



Increasing Inclusion, Engagement, and Independence in General Education

A tool developed by Michigan Alliance for Families and the Statewide Autism Resources and Training (START) Project to provide clarity for families and promote collaboration.



Introduction

Michigan Alliance for Families and the Statewide Autism Resources and Training (START) Project recognize that experiences in education are unique to every student and every family.

In this tool, you will find suggested answers to common questions, resources for families, and supplemental resources for extended research and information you may explore further. It also provides possible questions that families may want to ask the education team.

The purpose of this tool is to provide clarity for families and promote collaboration that leads to positive outcomes for the student. Visit the START website (gvsu.edu/s/2vE) to view this document or access the resources to provided.



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1. Academics and Curriculum

Should my child participate in an alternative curriculum or the general education curriculum if some or all of their programming is in a special education classroom?

Federal education laws are clear that ALL students, including those with cognitive disabilities, are to be taught using the grade-level general education curriculum. No student should be taught using an alternate curriculum. ([TIES Center Brief #5](#)) For students with significant cognitive disabilities, the U.S. Department of Education indicates:

- Annual Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals should reflect high expectations and be based on the state's content standards for their grade ([Michigan's Academic Standards](#)).
- If students are performing significantly below grade level, IEP teams should determine annual goals that are ambitious but achievable. Even if annual goals do not result in the child reaching grade level within the next year, they should help close the gap.
- The IEP must identify the specialized instruction the child needs to participate in the general education curriculum. The goal is to help the student meet the content standards ([TIES Center Brief #5](#))

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- What are my child's specially designed instruction needs?
- What do you have in place to make sure my child is able to be part of the general education curriculum?
- How are my child's IEP goals connected to the state standards?

Resources:

- [TIES Center - The General Education Curriculum - Not an Alternate Curriculum! \(TIES Brief #5\)](#)
 - [Michigan Alliance for Families - Access to General Education](#)
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My child takes the alternative state assessment. Does this mean they can't take general education classes?

No, the type of state assessment a student takes does not determine placement or restrict access to general education.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- What support does my child need to access general education?
- Are the supports my child needs being provided?
- Can we revisit my child's schedule and identify the specific times of day they will be educated in a setting outside of the general education classroom with all [Supplementary Aids and Services](#) in place?

Resources:

- [TIES Center - Taking the Alternate Assessment Does NOT Mean Education in a Separate Setting! \(TIES Center Brief #2\)](#)
 - [TIES Center - The General Education Curriculum - Not an Alternate Curriculum! \(TIES Brief #5\)](#)
 - [Michigan Alliance for Families - Statewide Assessment](#)
 - [Center for Parent Information & Resources - Supplementary Services](#)
 - [Michigan Department of Education \(MDE\), Office of Special Education \(OSE\) Guidance - Individualized Education Program \(IEP\) Development: Supplementary Aids and Services](#)
 - MDE, OSE Family Matters - State Assessments Fact Sheet (coming soon)
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How can I ensure high expectations are set for my child and the curriculum isn't just watered down to make it easier?

The purpose of accommodations and modifications is to increase engagement and independence so students can learn content alongside each other while maintaining high expectations for all students.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- How are decisions regarding curriculum accommodations for my child made?
- Is my child accessing lessons alongside peers in the general education setting? Does my child take part in the same curriculum and assignments with accommodations and/or modifications?
- How do you find a balance between having high expectations and providing the support my child needs to be successful in general education?

Resources:

- [Center for Parent Information and Resources - Supports, Modifications, and Accommodations for Students](#)
 - [TIES Center - TIES Center Inclusive Practice Series Tips - TIP #6: Using the Least Dangerous Assumption in Educational Decisions](#)
 - [Michigan Alliance for Families - Accommodations and Modifications](#)
 - [ASCD - Are You Communicating High Expectations?](#)
 - [TIES Center - TIES Center Inclusive Practice Series Tips - TIP #14: Academic Standards for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities in Inclusive Classrooms: Same Content Standards, Alternate Achievement Standards](#)
 - [TIES Center - TIES Center Inclusive Practice Series Tips - TIP #9: Special Education High Leverage Practices for Instruction in Inclusive Settings](#)
 - [TIES Center - Providing Meaningful General Education Curriculum Access to Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities](#)
 - [MDE, OSE - Family Matters Multi-Tiered System of Support \(MTSS\) Fact Sheet](#)
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Are there books and curriculum resources available for a wide range of reading levels so all readers can engage in the lesson?

