



ITA

International Teachers Association

Module 14: Early Childhood Special Educational Needs

What you will learn in this module:

14.1 Principles

14.2 Understanding Diverse Needs

14.3 Models of Intervention

14.4 Curriculum Development

14.5 Monitoring and Evaluating Progress

The early learning years of a child are fundamental to their learning in later years. **Early childhood education refers to the years between birth and eight years old.** It is during this time when a child's mind absorbs information, and becomes the foundation of their learning.

The first two years of a child's life are considered a subset of the overarching term "early childhood education." Making up the time when infants and toddlers begin to learn, through play, that facilitates a greater understanding of the world around them. Furthermore, language acquisition and communication is introduced.

Most parents find that their children grow, understand, and demonstrate all of these abilities over this very short period of time. From the ages of three through eight, children begin preschool and elementary school classes, where those early foundations are further developed through lessons that focus on reading, writing, and arithmetic. It is during this time that teachers who spend long days with their students will begin to recognize the learning differences and challenges that arise.

From birth through eight years old, special education students need to be identified and given multiple opportunities for learning. Students who have some form of learning or intellectual disability that inhibits them from traditional learning strategies, must be given alternative strategies to help them learn. With the help of a team made up of parents, teachers, counselors, and administrators, students with special educational needs can flourish, and experience personal, academic, and social growth. Throughout this module you will explore the many facets of early childhood special educational needs, and how to address each child's diverse needs unique to their challenges and life-long development.



ITA

International Teachers Association

14.1 Principles

The educational system has clearly defined standards that are built upon the foundational principles set forth by the authorities. All school systems, and specific schools are held to the highest standards that meet the educational needs of all children; regardless of their learning abilities or levels.

For instance, in a 4th grade reading class, a student reading above grade level and a student reading below grade level should both be offered the same opportunity for success. Teachers and counselors must intervene to provide activities that meet the needs of both students equally. In order to outline the process for reaching intervention and curriculum development strategies we must first cover the early childhood developmental principles, and the principles of special education.

14.1.1 Principles Of Child Development

It is essential that all children are challenged early in life. It is also crucial that practices in education are developmentally appropriate. This is why school authorities have outlined grade appropriate learning, so that learning is sequential and escalates in difficulty with age. In looking at early childhood development, it is important to know these main principles of learning:

- **All areas of learning are important:** whether it is in learning shapes and sizes, that $1+1=2$, how to write their own name, or how to interact with others, all areas of learning are important in early childhood education. Physical, social, intellectual, and emotional needs should all be addressed and met through learning practices.
- **Learning and development follow a specific set of sequences:** the old saying “you can’t learn to run until you learn to walk” is relevant here. Certain information is built upon previously learned information, thus making learning sequential in many ways.
- **Learning comes from interaction and experience:** whether through 1-1 teacher to student strategies, small group, or large group interactions, students learn best from communicating and sharing ideas, and through practice.
- **Development and learning are affected by social and cultural experience:** students will come into their classroom setting with their own unique set of background information drawn from their home life, previous life experiences, and cultural aspects. It is important for educators and authority figures to understand, respect, and adapt to these differences within the classroom.
- **All children are unique,** including the way in which they learn: while this is important to all students, it is highly important to students who are identified as needing special



ITA

International Teachers Association

educational services. Due to their unique learning needs, different opportunities need to be offered within the classroom.

- **“Play” is a fundamental part of cognitive and social learning as well as language development:** early childhood education, including that in the special educational realm, should incorporate learning through play. In fact, through active play students can make significant strides in language acquisition, learning through interaction with peers, and mental development.
- **Learning and development is the result of being challenged:** all children, whether receiving special educational support or not, must be challenged within reasonable limits in order to achieve success and grow.

14.1.2 Principles Of Special Educational Services

Students with learning, intellectual, physical, and other disabilities are protected under the law. Here are the six essential principles to be aware of that protect students in need of special educational support.

- **Free, appropriate, public education:** whether residing in the U.S. or the U.K., students with disabilities will, under law and guidance of the authority, receive public education that is at no cost to the family. If school districts cannot afford the means of intervention required by the student’s needs, the authority will provide the necessary funds.
- **Appropriate evaluation: experienced and trained evaluators must conduct periodic testing in order to establish the need for special educational services.** A plan of action will then be developed to help the student find academic, social, emotional, and physical success depending on his or her needs.
- **Individualized educational plan:** all students will receive plans that are individualized to their EHC Plan, which outlines their educational, health, and care within the classroom. Within the plan, goals are set, evaluative methods are outlined, and progress is measured in ways that suit each individual child. A team of individuals including the authority, classroom teachers, parents, and the student will have input on how each specific need of each child can best be met.
- **Placement in the least restrictive environment:** some students receiving special educational support will thrive in a regular, general education classroom setting, while others will need a more individualized, contained environment to learn. The “least restrictive environment” is chosen on a case-by-case basis depending on the child’s abilities, and needs. This determines the learning setting, the types of modifications needed to learn, and alternative instructional methods that will facilitate success.
- **Parent participation:** parents should always have the right to be involved in their child’s learning process. While the parents are encouraged to trust the expertise of teachers and



ITA

International Teachers Association

authority figures, parents can provide significant input into their child's learning process and the experiences their child will have in the classroom.

