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# The *Complete Guide* to **Special Education**

Assessments,  
Accommodations,  
and More

Expert Advice on Evaluations,  
IEPs, and Helping Kids Succeed

SECOND  
EDITION

Linda Wilmshurst, Ph.D.  
Alan W. Brue, Ph.D.

FOR PARENTS, TEACHERS,  
AND ADMINISTRATORS



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# THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO SPECIAL EDUCATION

Proven Advice on  
Evaluations, IEPs, and  
Helping Kids Succeed

**Second Edition**

**LINDA WILMSHURST**

**Ph.D., ABPP**

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**Ph.D., NCSP**



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# ABOUT THIS BOOK

## In the Best Interests of the Child

Our book, based on the perspectives of two school psychologists, focuses on how to optimize children's experiences in the educational system. Although we dedicate our book to children with special needs, we believe that all children, parents, and teachers can benefit from our recommendations and suggested interventions. In regard to children who require special education services, we provide explanations of the laws, procedures, and policies that are involved in identification and assessment of these children and, ultimately, in providing interventions for them.

Children live in a world that can provide rich resources to maximize their learning or minimize barriers to their success. If a child has a disability, then support from family, educators, extended family, the community, and even governmental laws can provide the resources needed for success. Our goal is to provide concerned parents and educators with the information they need to help make success a reality for all children.

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Linda Wilmshurst, Ph.D., ABPP**, is a Diplomate in Clinical Psychology (American Board of Professional Psychology) and is licensed as a psychologist and school psychologist in North Carolina. Linda has practiced psychology as a clinical child and adolescent psychologist and school psychologist for many years in both Canada and the United States. Linda is an associate professor in the psychology department at Elon University, where she teaches courses in child and adult psychopathology, developmental psychology, psychology in the schools, and introductory psychology. In her current research projects, she is investigating resilience, self-concept, and time perception in college students with ADHD. Linda is the author of a number of books, including *Child and Adolescent Psychopathology: A Casebook*; *Abnormal Child Psychology: A Developmental Perspective*; *Essentials of Child Psychopathology*; and *A Parent's Guide to Special Education*, which she co-authored with Alan Brue.

**Alan W. Brue, Ph.D., NCSP**, received his master's, specialist, and doctoral degrees in school psychology (with a specialization in gifted education) from the University of Florida. He works as a school psychologist for the Bartow County School System in Georgia and as a core faculty member in the Harold Abel School of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Capella University, where he teaches and develops graduate courses in psychopathology, child and adolescent psychology, learning theories, intellectual and behavioral assessment, and research methods. In addition, Alan has worked as director of professional standards for the National Association of School Psychologists and as a radio broadcaster. Co-author of *A Parent's Guide to Special Education* (with Linda Wilmshurst), he has extensive knowledge of assessment, special education laws, and school organization, and is keenly aware of the needs of children and parents. Alan is a Nationally Certified School Psychologist.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank my children, Luke and Rachel, for their continued support and inspiration and Rachel for providing the artwork for some of the figures. I thank my co-author, Alan, who makes collaboration an effortless and rewarding experience. This book is dedicated to all the children and youth with special needs who continue to amaze me with their ability to master difficult challenges and to the parents and teachers who support them in making their accomplishments possible. May our book provide information that will guide your efforts and provide increased opportunities for children and youth to overcome the challenges that they face and achieve the success that they deserve.

—Linda Wilmshurst

Jett, I love you. Thank you for always being there; you are inspiring. I thank Linda Wilmshurst for continuing to be a great writing partner; our collaboration has been a very enjoyable process. I thank my family—mother, Doris, and sisters, Laura and Jennifer—for their ongoing support. To Dr. Thomas Oakland, the finest mentor and role model one could ever have, I am very grateful to you for your support and for your words of wisdom. My thanks go to Dr. Scott Smith, Wanda McPherson, R. David Freeman, and my school psychologist colleagues at the Bartow County School System for their assistance with the RTI forms. My thanks also go to Dr. Laren Winter and my teaching colleagues at Capella University for their dedication to training outstanding future school psychologists. And finally, I send special thanks to the students, parents, and teachers whom I have worked with and learned from over the years. This book is for you.