School staff is obligated to adjust or differentiate reading materials as indicated in the student's IEP, regardless of whether the publisher of the curriculum has developed leveled reading materials.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- How are reading assignments differentiated to my child's reading level so they can participate in the curriculum?
- What differentiated materials are already available?
- Who is responsible for making sure my child has differentiated materials?
- What resources can you share with me to use at home?

Resources:

- [TIES Center - TIES Inclusive Practice Series Tips - TIP #18: Choosing Accessible Grade-Level Texts for Use in Inclusive Classrooms](#)
 - [TIES Center - TIES Inclusive Practice Series Tips - TIP #19: Creating Accessible Grade-level Texts for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities in Inclusive Classrooms](#)
 - [START Project - Literacy and Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder \(ASD\)](#)
 - [Understood - Assistive Technology for Dyslexia: A Mother's Story](#)
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2. Adult Support (Teachers, Paraeducators, Ancillary)



What can I do if I am concerned about the way school staff is handling my child's behavior? I feel that the intervention they're using is increasing my child's anxiety or might be making their emotional dysregulation worse.

It is important to open a line of communication with the school about your concerns regarding their approach. Be concrete about the changes in behavior you're seeing that make you concerned. Keep in mind that you and the school team have a shared goal of reducing interfering behavior so approach the issues collaboratively. It is helpful to explain the changes observed in your child at home that make you concerned about an increase in their anxiety.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- When my child is dysregulated, how do staff respond?
- What interventions are staff using to address my child's problem behavior?
- How can we collaborate to develop a plan for addressing my child's problem behavior?
- Who will be involved in developing the plan?
- Is there anyone we should invite to be a part of the behavior plan process who is not already a member of the team?
- Can I share some information about what I'm seeing at home?

Resources:

- [Center on PBIS - Supporting and Responding to Students' Social, Emotional and Behavioral Needs- Evidence-Based Practices for Educators](#)
- [PACER Center - Planning for a School Meeting About Your Child's Behavior Needs](#)
- [MDE, OSE - Family Matters: PBIS at Home](#)
- [MDE, OSE - Family Matters: PBIS at School](#)



What can I do if I feel like my child is not being encouraged to actively participate in general education due to concerns there will be behavior issues?

Remind your school team that engagement and participation are the focus and that you both have the same goal of improving your child's skills and independence.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- What can we do to encourage my child to be more independent and to participate in school activities on their own?

Resources:

- [United States Department of Education - Positive, Proactive Approaches to Supporting Children with Disabilities: A Guide for Stakeholders](#)
- [Michigan Alliance for Families - Behavior Topics](#)





How can I encourage my school team to use reinforcement and rewards with my child rather than taking away privileges?

You have a good foundation for making this request! Research supports the idea of using reinforcement strategies, rather than punishment, to change behavior. Share your concerns honestly with the school team and provide some ideas about motivators and rewards they could use at school that might be helpful.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- Can we brainstorm strategies for increasing my child's engagement?
- What are some reinforcers we can use to teach awareness and regulation skills?
- What is the difference between using a reinforcer and bribing my child?
- In what ways might a reinforcer support my child's progress and engagement at school?

Resources:

- [Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning - Positive Behavior Support: An Individualized Approach for Addressing Challenging Behavior](#)
 - [Michigan Alliance for Families - PBIS](#)
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What can I do if my child doesn't have a good relationship with their paraprofessional, coach, or another adult who supports them?

This concern is something you will want to bring to the attention of the educational team. The dynamics of their interactions need to be assessed. How is the adult responding to the student? If someone came in and observed, would they find a 5:1 ratio of interactions (5 positive interactions for every 1 negative interaction)?

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- Here is some information about my child's interests, strengths, and some strategies that work at home. What other information can I share that might support relationships and positive interactions?
- Can someone observe the interactions during the day? Are the expectations and schedule of the day clear? In what ways are the staff providing direction or redirection? Can you explain what that looks like?
- Do staff have all of the information and training/modeling needed to support my child? How might I be able to contribute or help?

Resources:

- [Understood - Building Positive Relationships with Students: What Brain Science Says](#)
 - [PBIS Rewards - Building Relationships with Students: 8 Ways to Connect](#)
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3. Communication



Some team members are ignoring my child's gestures and speech attempts and demanding my child only use their device. My child is telling us things in many different ways and all communication attempts need to be respected. How can we all agree?

