



# **Understanding Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE)**

**ECHO Presentation – October 10, 2025  
Texas Education Agency (TEA)**

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- The views and opinions expressed in this presentation are those of my own and do not reflect the official views or policy of UT Health San Antonio.
- I have no financial conflicts of interest to disclose concerning this presentation.



Texas Department of State  
Health Services



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- What is Special Education?
- What is Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE)?
- What is the Special Education Process?
- If families have concerns, where do they start?
- What other resources might be helpful for childcare providers?
- Case Study Practice



# What is Special Education?

# Let's Start at the Beginning

- Children from birth to age 3 who have developmental delays, disabilities or certain medical diagnoses that may receive support through a program called Early Childhood Intervention, or ECI.
- These services help children build skills in areas like communication, movement, and social interaction.

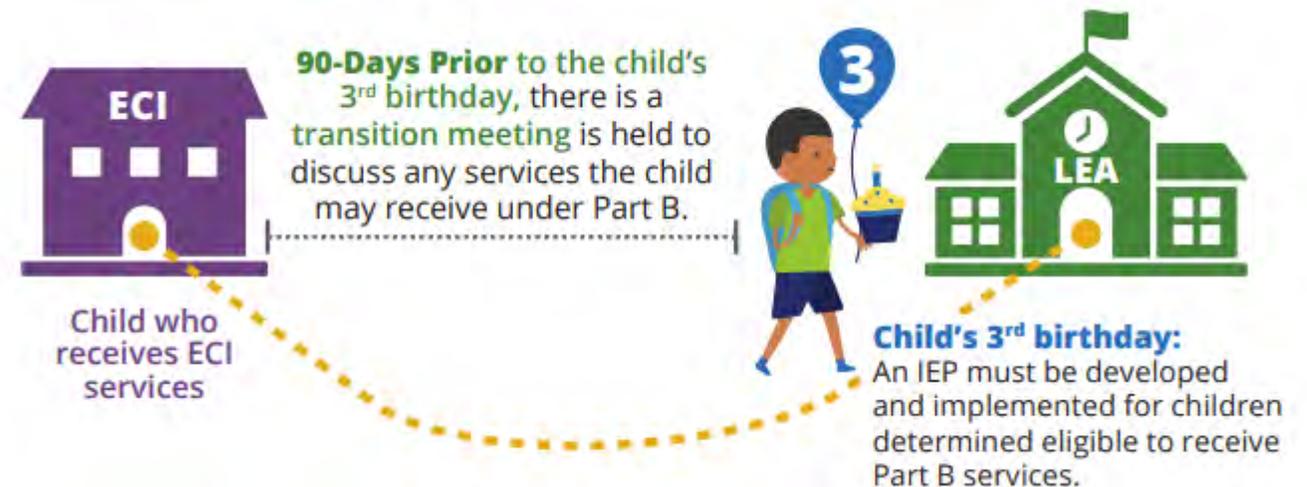
**But what happens when a child turns 3?**



# Overview of the Transition from ECI to ECSE

- Starting by 3 years old, children may qualify for **special education and related services**.
- When a child receives special education and related services, it means that a public school provides customized services and instruction specific to the needs of that child.

- **ECI** – Early Childhood Intervention
- **Part B** – special education and related services provided through the public school system for children ages 3 to 21 who qualify under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)
- **IEP** – Individualized Education Program



# What is Special Education?

- Special education is available because of a federal law called the IDEA, which provides students with disabilities and their parents special legal rights to receive these individualized learning opportunities if they qualify.
- The *Overview of Special Education for Parents* form is a summary of rights, required to be given to parents after a special education referral or request has been made.
- The form is available in English and in multiple languages on the SPEDTex website.



**Overview of Special Education for Parents**

**WHAT IS SPECIAL EDUCATION?**

When a child receives special education, it means that a public school provides custom services and instruction specific to the needs of that student. Special education is available because of a federal law called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which provides students with disabilities and their parents special legal rights to receive these individualized learning opportunities.