—Alan W. Brue



# INTRODUCTION

## **COLLABORATION VERSUS CONFRONTATION: SPEAKING THE SAME LANGUAGE**

To begin, let's meet Jeremy, a second grader who is not performing as expected academically or socially.

Jeremy is not doing well in school. He does not complete his seatwork, and he seems to have problems getting along with the other children. His teacher is concerned because he seems to be falling behind. When she meets his parents for the first time at the first parent-teacher interview of the term, they are shocked that he is not doing well academically, given that he is a bright and engaging youngster who seems to get along very well with everyone he meets.

The teacher is probably a bit nervous about meeting Jeremy's parents and having to give them less-than-positive news. She may be thinking, "What went wrong? Why is this child not succeeding? I must be able to do something that can change the situation. Have I tried everything? Maybe if I just give him more time, he will catch up."

## 2 Introduction

At the same time, Jeremy's parents may also be a bit nervous meeting the teacher for the first time and hearing what she has to say about their child. After they listen to the initial summary, they may be asking themselves, "What went wrong? Why is my child not succeeding? We must be able to do something that can change the situation. Have we tried everything? Maybe if we just wait a bit longer, things will work themselves out."

In this scenario, both Jeremy's teacher and his parents are concerned about Jeremy, who is not doing well. After the initial interview, the parents also share the teacher's concern about Jeremy's school performance. How can all of them best help him?

This book has been inspired by our work with children who have special needs and the parents and teachers who are concerned for their welfare in a system that can become bogged down with legalese language, definitions, and terminology that can confuse and alienate those who most want to do the best thing. The book provides information rarely covered in other special education books, such as an introduction to the assessment process, assessment instruments used by school psychologists, and checklists that can help parents and educators obtain a better understanding of why a child may be experiencing problems.

### **OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK**

The book is divided into five parts.

In Part One, we provide an overview of the different types of disabilities that children may have that qualify them for services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004) and how these disabilities are assessed or evaluated. Response to intervention (RTI) is a relatively new concept. RTI is a method used to maximize student achievement and reduce problematic behaviors. The process allows schools to identify at-risk students, implement research-based interventions, and monitor student responsiveness to the interventions and progress in school and will be discussed at length in this section.

What do assessments evaluate, and what do they mean? Part Two will provide information about the many types of assessments conducted by school psychologists or private psychologists and explain how to make sense of the results. We discuss assessments for intelligence, achievement, learning, emotion, behavior, and executive functions. We end this part with a sample psychological report and comments on how to interpret and understand its findings.

In Part Three, we provide guidelines for successful interventions that can be used in the classroom or at home for children who experience problems



with executive functions, self-esteem or social skills, behavior and discipline, or homework and project completion.

Communication and navigation are the topics of the chapters in Part Four, in which we discuss how to hold meaningful meetings with members of a child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) team and address the new emphasis on transitions in IDEA 2004.

In Part Five, we present the laws and regulations that govern special education and related services for students who qualify. We discuss IDEA 2004 and provide comparisons with services available through Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. We also offer insight about the No Child Left Behind Act, which affects all children.

In the appendixes, readers will find a wealth of information, including lists of educational acronyms and what they mean, helpful Web sites and resources for parents and teachers, and contact information for state departments of special education. The screening checklists for child problems will be a welcomed aid for teachers and parents who have concerns but are not sure whether their concerns warrant further action. We also provide samples of actual plans and forms that are typically part of the special education process. In another appendix, we list procedural safeguards that help ensure that parents of children with special needs know their rights under the law.



PART



One

# Understanding Disabilities



# CHAPTER

# 1

## DIFFERENT DISABILITIES, COMMON GOALS

In 1975, the U.S. Congress passed the first bill for children with disabilities, called the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act*, which has subsequently been renamed the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* (IDEA 2004). However, in adopting the initial version of the act, many state public educational systems excluded children with physical disabilities and impairments (for example, children who were deaf, blind, or physically handicapped), and children with learning disabilities and emotional disabilities, from special education services. Prior to this time, children with mental retardation and speech and language difficulties had been recognized as needing increased services, but those with learning disabilities were not formally recognized for federal funding until the passing of the law in the mid 1970s. In 2003, approximately 6 million children (roughly 13 percent of all school-age children) were receiving some form of special education services (U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