We all want to be heard and respected. Everyone communicates, and at times, in different ways. We should agree that all methods of communication are to be respected and encouraged.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- To build my child's confidence, their communication style and approach need to be honored. How do we make sure we are honoring their communication in all environments?
- Could we meet as a team with my child's Speech-Language Pathologist to discuss how to support communication, including nontraditional attempts?
- Can we schedule training for the team from a Speech-Language Pathologist or another trainer to help support communication? What resources or training will be provided?

Resources:

- [ASHA - Communication Bill of Rights](#)



My child does not communicate verbally. How do I know what they need? How can their team understand their needs?

Children communicate in many different ways. Talk to members of your child's team about their functional communication plan and how everyone can consistently support your child's communication.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- How can we build my child's communication skills?
- What strategies are you using to help my child learn to communicate effectively at school? How can these strategies be used at home?

Resources:

- [Alt+Shift - Demystifying Assistive Technology](#)
- [ASHA - About AAC](#)
- [TIES Center - Supporting the AAC User in the Classroom](#)
- [TIES Center - Communication Supports for Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities: What Parents Need to Know](#)



My child is using augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), but it is not available in all environments. When should my child have access to their AAC?

Students should always have access to their AAC. It is their voice. There is never a time when others have the right to take away your voice. Frequent opportunities to practice using AAC in different environments and with different people helps children learn to communicate.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- How can we make sure my child has a voice in all settings? When in distress? On the playground? At home? At the doctor? At the mall? At lunch?

Resources:

- [ASHA - Communication Bill of Rights](#)
 - [Edutopia - Students with Limited Verbal Capabilities Can Thrive in Inclusive Classrooms](#)
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Is there training available for us and school staff that will support our understanding of my child's augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) use?

Support to school personnel, families, or a liaison can be included in the IEP under supplementary aids and services. This ensures that we provide assistance, consultation, or training to adults supporting the student, and/or coordinate activities to address a specific need.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- How do we explore training options and/or consider additional training for members of the team?
- What are next steps to ensure whoever is supporting my child during the school-day has training in AAC?

Resources:

- [MDE, OSE Guidance - IEP Development: Supplementary Aids and Services](#)
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I am worried that my child will not learn to speak if we let them use an augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) device. Is this a concern?

Research indicates that augmentative communication systems, including picture systems and devices, can support and enhance spoken language. An augmentative communication system empowers your child to communicate their wants, needs, and ideas; therefore, decreasing their frustration and dysregulated behavior.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- How can I make sure that my child is learning to talk if their communication system uses pictures?

Resources:

- [ASHAWIRE - "Everyone Deserves AAC": Preliminary Study of the Experiences of Speaking Autistic Adults Who Use Augmentative and Alternative Communication](#)
 - [Alt+Shift - Demystifying Assistive Technology](#)
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4. Environment



Are my child's needs too complex for the general education classroom? Their focus is usually on things of personal/specific interest; I don't think they will have anything in common with classmates. I'm not sure the teacher will be able to differentiate, or adjust instruction, for all 27 students.

Your child's team will make adaptations to make it possible for your child to learn from their school experiences. Staff are able to use strategies that will help your child be engaged in classroom activities. We often see increased engagement for all students in inclusive classrooms. In addition, in this environment, your child will have multiple opportunities to observe and model expected behaviors, social interactions, and academic routines.

Students do not need to demonstrate any basic readiness skills to participate in general education classrooms. Whether they have significant cognitive disabilities or not, students can benefit from learning academic, behavioral, and social skills in general education settings. Gee, Gonzalez, and Cooper (2020) "found no experimental studies which have demonstrated that students with ESNs [Extensive Support Needs] benefit more from being taught in separate classrooms than inclusive general education classrooms" (pg. 224). Other researchers report that inclusion is academically beneficial to students with significant cognitive disabilities when appropriate supports are implemented (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010; Ryndak, Jackson & White, 2013).

School staff are trained to meet the needs of multiple students simultaneously. A plan can be developed if there are concerns about your child's behavior being a distraction.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- How are you going to engage my child in the general education classroom?
- What strategies will be used if my child's learning is a distraction to other students?
- What will differentiation look like? Who will make sure it is in place?

