide | Texas SPED Support](#)
- [Parent's Guide to the ARD Process | SPEDTex](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Special Education Referrals for Children Ages 3-5 | Texas SPED Support](#)
- [POLICY LETTER: March 17, 2023, to Nix - Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#)
- [Portfolios and One Page Profiles |Texas Project First](#)
- [School District Locator | Texas Education Agency](#)
- [Supporting Children Receiving Special Education Services in the Early Childhood Setting | Texas Education Agency](#)
- [Supporting Early Childhood Transitions | Texas SPED Support](#)
- [Straight Talk Parent Video Series | Texas SPED Support](#)
- [Texas Infant, Toddler, and Three-Year-Old Early Learning Guidelines – Children's Learning Institute](#)
- [Texas Medicaid Waiver Programs for Children with Disabilities | Navigate Life Texas](#)
- [Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines | Texas Education Agency](#)



[Spedtex.org](http://Spedtex.org)



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