- **Safeguards:** there are laws in place to prevent discrimination, and the withholding of access to these principles. If schools, districts, or teachers fail to meet a special educational plan, the individuals and systems can be fought with legal action. These safeguards are in place to protect the students in early educational (and later educational) environments who need access to additional support due to their learning disabilities or other disorders.

14.2 Understanding Diverse Needs

Great school districts will have students graduating from their system with the skills needed to enter a collegial program or join the workforce. To set students up for future success, every student must be offered all the possible opportunities for learning that exist, regardless of background or challenges. Students have unique, diversified stories, including race, religion, socio-economic status, or a disability or disorder that separates him or her from their peers. It is essential that schools and teachers understand the complex needs of students. You will explore the reasons that students may be identified as needing special educational services from the school, and what characteristics to expect from each of these diverse categories. In the following sections of this module we will explore how to address these needs within the classroom.

14.2.1 Learning Disabilities

A learning-disabled child struggles with the way in which he or she acquires information.

As an individual working with learning-disabled children, the most important thing you must know is that the child's disability in no way is connected to their intellectual ability, or their motivation to learn. The disability inhibits the student from learning in a traditional way. It is the responsibility of the school and teachers to offer alternative routes to these students, so they may obtain the same information that other kids get through traditional educational approaches. Children with learning disabilities can and will learn. However, it will take them an alternative, and at times more challenging, path to get there.

Here are some early childhood signs and symptoms of a learning disability:

- trouble finding the right words to express themselves.
- trouble learning the alphabet, numbers, colors, shapes, and/or days of the week.
- difficulty following directions.
- trouble learning the connection between sounds and letters.
- cannot blend different sounds to create words.
- consistently misspelled words or reading errors.
- continued trouble learning basic math concepts.



ITA

International Teachers Association

- delays in learning of new skills.
- does not like or want to attend school.
- does not like reading aloud in class.
- acts anxious when writing sentences, paragraphs, or essays.
- has continual trouble with homework in specific subject areas.

Here are some of the learning disabilities you are likely to encounter in the classroom:

- **Dyslexia:** a reading disorder that is demonstrated through impaired word recognition, understanding words and ideas, speed and fluency in reading, and overall vocabulary acquisition.
- **Dysgraphia:** a writing disorder demonstrated through neatness of writing, consistently misspelled words, organization issues, inability to communicate written ideas coherently, and the inability to accurately copy letters or words.
- **Dyscalculia:** a math based disability that affects a child's ability to memorize and organize numbers, symbols, and counting.
- **Dyspraxia:** a disorder that affects motor skills and movement demonstrated through being unable to write, cut, run or jump, and other instances where hand and eye coordination are not in sequence with one another.
- **Aphasia and Dysphasia:** a language and communication disorder that inhibits understanding or speaking language. Much like motor disorders, communication disorders are the result of the brain not connecting activity to the proper part of the body responsible for performing the action. The brain cannot signal to the mouth to say a set of words or for the brain to properly process information. These disorders are demonstrated through non-fluent speech, inability to retell a story or find the words to say something, and being unable to understand particular words or phrases.
- **Auditory and Visual Processing Disorders:** when students cannot hear or see things correctly due to auditory or visual processing, information can be misrepresented, resulting in the inability to comprehend basic information, and difficulty in participating in classroom activities. Constant asking to repeat things that were said, ignoring teachers or students who speak to them, squinting their eyes, or inability to explain words or images on a page are signs that a student might be suffering from one of these disabilities.

14.2.2 Intellectual Disabilities

There are a number of intellectual disabilities (ID) that students may have that will call for significant modification, and alternative methods to learning. In order for schools to meet the needs of these students, and to determine if the intellectual disability is mild or severe, one must understand the diverse needs associated with each. In later modules we will explore some



ITA International Teachers Association

severe mental disabilities in depth. Use this general list to associate yourself with some of the struggles, background, and needs of the students in the classroom.

Before understanding the disorders themselves, **one must know that an intellectual disability is something that a child can be born with or that a child can acquire due to something like a traumatic brain injury (TBI). Formally referred to as “mental retardation,”** it has in recent decades become widely understood, and accepted that individuals suffering from intellectual disabilities are productive and valued members of society.