Resources:

- [SWiFT Education Center - 5 Reasons Why Presuming Competence is Always a Good Idea](#)
- [TIES Center - The General Education Curriculum—Not an Alternate Curriculum!](#)
- [Education Week - Differentiating Instruction: It's Not as Hard as You Think](#)
- [TASH - Dispelling the Myths of Inclusive Education](#)
- [Because of Oliver](#)
- [Kurth, J. & Mastergeorge, A. \(2010\).](#)
- [Gee, K. Gonzalez, M., Cooper, C. \(2020\).](#)
- [Ryndak, D., Jackson, L. & White, J.M. \(2013\).](#)



I'm concerned that my child's anxiety will increase if they are in general education. What if they don't understand the content or we push them too much? How can we make sure this environment isn't overwhelming?

Share your concerns with your child's school team. Start a conversation to ensure all staff are aware what anxiety looks like for your child so the team can develop tools/skills to support your child in managing their anxiety. Consider calming/coping strategies and skills such as deep breathing and taking a break.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- What can we do if we see my child's anxiety increasing when they are in general education?
- How will we monitor my child's anxiety?

Resources:

- [NASP - Anxiety: Helping Handout for School and Home](#)
- [PACER Center - Tools to Help Your Child De-Stress](#)
- [IRIS Center - How Can I Support My Child Socially and Emotionally?](#)



What if my child has a substitute teacher or there are new staff who don't know them well?

This is a great opportunity for your child to learn from a variety of people. We want students to generalize skills, which means we want them to use skills with different people and in different environments.

Teams should have a plan for how to share important information about your child's needs with new or substitute staff to make these changes less disruptive to your child's learning. Staffing changes are another reason it is important to have a fully accurate picture of your student throughout their IEP.

Information must be written in a manner that can be understood by anyone involved in the development and implementation of the IEP and must be accessible to anyone responsible for implementing the IEP. This includes general education teachers, special education teachers, substitute teachers and related service providers.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- What is the plan when new staff are assigned to work with my child? How can we ensure consistency?
- What information will a substitute teacher have about my child? How will they get that information?
- What is the plan if a substitute teacher or new staff feels they need help supporting my child?

Resources:

- [START - Supporting Students with ASD Key Points](#)
 - [PACER Center - Introducing Your Child to the School Community Using a "Student Snapshot" Format](#)
 - [OCALI - Tips to Enhance Interactions with Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder](#)
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My child reads at a second-grade level and their team is recommending they participate in classes with their 8th-grade peers. How will this be successful?

Your child can learn important skills from participating in general education at their grade level and your team has the capacity to adjust the curriculum so your child can learn and have meaningful engagement in the curriculum alongside classmates.

Ask your team if Peer to Peer Support will be offered to your child. Research shows that participating with typically developing peers is effective in promoting growth in independence, social skills, communication, and academics.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- What strategies will you use to make sure my child is learning in the classroom?
- Will my child be part of a Peer to Peer program in this classroom?

Resources:

- [IRIS Center - Inclusion of Students with Significant Cognitive Disabilities](#)
 - [START - Peer to Peer: Frequently Asked Questions](#)
 - [PACER Center - Questions for Parents to Ask about School Adaptations](#)
 - [TIES Center - TIES Inclusive Practice Series - Tip #6: Using the Least Dangerous Assumption in Educational Decisions](#)
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I've been told that my child needs to learn "life skills." How can they do that in the general education environment?

Important life skills such as independence and interdependence, social interaction, and communication can be learned from participating with peers who can model age-appropriate skills. Students can also learn to ask for help, problem-solve during challenging situations, and self-advocate for their needs, all with support from school staff and peers in the general education setting. These are critical life skills that will help your child in the future.

This is a great chance to have a conversation with your child's school team about the fact that academic skills are more than just academic subject matter. Academics also includes opportunities to develop the life skills that students use every day in the school setting. Consider your child's overall progress outside of course subject content.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- Can you explain how we ensure my child will learn important life skills when they are in general education?
- How will others within the inclusive setting be able to support the life skills my child is working on?

Resources:

- [Kids Together - Benefits of Inclusive Education](#)
 - [MHDD - Self-Determination & Dignity of Risk](#)
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5. Individualized Education Program (IEP)



My child's IEP states that they receive certain services, but I'm not sure what they are?

