



The Exceptional Advocate

A newsletter for military families with special needs

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Communicating with Teachers When Your Child Has Special Needs

Overview

How can parents of children with special needs can communicate effectively with teachers?

- **Get to know your child's teachers and specialists**
- **Attend Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings**
- **Attend parent-teacher conferences**
- **Know when to contact the teacher**
- **Know your resources**

It's important to communicate regularly with your child's teachers from kindergarten through high school, especially if you are the parent of a child with special needs. Having a good working relationship with the people who work with your child helps make sure that education is a team effort between home and school.

You can get to know your child's teachers through parent-teacher conferences, IEP meetings, volunteering, and school events. At other times, you may want to connect with your child's teacher or therapist through email, telephone, written notes, or personal visits. However you do it, good

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Welcome Letter from the Desk of Mr. Milam

The Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) is dedicated to supporting military families with special needs. We take pride in ensuring families have access to the resources and information needed to be well-informed advocates for their family members. As an extension of our commitment to family support, we are excited to introduce *The Exceptional Advocate*, a monthly electronic newsletter for military families with special needs.



In each issue readers can look forward to

- articles that address key challenges for military families with special medical or educational needs;
- a spotlight on awareness for key health, safety or disability concerns;
- a look at EFMP best practices, events, and outreach activities at military installations worldwide;
- a children's activity page; and
- links to valuable resources for information and support.

We encourage you to subscribe to *The Exceptional Advocate* to receive a copy via email each month. We look forward to your feedback and hope that you will find the information we provide to be both informative and relevant to the needs of your family. Happy reading!

Mr. Charles E. Milam

Principal Director for Military Community and Family Policy

Spotlight On: Children's Eye Health and Safety Month

In recognition of Children's Eye Health and Safety Month, we would like to emphasize the importance of eye care for children of all ages. According to Prevent Blindness America, one in twenty preschoolers and one in four school-age children are affected by vision problems, which when left untreated, can further deteriorate a child's vision and lead to poor academic performance. Because many vision problems begin at a young age, it is important that children receive proper vision



screening at the recommended regular intervals. To learn more about vision screening and common problems that can affect a child's vision, visit the [Department of Health and Human Services' Healthfinder](#) website.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act at a Glance

School will be back in session before long. Right now is a great time to get reacquainted with some of the educational legislation and rights for children with special needs. Here's an overview of the core aspects of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 that can impact your child's education.

Part B of the IDEA includes the federal legislation that establishes educational requirements for children with disabilities from age three to twenty-one. Under the IDEA, there are six core principles that serve as the basis for the education of children with special needs:

1. Children have the right to a **free and appropriate public education (FAPE)** provided at public expense and under public supervision and direction, regardless of a child's disability or severity of the disability.
2. Students suspected of having a special need are entitled to an **evaluation** and specialized instruction if the results of the evaluation determine that a child has a special educational need as defined by IDEA. A comprehensive evaluation for special education services is provided only with written parental consent. Evaluations consist of assessments in a variety of areas to gather information about a child's functional, developmental, and academic abilities. When possible, testing is conducted in the language most comfortable to the child and must take place in a nondiscriminatory manner that is appropriate for the child's suspected disability.
3. Schools use evaluation results to determine whether a student requires special education and related services. An **Individualized Education Program (IEP)** is a written plan developed to ensure that the child's educational rights and needs are met. Educators and parents work together to develop an IEP, taking into consideration multi-factored evaluations, prior school performance, and growth. An IEP helps educators recognize issues, create goals, and offer solutions for your child. The IEP must include a written statement that defines how and when parents will receive updates on their children; the members of the IEP team; the special accommodations or related services that must be in the IEP; the role of the education professionals and requirements for any reviews and changes made to the IEP.
4. **Parent and teacher participation** is instrumental in developing the right IEP for a student; however, a parent cannot be forced to participate, nor can they be excluded from the process. It is important to know that consent to an evaluation is not the same as consent for special education services.
5. The **least restrictive environment (LRE)** enables the placement of children with special needs in general classrooms for the majority of their time spent at school. The LRE for each child will be different depending on his or her needs. Under the IDEA, the removal of children with special needs from a regular classroom environment should only occur in cases of severe disability that prevent the child from receiving a satisfactory education.
6. **Procedural safeguards** are in place to maintain accountability and provide parents with certain guarantees when it comes to their children's education. Parents have the right to copies of all educational records and may contest the findings of evaluations or the goals of an IEP. Parents are also guaranteed the right to an objective hearing.