Young children with intellectual disabilities are often in need of compassion, patience, understanding, and kindness. It is important for teachers to treat their challenges with care while not signaling them out. Also, offering other students the opportunities to learn from them as much as the child with ID can learn from his or her peers. A specific disorder will depend upon behavioral and social needs. However, children with ID will exhibit social, behavioral, emotional, and academic challenges.

An intellectual disability is a trait that is characterized by cognitive functioning and behavior. These individuals have the inability to learn like the general population, and are unable to meet the standards traditionally set forth by society, and traditional education standards. The average **IQ score of a non-intellectually disabled person is in the range of 100; the IQ of someone categorized within the realm of ID would be at a 50 or below.** Each intellectual disorder has its own set of diverse needs. Here are some of the most **prominent intellectual disorders** that will call for caring individuals, modified plans, and individualized attention. Please note, this is not a comprehensive list and more on these and other disorders will be discussed in later modules.

**Autism Downs
Syndrome**

**Fetal Alcohol
Syndrome**

**Traumatic Brain
Injuries**

**Fragile X
Syndrome**

Major causes of intellectual disabilities are:

- genetics
- pregnancy complications
- problems during childbirth
- illness or injury early in life
- undetected problems

Here are some warning signs and characteristics in early childhood educational experiences that can point to intellectual disabilities:

- delays in sitting, crawling, rolling over, and walking
- trouble with talking, and late language acquisition
- delays in potty training, ability to feed and dress oneself



ITA

International Teachers Association

-
- behavior difficulties that often result in tantrums
 - inability or difficulty to think logically
 - seizures
 - mood disorders

14.2.3 Other Types Of Disabilities

Learning and intellectual disabilities are not the only diverse challenges that schools and educators face in their classrooms. **Communication disorders, behavior disorders, physical disabilities, and social and emotional disorders** can affect children integrated into regular education classes. Each student must have the opportunity to have their needs met for the chance to learn, grow, and have a promising future. Understanding that a child's actions or inabilities are not due to lack of motivation, not liking school, the teacher, or classmates, or just being a daydreamer is important for educators to learn.

Exploring how each type of disorder allows students to come into the class, with a diverse set of skills and characteristics, can help everyone in the class to thrive. Whenever teachers or schools learn of a student experiencing a set-back or a child who has been diagnosed with a specific disability, it is their responsibility to learn about that child, and his or her needs, in order to guide them toward success.

14.2.4 Overcoming Challenges Of Diversity

We have covered the basic principles of meeting diverse needs as well as some of the types of individuals with diverse needs you may encounter. However, in addition to your knowledge of diverse needs within schools, you must understand **how to overcome some of the challenges associated with these learners.**

Here are some tips on working with diverse learners:

Always consult and follow the EHC Plan for the student.

Create and contribute to a multi-tiered support system for the student. This might include teachers, parents, counselors, peers, and consulting the student themselves

Do not "dumb down" material or eliminate a students' opportunity to reach goals. Instead, offer alternative forms of understanding concepts or differing paths to end up at the same

Speak to students with compassion and patience, letting them know the school environment is a safe place.



ITA

International Teachers Association

conclusions and products that the rest of the students receive.

Seek testing and services for students unidentified but whom you suspect to have a disorder or disability.

Pair or group students to work with supportive peers who show compassion and kindness toward them.

Always consult and follow the EHC Plan for the student.

Allow students opportunities to release tension or blow off steam by leaving the classroom with another adult (an aid, for example) and taking bathroom or other necessary breaks as needed.

Provide multiple sources of information in varied forms. For example, written, verbal, hands-on approaches and visual components to meet diverse learning styles.

14.3 Models Of Intervention

Special education intervention is the means by which teachers and schools can help alleviate obstacles for the student receiving special educational support, and to help the student actively learn and participate in their education.

14.3.1 Types of Intervention:

- **Preventive Intervention:** the focus falls on early intervention as the key to eliminating future problems before they occur. A student who is identified earlier in life has a greater chance at success than a student who goes undetected, and does not receive support for their educational needs.
- **Remedial Intervention:** when students are identified as in need of special educational support, they must be given specialized instruction. This refers to carefully chosen supplementary aids, materials, and activities that facilitate their style of learning. The purpose of remedial intervention is for students to be able to function independently with the use of these aids. The idea behind this stage of intervention is to prepare students for the real world ahead, giving them social skills, reading, writing, arithmetic skills, and vocational skills that they will utilize long after grade school.



ITA

International Teachers Association

-
- **Compensatory Intervention:** this stage takes remedial intervention to a higher level. It allows more independence to the learner, and offers ways to live with their disability or disorder that helps them through challenging tasks. When a student cannot perform a specific task to get to the desired result, an alternative task will be used as compensation.

14.3.2 Intervention Techniques

Once a student has been tested, identified, and is eligible for special education services, there are a number of options that the school can offer to engage the student in the best environment to facilitate learning.