If you are uncertain if or how your child's IEP is being implemented, it is important to ask questions. You should receive clear responses about the supports in place and your child's progress. It is important that you communicate with the school if any of this is unclear. State your goal of better understanding how the IEP is being implemented.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- Can you show an example of or explain to me what it looks like when my child is receiving...
- How do I know the IEP is being implemented with fidelity and that the school team is following through on the goals we identified?
- How do you determine whether or not the supports and services are working?

Resources:

- [Understood - 5 Conversation Starters for Discussing Supports and Services with Teachers](#)
 - [PACER Center - Resolving Special Education Issues: It seems like the school is not following my child's Individualized Education Program \(IEP\)—What can I do?](#)
 - [MDE, OSE Family Matters - Individualized Education Program \(IEP\)](#)
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I don't understand how it is determined if my child is in a general education classroom or a special education classroom. I noticed that some students are in both places during the day. Who makes these decisions?

The IEP team, which you are a critical member of, must consider placement in the least restrictive environment (LRE) at least annually. For more information about what LRE means, see the [Michigan Alliance for Families LRE and Placement](#) document.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- What are the needs of the student?
- What supplementary aids and services does the student need?
- Are the supports and services consistently provided in all classes?
- How was my child's placement selected? What options were considered?

Resources:

- [Center for Parent Information and Resources - Considering LRE in Placement Decisions](#)
 - [MDE, OSE Family Matters - Educational Placement and the Least Restrictive Environment \(LRE\)](#)
 - [MDE, OSE - Least Restrictive Environment \(LRE\) Continuum](#)
 - [Michigan Alliance for Families - LRE and Placement](#)
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If my child's evaluation determines that they are eligible under a specific eligibility category, do they have to go to a specific program based on their eligibility?

Placement should begin in general education. The law presumes that children will attend school with peers who are not disabled. This is part of LRE. If the school identifies a more restrictive placement, then the school must provide a good reason.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- What if the IEP team determines my child will go to a separate classroom or separate program?
- What are my options if I disagree with my child's placement?

Resources:

- [MDE, OSE Family Matters - Educational Placement and the Least Restrictive Environment \(LRE\) Fact Sheet](#)
 - [MDE, OSE Family Matters - Free Appropriate Public Education \(FAPE\) Fact Sheet](#)
 - [The Circle Makers](#)
 - [Special Education - Disability Rights Michigan](#)
 - [MDE, OSE - Dispute Resolution Options](#)
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How does the team determine if my child will benefit from and is ready to start going to the general education classroom?

It is often misunderstood that there are academic or behavioral skill prerequisites for a student to access the general education classroom.

"Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities are more likely to be engaged in an academic task related to standards when in a general education setting (Soukup, Wehmeyer, Bashinski, & Bovaird, 2007). Another benefit is students exhibit less problem behavior in inclusive settings (Lee, Wehmeyer, Soukup, & Palmer, 2010)."

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- What supplementary aids and services does my child need in the general education setting?

Resources:

- [MDE, OSE Family Matters - Educational Placement and the Least Restrictive Environment \(LRE\) Fact Sheet](#)
 - [Impact | Winter 2018/19 Volume 31, Number 2 - Myth vs Fact](#)
 - [IRIS Center - Information Brief - Least Restrictive Environment](#)
 - [Think Inclusive - One Big Misconception About School Readiness](#)
 - [MDE, OSE - Least Restrictive Environment \(LRE\) Continuum](#)
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6. Peer to Peer

What do I do if I think my child needs help making friends?

It is important to communicate this with your child's educational team. Opportunities for social interactions and friendship development are an essential component of education. Students can learn about the expectations of a situation or environment through observing, modeling, and participating alongside their peers.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- In what ways does my child currently engage with same-grade peers?
- How can we design a plan to support and increase social interactions and learning with peers?

Resources:

- [START Project - START Connecting - Peer to Peer Support is a Participation Model](#)
 - [AFIRM - Peer-Mediated Instruction and Intervention](#)
 - [START Project - Peer to Peer: Frequently Asked Questions](#)
 - [EMPOWERING STUDENTS: Students take the Lead in Leonard Peer to Peer](#)
 - [AFIRM - Peer-Mediated Instruction and Intervention Parent Guide \(Companion Guide\)](#)
 - [Ziegler, et al. \(2020\). From barriers to belonging: Promoting inclusion and relationships through Peer to Peer programs. TEACHING Exceptional Children, 52, 426-434.](#)
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How can I encourage the school team to begin a Peer to Peer program and create a culture of inclusion and belonging in my child's school? How can my school involve more students?