**Special education is a service, not a place.**

**How can special education services help your child?**

- ▶ If your child is eligible for special education services, your child will have access to services and supports that are specially designed to meet your child's unique needs.
- ▶ Special education services provide individualized programming at NO cost to you and may include special education teachers and service providers such as occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech language pathologists, and providers of dyslexia instruction.

**SPECIAL EDUCATION PROCESS:**

Parents have a right to request a special education evaluation at any time. Schools are required to refer a student for an evaluation when a disability is suspected that might require special education services. It's important to understand the steps of the special education process.

**Steps to Begin Special Education:**

- 1 Referral
- 2 Consent to Evaluate
- 3 Evaluation
- 4 Determine Eligibility (ARD)
- 5 Develop the IEP

**Receiving Special Education Services:**

Implement the IEP

More information about your rights as a parent can be found below:

-  [spedtex.org](https://spedtex.org)  
1-855-773-3839
-  **SPEDTEX**  
Special Education Help for Parents
-  [Parents Guide to the ARD Process](https://parents.ard)  
<https://parents.ard>
-  [Notice of Procedural Safeguards](https://parents.nps)  
<https://parents.nps>

While there are other federal laws that also offer certain protections for students with disabilities - such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 - IDEA has specific rights only available under that law. This document summarizes those rights.

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# What is ECSE?

# What is Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE)?

- ECSE is a program that provides **special education services** to children **ages 3 through 5** who are not yet enrolled in kindergarten.
- If a child qualifies, ECSE services provide a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) through related services such as:
  - Speech therapy
  - Occupational or physical therapy
  - Specialized instruction
- These services are provided in the least restrictive environment (LRE) that best meet their individual needs.

# Examples of Possible Continuum of Services for ECSE



General Education Classroom



Special Education Classroom



Community-Based Program



Combination of Settings



Home Setting



Separate Special Education School



Hospital or Residential Setting



# How is a child eligible for ECSE?



- The child must be 3 to 5 years old and not enrolled in kindergarten.
- The child must be evaluated by the school district and meet one of the 13 disability categories defined by IDEA.
- The disability must show a need for specially designed instruction.

Once eligibility is confirmed, an admission, review, and dismissal (ARD) committee develops an IEP tailored to the child's needs.



# What is the Special Education Process?

# Special Education Process

Parents have a right to request a special education evaluation at any time. Schools are required to refer a student for an evaluation when a disability is suspected that might require special education services.

## Steps to Begin Special Education:

- 1**  
Referral
- 2**  
Consent to Evaluate
- 3**  
Evaluation
- 4**  
Determine Eligibility  
(ARD committee meeting)
- 5**  
Develop the IEP

## Receiving Special Education Services:

- 
- Implement the IEP

# 1 REFERRAL FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION EVALUATION IS MADE.

## A referral is:

- Required by law when a public school feels that a child may have a disability that requires special education services to be successful.
- Called a *request* for a special education evaluation when a parent makes it. A request should be made in writing to the proper staff member. The school will respond with information on whether it will proceed with an evaluation.

This referral can happen through ECI!



The school must respond in writing within 15 school days.

## 2

# THE PARENT WILL BE ASKED WHETHER THEY **CONSENT** FOR THE SCHOOL TO EVALUATE THEIR CHILD.

## Consent to evaluate is:

- Permission a parent chooses to give for specially trained personnel to evaluate and assess your child in specific areas.
- Used by the school to start the timeline by which the school must complete the child's evaluation.



With some exceptions, an evaluation must be completed within 45 school days.

### 3

## EVALUATION IS DONE BY A GROUP OF TRAINED PROFESSIONALS.

### An evaluation is:

- Called a Full Individual and Initial Evaluation (FIIE), which includes a written report of education recommendations and information about your child's strengths, interests, and challenges. Professionals with training in the suspected disability must participate, e.g., someone like a licensed dyslexia therapist if dyslexia is suspected.
- Done at no cost to you. If you do not agree with the school's evaluation, you may ask for an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE). This would be done by someone who is not employed by the school.