The IDEA contains several safeguards for the protection of parents and students with and without disabilities, as well as for the protection of educators. For more information, check out [Building the Legacy: IDEA 2004](#). You can also learn more on [MilitaryHOMEFRONT's Exceptional Family Member Program section](#).



Kid's Corner



Hi, my name is Iman Advocate and this is my dog, Watson! I made this superhero costume all by myself because I want to help other kids like me.

We'll be here at the Kid's Corner with fun things to do every month. So get your pencils and crayons out and let's get ready to play!



Back-to-school
word search

Find and circle the words
from the list.

Pencil	Library	Math
Paper	Teacher	Reading
Student	Book	Science
Crayon	Class	Art
Ruler	Fun	Spelling

A R T K O O B W L W
D V Q J U S R M I R
N O Y A R C U V B E
S P E L L I N G R L
P T G D R U T N A U
E K U M F E Q I R R
N B F D B J P D Y H
C Z R R E H C A E T
I S C I E N C E P A
L C L A S S T R J M

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communication leads to a positive home-school relationship, which will ultimately help your child have a more positive school experience.

Get to know your child's teachers and specialists

It's never too early in the school year to start building a good relationship with your child's teacher and the other professionals who work with your child.

- *Attend back-to-school-night events whenever possible.* These are usually held at the beginning of the school year. They are a good way to get to know your child's teachers, including special education teachers.
- *Introduce yourself to the teacher.* If you can't make contact in person, write a note or send an email asking how the teacher prefers to be contacted and the best time of day to reach him or her. This will set a positive tone for future communications and will make getting in touch easier.
- *If you have just moved to a new school, schedule an IEP meeting as soon as possible.* The new school

is required to provide services comparable to those your child received at the previous school until the current IEP is adopted or a new one is in place. The IEP meeting will help make sure that your child receives services and will give you the opportunity to meet the specialists who will be working with your child.

- *Encourage communication between your child's teachers and other related service providers.*
- *Keep your child's teachers and service providers updated on changes at home.* Deployments and other separations may affect your child's behavior and class work.
- *Set up a communication log with your child's teacher.* Provide a notebook or use the school agenda book to record and track ongoing conversations. Ask questions about class work and areas your child did particularly well in that day or week. Keep in mind that communication logs can sometimes become a negative reflection of your child at school. Keep it positive. Ask the teacher to call you with any concerns.

- Past IEPs
- Phone log
- Assessments and evaluations
- Discipline reports
- Report cards/progress reports
- Correspondence to and from the school
- Immunization and pertinent health records
- Contact information for service providers and other agencies

- Remember to copy all the letters and emails you send to the school and include them in your file.
- *Stay calm and communicate clearly.* Good communication includes direct eye contact, an even voice, and open body language. You can still be polite to someone even if you don't agree.
- *If you don't understand what someone has said, politely ask, "Did I understand you to say that...?"* This can clear up a misunderstanding early on or help define an area of disagreement.
- *Don't be embarrassed to ask for further explanations.* Look for common ground and make sure others know you are trying to understand their point of view.
- *Ask for regular communication with your child's teachers and service providers.*

DID YOU KNOW



Free online tutoring, resumé writing, test preparation, and career transition assistance is available through a Department of Defense partnership with Tutor.com. Tutoring is provided 24/7 by professional tutors with expertise in more than twenty subjects. Education levels range from K-12 to introductory college and adult learning. Visit Tutor.com/military for more information.

Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings

IEP meetings are a great opportunity to communicate with your child's teachers and other specialists. Whether your IEP meeting is an annual review or the first IEP meeting at a new school, effective communication is key. Consider these helpful tips:

- *Be prepared.* IEP meetings generate a lot of paperwork. Create a system to help you keep track of your child's papers as they relate to the IEP. Your binder may include these items:

Parent-teacher conferences

Almost every school holds some form of parent-teacher conferences, or conversations with a teacher

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EFMP at your Service

The Exceptional Fitness Program

When Hurlburt Field Air Force Base Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP) Coordinator, Ruthy Srun, was approached by a father in need of assistance with finding a fitness program for his seventeen-year-old autistic son, she had no idea it would be so difficult. After an extensive search, Ms. Srun realized local programs for teens or adults with special needs were non-existent. She decided partnering with the installation fitness centers was the logical thing to do. After all, Hurlburt Field is home to three fitness facilities and a top-notch Force Support Squadron. Ms. Srun contacted Karen Cataldo, Fitness Manager at the Hurlburt Field's Fitness Center, along with Sheena Frey and Sandra DeMezzo from the installation's Health and Wellness Centers. Before long, plans were underway to develop a program for the unmet fitness and nutritional needs of teens and adults with special needs.