The number of students with disabilities (ages three to twenty-one) who received special education services in the United States in 1976–77 was 3.7 million (8 percent of the school population); however, in 2005–06, that number had increased to 6.7 million students, representing 14 percent of the school population (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, 2006). Critics of special education point to this increase as evidence of a tendency to over-identify children with special needs. However, the Association of State

Units on Aging (2005) reports that the number of individuals with disabilities between age twenty-one and sixty-five represents 19 percent of the U.S. population. The fact is that due to technological advances, increased awareness about disabilities, and pharmacological interventions, many individuals survive today and are recognized as disabled who would not have been recognized in the past. Furthermore, comparing actual percentage rates for school-aged children reveals that 10.4 percent of the school-age population were receiving special education in 1980 compared with 13.4 percent in 2003, which represents an increase of only approximately 3.4 percent over a twenty-four-year span.

### **WHO ARE THE CHILDREN WHO RECEIVE SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES?**

Children who receive special education and related services represent children between three and twenty-one years of age who have a wide range of difficulties, disabilities, and special needs that interfere with their learning. The following list will provide a profile of characteristics that may apply to children who receive special education services:

- Children with special needs differ in ability levels, strengths and weaknesses, ages, learning styles, pace of learning, and personality or temperament.
- Students who receive special education services represent a wide range of social, economic, and cultural backgrounds.
- All students who receive special education assistance qualify for services based on their unique learning needs.
- Students who receive special education services will be provided with an individualized education program (IEP) that is specifically designed to meet their learning needs by incorporating modifications in instructional design or materials or other adaptive methods.
- In addition to modifications to their learning program, students may also require support services such as speech-language therapy, adaptive physical education, physical or occupational therapy, or counseling services.
- While some children may require minimal adjustments to achieve success, others with chronic health problems or multiple disabilities may require more complex adaptations and accommodations.

- Some students may experience cognitive deficits, such as intellectual delays that may range from mild to severe mental retardation, and therefore may require more time and repetition to consolidate information.
- Other students may not have cognitive impairments; however, they may experience impaired learning due to a variety of processing problems that interfere with their perception, reception, expression of information, or ability to recall information.
- Some students may require adaptations that accommodate their physical disabilities, such as wheelchairs or other devices, in order to improve their mobility in the classroom.
- Other students may require technical and assisted devices to adapt the educational program to sensory impairments such as vision or hearing problems.
- For some students, emotional or behavioral problems can be a barrier to learning and school success.
- While some students may require special education services for a limited amount of time in order to reduce the gap between their academic performance and their grade level, other students may require special education services throughout their school enrollment.

Although most people support the notion of special education services to improve educational opportunities for children with disabilities, there continues to be controversy and discussion about how the process should be funded and the best way to deliver services and monitor the success of programs.

## **WHAT SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS ARE SAYING AND THE QUESTIONS THEY ARE ASKING ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION**

A Public Agenda survey of over 850 superintendents and principals (Farkas, Johnson, Duffett, Foleno, & Foley, 2001) revealed that in times of increasing need and accountability (teacher shortages and high teacher turnover, overcrowded schools, higher academic standards) and decreasing budgets, administrators struggle to balance the needs of special education and regular education programs. In addition to voicing financial concerns, administrators have criticized the bureaucratic process of administering special education (which has become extremely paperwork-heavy and time-consuming) and the need for increased research to determine whether special education programs are actually effective. One of the

major questions revealed by the survey was whether special education programs are a dumping ground for difficult students.

## WHY DO WE NEED SPECIAL EDUCATION?

Critics of special education have asked some of the following questions: Couldn't we just get rid of special education if teachers were better trained to work with all children and give more consistent discipline? Would special education be needed if parents did a better job of disciplining their children? If special education is working, then why are so many children still enrolled? (Johnson, Duffett, Farkas, & Wilson, 2002).

By the time you finish reading this book, we hope that you will have found the answers to the questions posed in the box and any other questions that you may have. As you will see, administrators, teachers, and parents are all somewhat frustrated with the special education process, which means that in understanding how the process works, it is important to see the different concerns that each of the players brings to the table in order to create the best possible opportunities for a child. While some critics of special education are prepared to throw the baby out with the bathwater, others suggest shifting the emphasis from the process to the results. Horn and Tynan (2001) suggest that it is time to make special education special again by working to improve outcomes for children in special education and empowering students through compensatory mechanisms that will allow them to become more successful in regular education. For those of us who work in special education, that is always the goal. The movement toward response to intervention (RTI), which will be discussed in Chapter Four, is another attempt to focus on early intervention strategies that can increase opportunities for success in the regular classroom in a shorter period of time than would be required if a full assessment were necessary.