# 4

## ADMISSION, REVIEW AND DISMISSAL (ARD) COMMITTEE MEETS TO DETERMINE IF THE CHILD IS ELIGIBLE FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES.

### The ARD committee is:

- A team, including parents, teachers, school administrators, those with special expertise about the child, and professionals with special training about the suspected disability.
- In this meeting, discussing the child's evaluation report, identifying the child's strengths and areas of need, and then determining whether the child has a disability and the need for special education services.



Once the evaluation report is done, an ARD committee typically has 30 calendar days meet and determine eligibility and develop the IEP.

IF THE CHILD IS ELIGIBLE FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES, THEN THE ARD COMMITTEE WILL ALSO DEVELOP AN **INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAM (IEP)**.



### **An IEP is:**

- A collection of information that identifies the child's disability, shows the child's current strengths and areas of need, identifies goals to be worked on, and shows the special education and related services that are required for the child to be successful.
- A document that a school must follow once the process for developing it is complete, and parents consent to their child receiving services. Services would begin as soon as possible.

**Parents have the right to participate in the development of the IEP and agree or disagree to their child getting special education services.**



**If families have concerns, where do they start?**

## A Parent's Guide to Special Education Referrals for Children Ages 3-5

Early Childhood, Child Find



**When You Have Concerns: A Parent's Guide to Special Education Referrals for Children Ages 3-5**

**Concerned About Your Child's Learning?**

If your child is between the ages of 3 through 5 and you're concerned about their development or learning, early intervention can make all the difference.

**Examples of Concerns:**

- Your child is not speaking as much as other children their age.
- Your child has difficulty understanding simple instructions.
- Your child has trouble interacting with other children or adults.
- Other people have difficulty understanding what your child says.

The Child Find process is a required part of a federal law called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that ensures all children with disabilities, from birth through age 21, are identified, located, and evaluated to determine their need for special education and related services.

[View English Guide](#)

[View Spanish Guide](#)

# Key Takeaways for Parents Who Have Concerns

- Find your local school district.
- Contact your local school district's special education director or campus principal to request a special education evaluation. (It's recommended to make this request in writing.)
- Collaborate with your local school district staff and provide information about your child.



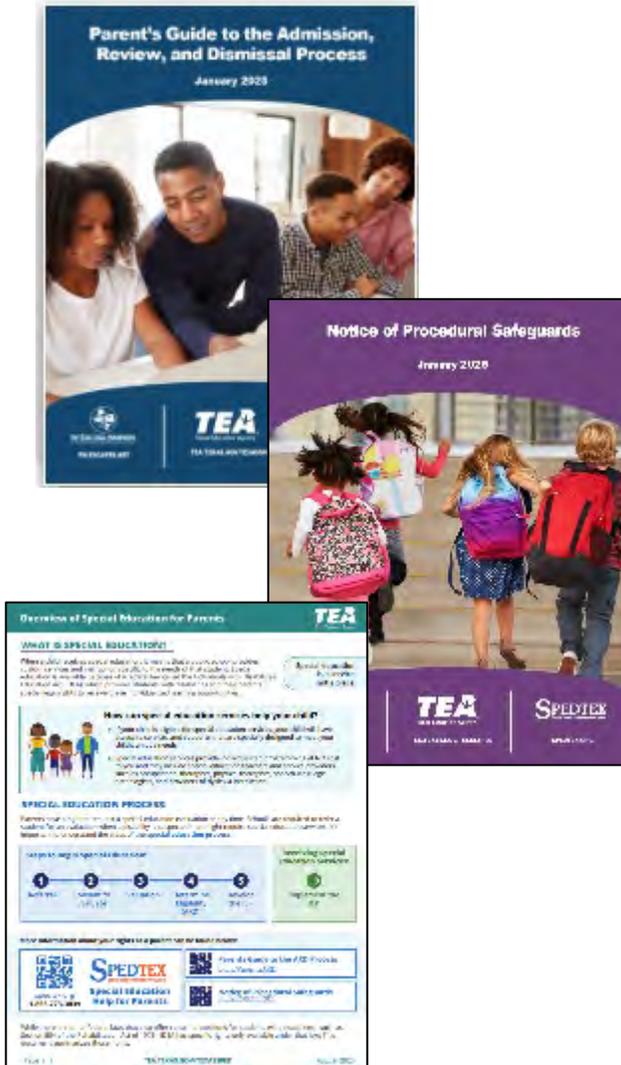
# What are families entitled to when their child qualifies for ECSE or special education and related services?