Begin by talking to your child's teacher or case manager. Share your interest in Peer to Peer with them. Ask them if they have connected with their [START Regional Collaborative Network \(RCN\)](#) about peer support programming.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- Has our school previously had a Peer to Peer program? Is there someone I can talk to if I'm interested in finding out more?
- Who would I talk to at this school about making sure there is a culture of inclusion and belonging in our school?

Resources:

- [START - Peer to Peer](#)
 - [Inclusive Schools Network - Together We Learn Better: Inclusive Schools Benefit all Children](#)
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My child's school recruits high academic students to be LINKs in the Peer to Peer program, but I think many other students could be good peer partners. What should I do?

START shares this belief and supports expanding recruitment efforts! We recognize that peers bring different skills to LINKS programs, and top academic performance is not a necessary prerequisite to being a good peer partner. Feel free to share with your school team some of the characteristics you think would be beneficial for your child, but also know that some of the best peer matches have been surprising and unexpected.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- Can any student who signs up be a peer partner at our school?
- How do you help support peers to become good partners?

Resources:

- [START Project - Outcomes for LINKs: Benefits to High School Peers](#)



7. Independence

? How can I convince the school team to give my child more space and opportunities to be independent?

Share this goal with your team! It is great that you have high expectations for your child and expect them to become independent. Explain why you think it's so important for your child, you, and your family.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- What are some ways we can increase independence for my child at school? Can I explain how we are setting high expectations at home and some examples of how this has promoted my child's independence?
- What is the plan to encourage and teach my child skills and strategies to be more independent?

Resources:

- [START - Home Independence Goals and School Independence Goals](#)
- [NJCIE - Developing a Plan for Fading Close Adult Support](#)
- [START - START Connecting - Paraprofessionals as Independence Facilitators](#)
- [Carter \(2014\). What Matters Most: Research on Elevating Parent Expectations](#)

? How do I get one-on-one support for my child?

In many cases, one-on-one support is too restrictive and can become a barrier to peer interactions and the development of independent skills. Consider these goals for your child: to build independence and increase engagement. An extra adult in the classroom can sometimes help, but it can also interfere with reaching these goals. You and your child's school team should identify activities where your child does and does not need adult support to be successful. Many other strategies, such as visual and organization support and peer models, can benefit your child.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- Can you share how you are collecting data to make sure my child is learning independence and socializing with peers?
- What does (describe your concern) look like?

Resources:

- [NJCIE - Developing a Plan for Fading Close Adult Support](#)
- [Giangreco, M.F. \(2010\). One-to-One Paraprofessionals for Students With Disabilities in Inclusive Classrooms: Is Conventional Wisdom Wrong? Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 48, 1-13.](#)
- [The Role of the Paraprofessional in the Inclusive Class](#)
- [TIES Center - Understanding the Role of Paraprofessionals in Your Child's Education in Inclusive Classrooms](#)
- [Michigan Alliance for Families - Paraprofessionals](#)

? What are some ways to encourage my child's independent use of visual supports, or building their interests in their own schedule?

The idea is for visual supports to build independence. One way to improve engagement with visual supports is to include the child's interests in the visual schedule. Once your child masters using a visual strategy, like a schedule, the next step may be to empower them to create their own. Providing a framework and guide can get your child started.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- What action steps can we take to foster my child's independent use of their visual supports?

Resources:

- [TIES Center - Distance Learning Series - DL #7 Self-Determined Schedule Making](#)

8. Self-Advocacy and Family Advocacy

? How does the school identify and address bullying?

Being in the general education setting allows all children to learn and practice self-advocacy skills while being supported by adults. These skills promote safety during interactions and allow children to recognize the power they have to seek help and protest when they have concerns.

Providing information to peers empowers them to understand and respect differences. Positive connections can decrease bullying and build authentic, supportive relationships between students. Consider also that the community does not have a special education classroom. By participating in general education, your child is learning how to tolerate and be a part of the larger community.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- How will you work to promote friendships between students?
- How does the school identify and address bullying?
- What can I do to promote friendships with my child at school and outside of school?
- How can we build my child's self-advocacy skills so they can share if they are uncomfortable or upset?