- **Team Teaching:** having a classroom full of students with one teacher is not always the best answer when there are students present who have diverse, and distinct needs that reach beyond traditional methods of learning. Having two teachers present, in a team teaching environment, allows all of the pupils to have easier access to information and guidance whether they are identified as having special educational needs or not. For those students struggling to learn due to their disabilities, the more adults present who can help them find their way, the better.
- **Inclusion:** depending on the severity of one's disorder will depend on if they will need to be considered for inclusion. Inclusion refers to students who are in smaller, designated classrooms or given specific aids and paraprofessionals who travel with them throughout the day. This one-on-one, guided service allows students to be monitored, be well cared for, and have instructions and tasks repeated to them throughout the day.
- **Differentiated Instruction:** when all students are able to reach the same end result of learning, yet they have traveled different paths to reach that end result; this is differentiated instruction. Whether it is through adapted texts, larger fonts, pointing activities, or repeated instructions, giving all students the opportunity to learn, in their own unique styles, is a great way to provide intervention to those in need.
- **Resource and Study Skills Classes:** some students with disabilities or disorders will benefit from extra time focused on areas of difficulty. Whether it is through reading classes, classes that focus on homework help and guidance, or simply having the time in a resource class to organize their backpacks and folders, students can find great success through these intervention techniques.
- **Access to Technology:** many students in need of special educational services benefit from the use of technology. Whether it is computers, laptops, Smartphones, tablets, or readers, these devices often make learning more approachable. The ability to learn with the help of technology allows students' diverse needs to be met.
- **Response to Intervention:** A large public policy making its way to the forefront of education reform is the *response-to-intervention model*. In this model, teachers can offer



ITA

International Teachers Association

a large variety of intervention strategies in order to guide students on the path to greater understanding, comprehension, and progression of learning.

14.4 Curriculum Development

When planning curriculum, the objectives, learning outcomes, and activities that your class will participate in on a daily basis, teachers and schools must take a large number of factors into account. For one, the starting point of **curriculum development often begins with ideas** rather than having a focus of any kind on students. The authority outlines what every student must learn in each grade, and that is the initial concept that each lesson must be designed around. The challenge for teachers and writers of curriculum is to take into account the variety of learning styles, and special needs of each student who are all being asked to achieve the same learning outcomes. Once the standard education curriculum, and lesson planning is complete, educators must adapt the curriculum in ways that will suit the needs of students with special educational backgrounds.

The following factors must be considered when developing curriculum:

- **Cognitive Needs:** items like critical thinking, problem solving, reasoning, judgment, and how your special educational students will be able to perform these cognitive tasks.
- **Emotional Needs:** the length at which you will allow students to express themselves and their own connections to activities, the concepts of showing thoughts, opinions, feelings, and finding a way to express them appropriately through speaking or writing.
- **Communication Needs:** the way in which a student might provide an answer, be it a yes/no response, a written or verbal response, the raising of a hand, or pointing to an object.
- **Social Needs:** the aspect of interacting with peers and classmates, finding support from aids and teachers, having time built into the day to socialize, make connections, and friends.
- **Independence Needs:** some students might need to be transported to the restroom with assistance, have easy access to the door or windows, show leadership skills, or show initiative in their learning.

All of these items should be carefully considered and integrated into the foundation of curriculum development. Along with meeting the standards and objectives for each grade level, special educational needs should be met at the early stage of curriculum development.



ITA

International Teachers Association

14.5 Monitoring And Evaluating Progress

There are several ways that the national authority is able to monitor and evaluate the progress of students receiving special educational support. Since all students have the legal right to have their educational needs met, schools must do all they can to make sure their procedures and practices are working in favor of the students' progress. From the initial identification in early stages of education, testing procedures, classroom intervention strategies, assessments, and teacher evaluations, the national authority for education can ensure that students, with special educational needs, are getting the fair and balanced treatment they deserve.

Here are some ways that schools can enact strict guidelines for special educational students success:

- have regular evaluative sessions on teacher performance.
- provide adequate and continued training in the areas of special education and intervention strategies.
- give pre and post learning assessments to students to measure if learning occurred as a result of alternative methods of delivering lessons.
- hold bi-yearly and yearly meetings to review student's EHC Plan.
- communicate regularly with parents, teachers, counselors, specialized instructors, etc., and log student progress.
- observe the student in class to see if he or she is focusing, participating, and actively engaging in lessons.
- keep monitoring logs of appropriate/inappropriate behaviors and responses.
- if a viable option, speak to the student about his or her progress.

In later modules we will discuss how student EHC Plans create a process to measure and monitor progress of students in order to set goals, adjust the delivery of information, and lesson planning. As an educator in the special education field, it is important to remember that students struggling with unique learning needs will continuously go through the process of assessment, monitoring, and evaluation in order to have the most up-to-date approaches outlined that will help them achieve their goals.

[Link to EXAM](#)