March 24, 2011 marked the start of the Exceptional Fitness Program.



Once a week, program participants meet for a forty-five-minute class that promotes overall physical fitness through exercises focused on strength, flexibility, and endurance. At the end of each class, students receive a short instruction on nutrition. The program takes place in six-week sessions and is open to individuals authorized to use base facilities who are fourteen or older with a physical, medical, emotional, or behavioral need. Classes are taught by qualified staff members. Participants are assigned a "buddy" who can modify activities as needed to accommodate each participant's disabilities or physical limitations.

"We've found that a circuit class works very well with the participants rotating to each station every forty-five seconds to one minute," says Ms. Cataldo. "As the program continues to grow, we'll look at offering different activities, such as water aerobics, or possibly a cycling class. Our main goal is to provide an environment that enables everyone to have fun and exercise at the same time."

Now in its second six-week session, the program has received nothing but positive feedback from parents and participants alike. It was recently recognized as a "Promising Practice" during an Air Force Joint Training Conference for the Exceptional Family Member and School Liaison Programs.

What started out as a seemingly simple request has turned into a promising new opportunity for

teens and adults with special needs, allowing them to become more active in a fun and comfortable environment. Since the program's inception, there has been a "ripple effect" of positive experiences. Participants are able to socialize and make new friends while becoming more physically fit. According to Ms. Srun, some parents have even received approval to substitute their children's school physical education

"My hope is that the program will continue to grow and that more and more people will benefit from it. I know that it will take time, but the start has been great."

— Ruthy Srun, Hurlburt Field EFMP Coordinator

requirement by participating in the Exceptional Fitness Program. Ms. Srun has learned several parents feel as though fitness is one of the areas where their children get left behind as they grow older.

Though the program is still new, it's off to a great start with much potential. Those involved in coordinating the Exceptional Fitness Program are pleased with its progress.

To learn more about health and fitness for teens and adults, visit [Military OneSource](#) where you'll find information about the Healthy Habits Coaching Program, a free program that focuses on helping you reach your health and fitness goals.



Eye Care Q&A

Q: Does TRICARE cover eye exams?

A: Coverage for eye exams depends on your beneficiary category and which plan you are using. Generally, TRICARE covers the following:

- annual routine eye exams for active duty service members and active duty family members
- comprehensive eye exams every two years for beneficiaries enrolled in TRICARE Prime
- comprehensive eye exams every year for diabetic patients enrolled in TRICARE Prime

Ophthalmological services, which may include an eye exam and other specialized services, if in connection with the medical or surgical treatment of a covered illness or injury.

Q: What vision coverage does TRICARE offer for children?

A: Eligible children receive vision exams under the well-child care benefit, which includes one routine eye examination by an ophthalmologist or optometrist every two years beginning at age three. These routine eye exams offered between age three and six should include screening for amblyopia and strabismus.

Q: What about eye glasses and contact lenses?

A: TRICARE covers contact lenses and/or eyeglasses only for treatment of the following:

- infantile glaucoma
- corneal or scleral lenses for treatment of keratoconus
- scleral lenses to retain moisture when normal tearing is not present or is inadequate
- corneal or scleral lenses to reduce corneal irregularities other than astigmatism
- intraocular lenses, contact lenses, or eyeglasses for loss of human lens function resulting from intraocular surgery, ocular injury or congenital absence
- “pinhole” glasses prescribed for use after surgery for detached retina

You may qualify to receive eyeglasses free of charge based on your beneficiary category. Content Source: TRICARE Management Activity

Visit the [TRICARE website](#) for more information about covered services.

School Liaison Program: Your Link to a Smooth Transition

Frequent relocations are part of the military lifestyle. The military child will most likely change schools eight to ten times during a parent's military career. Transitioning to a new school in an unfamiliar location can cause anxiety and stress for parents and their children.

School liaisons (SL) are located at most major military installations. While the function of the SL may vary from installation to installation, they generally to help families, educators, and commands understand how frequent relocations, deployments, and separations impact children's ability to receive a quality education.

The SLs act as a link to the installation commander, local school personnel, and military families. SLs help school personnel address issues related to transition and the military lifestyle by providing information, referral, training, and resources.