- Parent's Guide to the ARD Process
- Notice of Procedural Safeguards
- Overview of Special Education for Parents form

More information, resources, and live support about your rights as a parent can be found at SpedTex!



The banner features a QR code on the left, the text "SPEDTEX Special Education Information Center" in large blue and orange letters, and "Special Education Help for Parents" below it. At the bottom, it provides the website "spedtex.org" and the phone number "1-855-773-3839".



A collage of three TEA resource documents. The top document is "Parent's Guide to the Admission, Review, and Dismissal Process" (January 2025) showing a family. The middle document is "Notice of Procedural Safeguards" (January 2025) showing children walking. The bottom document is "Overview of Special Education for Parents" showing a flowchart of the special education process.

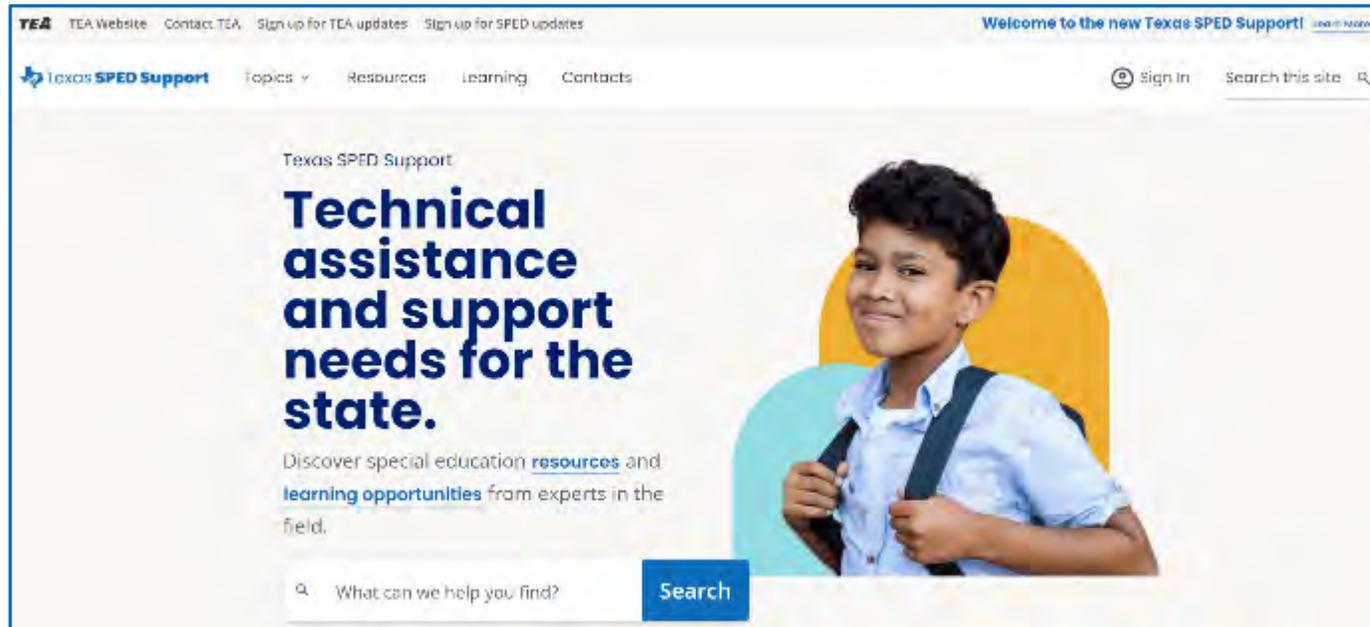
**What other resources might be helpful for childcare providers?**