Another question that critics have asked is why special education classrooms are populated mostly by male students. Unfortunately, being male is a risk factor for many disabilities and a significantly higher proportion of males than females have attention deficit disorder, learning disabilities, oppositional defiant disorder, and conduct disorder. As a result, it would not be surprising to see more males than females in special education programs. Of the parents surveyed in the Public Agenda report described in the next section (Johnson et al., 2002), two-thirds had



a male child in special education and only one-third had a female child in special education.

## **WHAT PARENTS ARE SAYING ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION AND THE QUESTIONS THEY ARE ASKING**

Researchers from the Public Agenda report (Johnson et al., 2002) surveyed over 500 parents of children with special needs to obtain an in-depth look at how parents perceive the experiences and special education services that their children receive from the public education system. Results from that survey suggest the following:

- The majority of parents did not side with the critics who believe that educators are too eager to place children in special education; on the contrary, over half complained that information about special education was hard to come by and that schools were slow to volunteer the information.
- Once their child was in a special education program, 84 percent of parents felt that their child's teacher really cared about their child; 77 percent felt a part of their child's special education team; and almost 70 percent felt that their child's teachers were knowledgeable about their child's disability and how to work with it. A majority also felt that teachers were capable of managing their child's behavior and discipline.
- A majority of parents reported that their child spent the better part of the day in the regular class, regardless of the extent of disability, and most were supportive of this arrangement because it satisfied social and academic needs. However, parents also voiced concern that for special needs children, academics were often emphasized at the expense of social development, which is very important for these children.
- Parents were mixed in their feelings about how children with special needs were accommodated during standardized or statewide testing and exit exams. Many felt that if accommodations were not provided, their child would never pass.
- Many parents were less than satisfied with the number of services available and felt that they had to persist in order for services to be provided. Parents indicated a number of stumbling blocks and barriers within the special education process, including the process itself, paperwork, bureaucracy, and difficulty in getting help quickly.

## WHAT SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS ARE SAYING ABOUT THEIR PROFESSION

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) conducted an Internet survey during 1998–99 to obtain perceptions of special education teachers about the status of special education programs in their schools. Almost 200 teachers from thirty-two states responded to the survey. On average, the respondents had been teaching students with disabilities for five and a half years and had a caseload of twenty students. A majority reported that they were spending increasingly more time on paperwork and meetings and less time for teaching their students. A large majority (83 percent) indicated that they did not have enough time to spend on each individual student. Many also complained about IEPs and the legalese of IEP forms, and teachers in both general education and special education said they wanted easier access to modified textbooks for students with disabilities rather than having to spend time adapting existing materials for individual students enrolled in special education programs.

Over 1,500 special education teachers responded to a more recent survey conducted by the Texas Center for Educational Research (TCER) in 2006. Educators who responded had an average caseload of twenty-five students, the majority of which (57.9 percent) were categorized as learning disabled; smaller percentages of students had disabilities in areas of emotional problems (9 percent), mental retardation (7.6 percent), autism (4.3 percent), speech and language (4.1 percent), and developmental delay (1.3 percent). Thirty-five percent of respondents had a master's degree or higher. In response to a severe shortage of special education teachers nationally and high turnover rates in the profession, the survey looked at how special education teachers felt about their job and special education in particular. Although the respondents were generally satisfied, approximately one-third of the respondents stated that they planned to leave their positions in the following year.