For families relocating with a school-aged child, the SLs can provide important information regarding the local schools and available services. They are knowledgeable about the issues school-aged children face when relocating and can provide tools to help families ease this transition. The SLs can be a great help navigating the special education system as they work closely with the Exceptional Family Member Program family support personnel.

If you need information about schools, educational resources, services, or tips for easing the transition, contact a SL for assistance. To locate contact information for the nearest installation SL, visit [MilitaryINSTALLATIONS](#).



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about your child's schoolwork. These tips will help you make the most of conferences:

- *Before the conference, review the work your child has brought home from school.* You may find areas of concern you want to discuss with the teacher or other invited professionals. Bring the work with you.
- *Ask your child if there's anything he or she would like you to bring up.* You might also ask what he or she thinks the teacher will say. This will allow you to anticipate some issues that might come up at the conference.
- *Decide whether to leave your children at home with a babysitter.* It will be easier for you to concentrate if you do. At some schools it's becoming more common for older students to attend conferences with parents. Find out if this is the case at your school.
- *Be punctual.* Teachers usually have several conferences scheduled in a row and will appreciate your promptness.
- *Don't be afraid to ask questions.* With younger children, you may want to ask more about behavior or learning styles. With older children, you may need to discuss curriculum or plans for high school (and beyond). Here are some sample questions:
 - What are your goals and expectations for your students this year?
 - What can I do to help my child and reinforce learning at home?
 - Are the accommodations effective?

- What are my child's strengths and weaknesses?
- What areas need more work and improvement?
- Does my child participate in class? Is my child actively involved in learning?
- How much homework do you expect students to do each night? What kind of homework do you assign? What projects will be assigned this year?
- *Develop an action plan.* If you're concerned about your child's academic performance, work with the teacher to develop a plan for improvement.
- *Look at the goals and objectives on your child's IEP.* Now might be a good time to review the progress your child is making and see if changes need to be made.
- *Remember to thank the teacher for assisting your child and taking the time to meet with you.*

When to contact the teacher

There may be times during the school year when you'll want to speak with your child's teacher. If you have concerns, you should contact the teacher directly. The following issues might warrant contacting your child's teacher:

- If you see a change in behavior (such as when an outgoing child becomes withdrawn)
- If your child is having trouble academically or socially
- If your child's grades drop suddenly
- If you are going through changes at home that may be affecting your child, such as a deployment, a divorce, a new baby, or a serious illness in the family

- If your child is going to be out of school for more than a few days
- If you and your child need clarification about a project or an assignment
- If you are requesting a face-to-face meeting with your child's teacher, send a note or an email and allow the teacher to plan for the meeting.

Good parent-teacher communication has lasting benefits. Remember, both you and the teacher want what's best for your child.

Resources

DoD Education Activity Special Education page

Download the [Parent Handbook on Special Education](#) under the "Publications for Parents and Administrators" link.

HOMEFRONTConnections

This DoD social-networking site has a community for military families with special needs. Visit [HOMEFRONTConnections](#) for more information.

MilitaryHOMEFRONT's Special Needs EFMP Module

Call 1-800-342-9647 or go [Military OneSource](#) to learn more. Go to [MilitaryHOMEFRONT's Special Needs EFMP Module](#) for more information.

STOMP (Specialized Training of Military Parents)

Funded by a grant from the United States Department of Education, STOMP is a Parent Training and Information center for military families who have special education or health needs. Visit [STOMP](#) to learn more.

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Your Military Support Services

Visit your installation family center EFMP Office or Information and Referral Office for assistance. You can call or visit any installation Army Community Service Center, Marine Corps Community Services, Fleet and Family Support Center, or Airman and Family Readiness Center regardless of your branch affiliation. Visit [MilitaryINSTALLATIONS](#) for the contact information for your closest center.

If you aren't near an installation, National Guard Family Assistance Centers are available in every state. Go to the [Local Community Resource Finder](#) to find your closest center.

Military OneSource

This free, 24-hour service is available to all active duty, Guard, and Reserve members (regardless of activation status) and their families. Consultants provide information and make referrals on a wide range of issues, including education. Special Needs Specialty Consultations (up to twelve per issue each year) are available. Free face-to-face counseling sessions (and their equivalent by phone or online) are also available. Call 1-800-342-9647 or go to [MilitaryOneSource](#) to learn more.

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Exceptional Family Member Program



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