# What is Texas SPED Support?

A website for educators who support students served through special education.



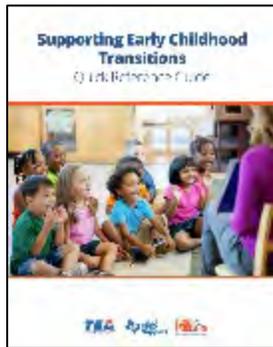
## Texas **SPED Support**



The screenshot shows the homepage of the Texas SPED Support website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'TEA Website', 'Contact TEA', 'Sign up for TEA updates', and 'Sign up for SPED updates'. A welcome message reads 'Welcome to the new Texas SPED Support!'. Below the navigation bar, there are menu items for 'Topics', 'Resources', 'Learning', and 'Contacts', along with a 'Sign In' button and a search bar. The main content area features a large heading: 'Texas SPED Support' followed by 'Technical assistance and support needs for the state.' Below this, a sub-headline says 'Discover special education resources and learning opportunities from experts in the field.' To the right of the text is a photograph of a young boy with a backpack. At the bottom of the main content area, there is a search bar with the placeholder text 'What can we help you find?' and a blue 'Search' button.

**SPEDSUPPORT.TEA.TEXAS.GOV**

## ■ Supporting Early Childhood Transitions Quick Reference Guide



Included in this guide are tips for educators on how to:

- establish a supportive early childhood environment;
- promote communication and collaborative relationships;
- develop a cohesive transition plan; and
- build self-determination skills.

## ■ A Guide to Early Transitions in Texas



Included in this guide are topics such as:

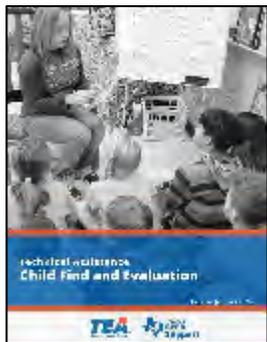
- Early Transition overview and timelines
- Early Childhood Intervention (ECI)
- ECSE
- Early Childhood Transition Conference
- Program Roles and Responsibilities

## ■ Determining the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) in Preschool



This document is intended to provide local educational agencies (LEAs) with information on LRE, continuum of services and placement determinations to support educators and ARD committee members in understanding early childhood educational environments and making informed decisions for students ages 3 through 5 and not in kindergarten who receive ECSE services.

## ■ Technical Assistance: Child Find and Evaluation



Some topics that this guide addresses include:

- Child Find
- Evaluation Purpose
- Referral for Possible Special Education and Related Services
- Parent Referrals
- Age Ranges for Eligibility

- Evaluation Procedures
- Early Childhood
- Early Childhood Intervention - ECI
- Early Childhood Special Education - ECSE
- Prior Written Notice
- Reevaluation
- Independent Educational Evaluation - IEE

This quick guide outlines the criteria for identifying and determining eligibility for special education and related services (different from the ECI definition) for children with a developmental delay (DD). The frequently asked questions (FAQs) provide recommendations and best practices for identifying DD. The quick guide is a resource for teachers, special education personnel, administrators, and other professionals.

