



SPECIAL EDUCATION RESOURCES

Trauma and Comprehensive Special Education Evaluation

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that special education evaluations be sufficiently comprehensive to identify all of the student's disability-related educational needs, whether or not they are commonly linked to the disability category in which the student has been classified (34 CFR 300.304). Comprehensive special education evaluations are conducted in a culturally and linguistically responsive manner, non-discriminatory for students of all cultural, racial, ethnic, socioeconomic and other backgrounds.

The purpose of this resource is to highlight important IEP team considerations when conducting an initial comprehensive special education evaluation or reevaluation of students who may have experienced trauma. This resource may also be helpful when IEP teams apply criteria for emotional behavioral disability which requires that the

"IEP team shall consider the effects of any known history of trauma or mental health disorder on the child's functioning. The IEP team may not identify or refuse to identify a child as a child with an emotional behavioral disability based solely on a known history of trauma or mental health disorder." [PI 11.36\(7\)\(d\)](#)

When evaluating a student, the IEP team reviews all data and other information and considers the influence of many factors, including trauma, on the student's ability to access, engage, and make progress in age or grade-level curriculum, instruction, activities, and environments. It is very important to have such knowledge of the student's history in order to develop a deeper understanding of the student's strengths and needs, to select and use appropriate assessment procedures, and to determine trauma-sensitive support strategies.

The DPI's definition of trauma is *exposure to a traumatic event that overwhelms a person's ability to respond and creates significant difficulty in functioning*. This definition of trauma is less about the event itself, and more about the impact. Exposure to trauma in childhood can affect, among other things,

- 1) learning and memory, which may manifest in academic challenges,
- 2) emotional regulation, which may manifest as behavioral difficulties,

3) attention, which may manifest as difficulties staying engaged in the classroom or to instruction, or

4) language development, including social communication, learning and retrieval of new verbal information, and language organization (i.e., understanding and retelling stories).

These effects can vary by age of onset and across individuals, with specific consideration given for the developmental impact of trauma on our youngest learners. Under the [Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act \(HIPAA\)](#), parents and guardians may choose whether or not to share confidential health information. IEP teams should be responsive to what parents or guardians choose to include in their child's IEP evaluation with respect to trauma(s) and have a clear understanding of who has access to their child's records.

Though a traumatic event or events can create significant difficulty in school functioning, these difficulties do not necessarily equate to eligibility for special education services. ***A trauma history does not necessitate special education, nor does it preclude a student from being eligible for special education.*** IEP teams should keep in mind that the effects of trauma may influence student performance in both [academic and functional skill areas](#). A history of trauma may help explain why a student demonstrates a certain skill level or behavior response. Discussing the potential effect of trauma on assessment data and other information used to make evaluation decisions and determining the effect of trauma on the student's access, engagement, and progress within the educational setting are tasks of the IEP team as they examine potential special education eligibility.

IEP Team Discussion Questions

IEP teams are encouraged to consider the following when making special education eligibility decisions and examining if and how trauma has an impact on a student's access, engagement, or progress in age or grade level general education curriculum, instruction, and other activities across environments:

- What information about the student may be needed when completing a review of existing data to best understand any of the concerns outlined in the referral? How will additional information from the parent and student, when applicable, be collected?
- How might a student's history of trauma affect the student's academic and functional skills in areas such as academics, cognitive learning, communication, independence and self-determination, physical and health, or social and emotional learning?
- How might a history of trauma affect the selection or development of assessment methods, procedures, or tools, and assessment findings?
- Is specially designed instruction required to address the effects of a student's disability to which a history of trauma may have contributed?

- Did the IEP team clearly determine if a student meets special education eligibility criteria and requires specially designed instruction as a result of their disability, versus determining if a student requires specially designed instruction solely based on a history of trauma?

Additional Resources

- [Trauma-Sensitive Assessment and Planning Checklist](#), *National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments*
- [Guidelines for Adopting a Multitiered Approach to Addressing Trauma](#), *National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments*
- [Mental Health - Trauma Sensitive Schools](#), *Wisconsin DPI*
- [Comprehensive Special Education Evaluation](#), *Wisconsin DPI*



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