Why would special education teachers be inclined to leave their profession? Frustration with paperwork and non-teaching responsibilities were high on the list of reasons. The special education teachers who responded to the TCER survey indicated that they spent an average of 57.9 hours a month (approximately 1.4 weeks per month) engaged in non-teaching activities (for example, planning, paperwork, meetings, and committees). In addition, they specified other needs:

- More release time for professional development
- Adequate classroom space and equipment

- Access to reliable computers in order to complete paperwork
- Adequate support regarding legal issues
- Opportunities to meet with other special education teachers in the district

For the majority of special education teachers, elements that would increase job satisfaction included more time to work with students; improved classroom facilities; and a supportive school environment. Supportive school environments were described as having

- Teacher involvement in the decision-making process
- A campus administrator who provides information and advice and helps resolve classroom issues
- Policies that are consistently applied
- A principal who understands the challenges of working in special education
- Evaluative feedback to improve teaching
- An administrator who considers student and teacher capabilities when placing students
- A principal who is knowledgeable about special education laws

As a result of their survey, TCER made two recommendations on how to improve special education services and the quality of the school environment:

1. Find ways to inform parents and general education teachers about special education topics.
2. Create more opportunities for teachers to spend uninterrupted time with their students in adequate classroom facilities.

## **CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN EDUCATION: ACHIEVING COMMON GOALS**

As we have seen in this chapter, administrators, teachers, and educators all share the common goal of providing the best possible educational opportunities for children; however, it is also clear that special education can be a complex and frustrating process for all concerned. For parents, obtaining information about

special education services available in their child's school is often a major stumbling block. For special education teachers, working in a school environment in which administrators and general education teachers are aware and supportive of special education could make the difference in whether they remain as special education teachers or leave the profession. Special education teachers want more time to work with children individually. Administrators want to be able to hire high-quality special education teachers and retain them in the face of high turnover rates in the profession. And in the middle of it all is the special needs child, who just wants to learn and be successful in school.

In the next chapter, we will provide an overview of the different disabilities that qualify a child for special education services and how these disabilities are labeled and defined by educators. In Chapter Three, we will provide in-depth discussion of some of the more common disabilities, such as learning disabilities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism, Asperger's disorder, emotional disorders (including bipolar disorder), and behavioral disorders; how these disabilities are defined and labeled by clinicians who may be involved in helping a student; and suggestions for how to assist students with disabilities at home and at school. In Chapter Four, we will discuss response to intervention and how it works.

# CHAPTER

# 2

## **WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT DISABILITIES, AND HOW ARE THEY CLASSIFIED?**

Thirteen different categories of disabilities are recognized by IDEA 2004. If children experience difficulties that fall within one of the thirteen categories and their education is significantly affected as a result of their disability, then they may qualify for special education and related services.

### **REASONS FOR NAMING THE PROBLEM**

One of the goals in education is to include children with special needs in the regular education classroom as much as possible. Therefore, children with special needs will most likely have ongoing contact with regular education teachers, and these teachers may not have experience in working with children who have a particular disorder. Usually, a psychologist or school psychologist conducts an assessment and diagnoses a child to determine which diagnostic category best describes the child's problems. The child may have an emotional problem, a learning disability, an intellectual disability, or some other disabling

condition recognized by IDEA 2004. Every child is different, and even children whose diagnosis falls within the same category can be very different from one another.

But just what do these terms mean? Let's take a child with an emotional disorder, for example. The term *emotionally disturbed* does not really provide a great deal of information about that child. If the problem is of an emotional nature, it could be anything from a specific phobia to depression—any emotional problem that interferes with the child's ability to learn. However, the term *emotionally disturbed* does name the category under which the child will receive services. That category, which is directly related to a diagnosis such as depression or generalized anxiety disorder, helps others to understand some of the child's problems and helps school personnel better understand the child's needs. Naming a child's problem and giving it a label often means giving the child access to and assistance from a variety of school personnel.

The names of the thirteen categories are presented in Table 2.1, along with the different types of school personnel who might be involved with the child. Use this information only as a guide, because some school districts, particularly those that are small, do not employ all these personnel. As you can see, children with complex problems may require support from a wide variety of resources. When parents come to a school meeting, it is sometimes overwhelming to them when all the individuals involved in helping their child attend the meeting to report on the child's progress. Having an understanding of what to expect and knowing that everyone is there to help the child can help alleviate these feelings.

## DID YOU KNOW

School psychologists have the highest entry-level education of any school personnel. To be credentialed in their state, they must acquire an advanced graduate degree, obtain supervised experience in the schools, complete a supervised, full-time, one-year internship, and pass a state or national examination (or both). A school psychologist may also be a Nationally Certified School Psychologist (NCSP), board-certified by the American Board of Professional Psychology, or licensed for private practice.