## Developmental Delay Quick Guide and Frequently Asked Questions

### INTRODUCTION

This quick guide outlines the criteria for identifying and determining eligibility for special education and related services for children with a developmental delay (DD). The frequently asked questions (FAQs) provide recommendations and best practices for identifying DD. The quick guide is a resource for teachers, special education personnel, administrators, and other professionals.



### ELIGIBILITY DEFINITION

Developmental delay is an eligibility category in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that may be used for certain children in a specific age group who are experiencing developmental delays, as determined and defined under state law. ([24 Code of Federal Regulations \(CFR\) § 300.30\(b\)](#))

In Texas, DD ([19 Texas Administrative Code \(TAC\) 89.1040\(c\)\(13\)](#)) is one possible eligibility category for children beginning at age three and continuing through age nine.

#### Developmental Delay Criteria

- Between the ages of 3 through 9
- Evaluated by a [multidisciplinary team \(MDT\)](#) for at least one [disability category](#) (autism, deaf-blindness, deaf or hard of hearing, emotional disability, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech impairment, traumatic brain injury, or visual impairment) and
- Evaluation data indicates a need for special education and related services and shows evidence of, but does not clearly confirm, the presence of the suspected disability or disabilities due to the child's young age.

**NOTE:** As its definition suggests, the disability criteria for DD is not the first consideration for the MDT. A child would be referred for evaluation based on a suspicion that the child has one or more of the other IDEA-eligible disabilities, and then the MDT would conduct a review of existing evaluation data (REED) to determine how best to proceed with the evaluation.

**NOTE:** The eligibility category of [non-categorical early childhood](#) (NCEC) may be used until the 2025-2026 school year. Any eligible child who begins the 2025-2026 school year already identified as NCEC may maintain this eligibility category, if determined appropriate by the child's ARD committee, until the required re-evaluation before the age of six.

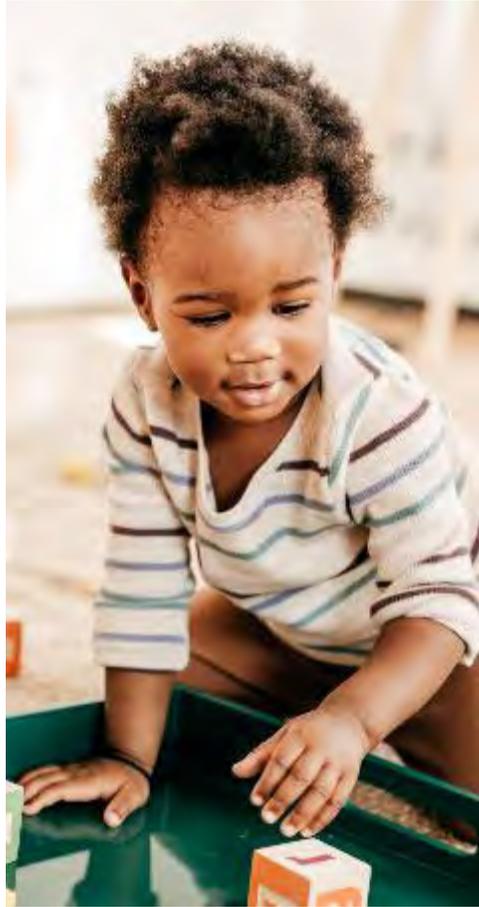
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The Autism Toolkit is a comprehensive and evolving collection of resources designed to support educators working with students with autism across Texas. It includes a curated set of **downloadable tools, images, instructional steps, and videos** that help educators implement programming for students with autism. It is one of the **top five most utilized resources** on Texas SPED Support.



# Case Study Practice



Student Background: Josiah  
Age: 2 years, 8 months

Currently attends daily childcare and the providers have concerns regarding speech, peer interactions, and transitions.

