



## OVERVIEW OF PROFESSIONALS IN THE SCHOOL-AGE SPECIAL EDUCATION SYSTEM

Throughout your child's academic career, he or she will come into contact with dozens of different professionals who are there for support. The list below provides an overview of some of these individuals and a description of the role they may have. Be aware that your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) will control who works directly with your child and what they do.

### *Regular Education Teachers*

Depending on your child's educational placement, your child may interact with several regular education teachers throughout each school week. These teachers may provide academic instruction, teach specials (such as art, music, or a foreign language), or may simply be adults with whom your child interacts in the hall. Most regular education teachers do not have a lot of training in providing services to students with special needs. Typically, they have had minimal training while in college or graduate school and may have attended in-service workshops since becoming a teacher. It may be a good idea to include professional training for regular education teachers in your child's IEP.

### *Special Education Teachers*

Professionals who are designated as special education teachers (or "special educators") must have special training in working with children with disabilities and must also meet competence standards of any subjects that they teach. Depending on your child's IEP, your child may work with one or more special education teachers during the week. A special education teacher may teach students in his or her own classroom (for example a resource room or self-contained class) or may co-teach a class with a regular education teacher. Special education teachers are usually responsible for modifying the educational curriculum for students with disabilities when necessary and may also act as a resource for regular education teachers who may have less experience working

with students with disabilities. Some special education teachers have the added role of making sure your child's entire IEP is implemented as planned and may be responsible for planning and conducting the IEP meetings. Your child's special education teacher may be a good resource for you to learn more about how to help your child at home. But teachers are learners too! Consider including professional education training for your child's special education teachers in your child's IEP.

### *Aides/Paraprofessionals*

School aides are individuals who assist students and teachers during the school day. Depending on where you live, they may be called paraprofessionals, para-educators, instructional paraprofessionals, educational assistants, instructional assistants, one-on-ones, personal care assistants, TSS (therapeutic support staff), or teacher's aides. As the term one-on-one implies, an aide can be assigned for a particular student. Some classrooms have classroom aides who are there to assist all students in a particular class. If your IEP team determines that your child needs an aide, an aide will be listed as a service or support in your child's IEP. You should also make certain that the role of the aide is clarified within the IEP document.

### *Occupational Therapists (OTs)*

Occupational Therapists (OTs) have specialized degrees in occupational therapy. Licensed therapists are regulated by the states in which they practice and must pass a national certification examination. Those who qualify are awarded the title of "Occupational Therapist Registered (OTR)." OTs help children with the "occupation" of being a student. This can include a wide range of activities, including coloring and handwriting, playing, self-regulation, self-care, and developing job skills. Therapy may be delivered in a group or individually. School OTs are not always employees of the school or school district in which they work. Often they work for outside organizations which the school hires to deliver OT services. Even OTs who are school district employees usually work in more than one school and thus will not be at your child's school the entire school day or even every school day. Because of this, school OTs frequently consult with other school staff to make sure all team members understand and enforce the child's occupational therapy goals.

### *Speech-Language Pathologists (SLPs)*

Speech-Language Pathologists (SLPs) must have at least a master's degree. They

must be licensed and pass a national exam on speech-language pathology. Most states also have continuing education requirements for license renewal. There is generally a shortage of licensed speech-language pathologists, however, and schools in most states are allowed to provide an emergency certification to professionals who have yet to be licensed. Children with on the autism spectrum can have a variety of speech-language difficulties, including difficulty speaking (ranging, for example, from an inability to produce sound to stuttering), difficulty understanding or processing language, and difficulty understanding non-verbal forms of communication. Therapy may be delivered in a group or individual session, but it must be provided by an SLP (or someone who has an emergency certification). SLPs may also provide consultation services for students who do not qualify for speech-language services.