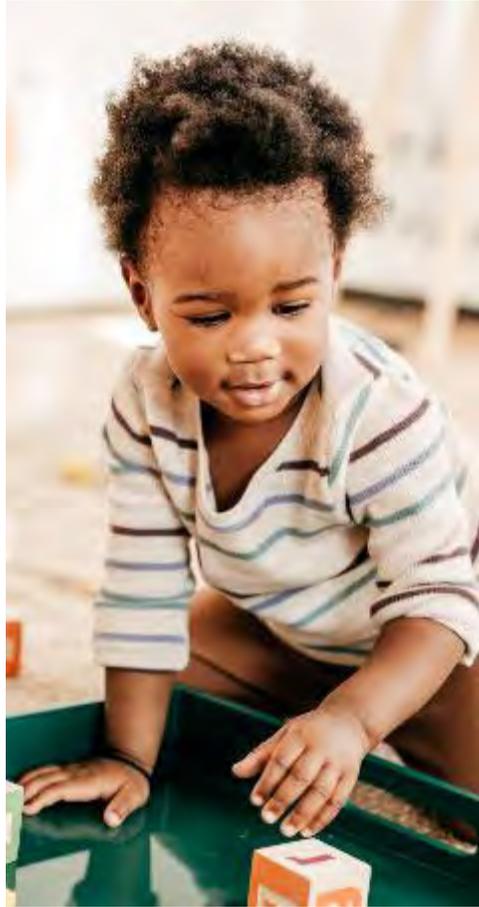
Family Context: Lives with both parents; family is supportive and engaged in early intervention services

#### Challenges:

- Limited expressive language; uses gestures and single words inconsistently
- Difficulty with joint attention and peer engagement
- Sensory sensitivities, especially to loud sounds and crowded environments
- Difficulty with transitioning to non-preferred activities

#### Strengths:

- Responds well to adult-led structured play
- Enjoys music and movement activities
- Demonstrates emerging problem-solving skills during play
- Family is proactive in implementing strategies at home



- Questions/Concerns for ECHO Discussion:
  - How can we ensure a smooth transition from home-based ECI services to classroom-based ECSE?
  - Are there best practices for coordinating with ECI providers and school special education staff during the transition?

# Case Study – Strategies and Interventions

## ■ Family Engagement:

- Discuss concerns and how parents can request a special education evaluation, use the [Parent's Guide to Special Education Referrals for Children 3-5](#).
- Ensure the parent knows what to expect – what is the special education evaluation process and what does it mean? [The Overview of Special Education for Parents Form](#) is an excellent way to walk through this process.
- Encourage families to reach out to [SpedTex.org](#) or their [local school district's](#) special education director with any questions.
- Explain that if eligible for ECSE services the child may receive intervention in the least restrictive environment (LRE) and that these services are provided at no cost to families.
- Discuss what strategies support the child in peer interaction and how that might be implemented into an Individualized Education Program (IEP) – speech therapy, possibly visual schedules, progress monitoring goals on communication.

## ■ Services Initiated:

- ECSE services scheduled to begin by Josiah's third birthday, including speech therapy and classroom-based instruction.
- Josiah will attend his local school district pre-k classroom in his least restrictive environment.





# Thank you!

Contact: [SpecialEducation@tea.Texas.gov](mailto:SpecialEducation@tea.Texas.gov) with any questions

- [Parent's Guide to the ARD Process](#)
- [Notice of Procedural Safeguards](#)
- [Overview of Special Education for Parents form](#)
- [SPEDTex](#)
- [Find your local school district](#)
- [Parent's Guide to Special Education Referrals for Children Ages 3-5](#)
- [Texas SPED Support Site](#)
- [IDEA's 13 Disability Condition Eligibility Definitions](#)
- [Determining Least Restrictive Environment in Preschool](#)

- [The Texas SPED Support website](#)
- [Supporting Early Childhood Transitions Quick Reference Guide](#)
- [A Guide to Early Transitions in Texas](#)
- [Technical Assistance: Child Find and Evaluation](#)
- [Developmental Delay Quick Guide and Frequently Asked Questions](#)
- [The Autism Toolkit](#)