### *Physical Therapists (PTs)*

Physical Therapists (PTs) have graduate degrees and are either licensed or certified. They must pass a national physical therapy exam and must take continuing education classes to remain eligible to practice. School based PTs work with students who have conditions that limit their abilities to move and perform functional activities. Students who receive physical therapy services may perform activities designed to improve gross motor skills, such as exercise and other movement oriented activities. Often PTs are not employees of the school or school district in which they work. Instead, they may work for outside organizations which the school hires to deliver physical therapy services. Even PTs who are school district employees usually work in more than one school and thus will not be at your child's school the entire school day or even every school day. Because of this, school PTs frequently consult with other school staff to make sure all team members understand and enforce the child's physical therapy goals.

### *Behavior Support Professionals*

Sometimes a student on the autism spectrum may have learning or social behaviors that interfere with school. The role of the behavior support professional is to help determine the reasons for a student's behaviors and to design and implement programs to help change unwanted behavior or encourage positive behavior. The behavior support professional is responsible for discovering what motivates a child (for example, praise or tangible rewards) and for designing a program using these reinforcers. They collect data on behaviors targeted for

intervention. They may work one-on-one with a student or may provide consultative services. There are different types of behavior support professionals. Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs) have a master's degree or doctorate in Behavior Analysis, psychology, or special education. They must undergo supervised training and pass a standardized exam. Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analysts (BCaBAs) have a bachelor's degree, with specific coursework related to behavior, and must pass an exam. Currently most states do not require that a BCBA or BCaBA provide behavior services in schools, however.

### *Guidance Counselors*

In some schools, guidance counselors are very involved with students on the autism spectrum. In others, the guidance counselor is used on an "as needed" basis. Some guidance counselors have primary responsibility for ensuring that your child's IEP is implemented correctly - meaning that your child is receiving the services, accommodations, and supports agreed upon. The guidance counselor may routinely check in with teachers and other service providers and be a part of monitoring your child's progress. Other districts give this organizational role to the special education teacher, school nurse, school principal, or another professional within the school. Guidance counselors are not required to have any specialized training in special education and thus their experience working with students on the autism spectrum vary across schools. Due to the number of students with disabilities attending public schools, more and more guidance counselors are gaining additional training. Some offer direct instruction or services to students on the autism spectrum. For example, a guidance counselor may be responsible for running a "lunch bunch" or other social group designed to promote peer interactions. For older students, guidance counselors may be involved in transition planning. Counselors may be licensed counselors with a minimum of a master's degree, may be social workers, or may be psychologists.

### *School Psychologists*

School psychologists work with students in schools and collaborate with teachers, parents, and school personnel to create safe, healthy, and supportive learning environments. School psychologists address students' learning and behavioral problems, suggest improvements to classroom management strategies or parenting techniques, and evaluate and test students with disabilities and gifted/talented students to help determine the best ways to educate them. They

also may evaluate the effectiveness of academic programs, prevention programs, behavior management procedures, and other services provided in the school setting. School psychologists must have a minimum of a specialist or master's degree. Most school districts require that a school psychologist be certified, meaning they have passed a state exam and have attended continuing education classes as required by the state in which they practice.

### *School Nurse*

Depending on where your child goes to school, the school nurse may play a large role in your child's special education. In many areas, the school nurse serves as a prominent member of the IEP team, perhaps even serving as the person in the school with primary responsibility for implementing the IEP. In other areas, the school nurse is involved with your child to the extent your child may need to take medication during the school day or when your child becomes sick at school.

### *Miscellaneous*

In addition to the school professionals discussed above, there will probably be a number of other staff who will work with your child. These include the school principal (who may be involved in the IEP process and will also likely be involved in discipline decisions), the bus driver, recess monitors, and lunchroom staff. The IEP team should evaluate which of these individuals might need additional training to support your child and add this to your child's IEP.

### Related Articles:

- [What Kinds of Special Education Services are Available?](#)
- [Supports for School Personnel](#)
- [Aides/Paraprofessionals for School-Age Students](#)
- [Speech, Language and Communication](#)
- [The Role of the Pediatric Physical Therapist for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder](#)
- [Occupational Therapy for Children with ASD](#)
- [Functional Behavioral Assessment: What is It?](#)
- [Behavior Intervention Plan](#)
- [The Importance of Data in Measuring Progress](#)
- [School Counselors and Counseling Services](#)
- [The Role of the School Nurse](#)

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