Resources:

- [A Guide to Safety: Five Steps Parents Can Take to Prevent Bullying](#)
 - [START - Self-Advocacy Resources](#)
 - [PACER National Bully Prevention Center](#)
 - [Michigan Alliance for Families - Bullying](#)
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? Isn't it better if we keep my child's disability a secret from their peers?

Information empowers peers to not see differences or disabilities as negative. It eliminates confusion, questions, fear, and creates a space where all individuals are viewed to have unique strengths and areas for growth.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- How can I help my child share about their disability, strengths, skills, and some of their challenges?
- Is there already discussion of differences and disabilities in the classroom?

Resources:

- [PACER Center - Telling Classmates About Your Child's Disability May Foster Acceptance](#)
 - [START - Self-Advocacy Resources](#)
 - [Organization for Autism Research - Kit for Kids](#)
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? I don't think my child's school team understands how my child's disability impacts them. What should I do?

Offer to meet with the team to share your child's unique skills and strengths, the challenges they face, and the structures and responses that are effective outside of school.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- Can I share with the team some of the things we've learned about my child over the years?
- Can I help create a self-advocacy presentation for my child to share with the school team?

Resources:

- [START - Self-Advocacy Resources](#)
 - [Michigan Alliance for Families - Executive Function](#)
 - [CHADD - Tips for Talking to Teachers about ADHD](#)
-



When my child struggles at school, it feels like staff focus on punishment. What can I do?

Express your interest in being part of solutions that focus on prevention and identifying what skills your child needs to learn and how these skills can be taught.

Your child's school should focus on implementing universal strategies to help reduce problem behavior and teach important skills, these might include using visuals, implementing a peer support program, and teaching communication skills, among other things. If these strategies are not effective, you can request a Functional Behavior Assessment to help the team try to understand the reason your child is struggling and teach an appropriate replacement for problem behaviors.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- Are there ways we can prevent and respond to _____ instead of _____ ?
- I really want school to be a positive experience for my child. Can we consider some more positive approaches?
- What is in place to support my child before they are struggling?
- Can we take a closer look at how we are teaching appropriate (expected) behavior?

Resources:

- [IRIS Center - Functional Behavioral Assessment: Identifying the Reasons for Problem Behavior and Developing a Behavior Plan](#)
- [United States Department of Education - Positive, Proactive Approaches to Supporting Children with Disabilities: A Guide for Stakeholders](#)
- [Michigan Alliance for Families - PBIS](#)



How can I involve my child in their educational decisions?

It is important to empower students and encourage involvement by asking them to provide input, including them in discussions and supporting their participation in decision-making about issues that impact their education. These self-advocacy experiences can benefit all students.

Working alongside the educational team to ensure student contribution is valued and the design of the meeting is meaningful for the student might be a good first step.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- In what ways can we involve my child in conversations and decisions regarding their education?
- What supports will need to be provided or developed in advance to ensure meaningful and valuable input?
- Are there others that need to be invited to participate in this process who have genuine understanding and perspective of my child's interests, strengths, and strategies that might work best?

Resources:

- [Center for Parent Information and Resources - Students Get Involved!](#)
- [Alt+Shift - Self Advocacy](#)
- [START Project - Families and Self-Advocates](#)
- [IRIS Center - Student Involvement in the IEP Process](#)
- [CHADD - Should Students Attend Their IEP Meeting?](#)
- [PACER Center - How Can My Child Be Involved in the IEP Process?](#)
- [Michigan Alliance for Families - Self-Determination](#)

9. Supports and Strategies

Is my child receiving too much negative feedback? I'm concerned they are always being corrected and they are less excited about school.

Your child's school team should be working to provide more positive than negative interactions. In the field of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), we call this a 5:1 ratio; a simple reminder that staff needs to be offering at least five positive interactions (high five, thumbs up, verbal praise, etc.) to every one redirection or correction.

Sometimes students need prompts or other forms of help (visual cues) to help them be successful. These strategies can reduce the need for corrective feedback and can help your child be independent and achieve new skills.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- My child doesn't seem happy about going to school. Are there things we can do to make this a more positive experience for them?
- Are there other ways we can provide corrective feedback without them feeling criticized?
- Could we develop a self-management plan to help my child be more independent?

Resources:

- [MiMTSS Technical Assistance Center - Behavior Specific Praise \(BIC\)](#)
- [Education and Behavior - This Evidence-Based Approach Helps Prevent Behavior Challenges in the Classroom](#)

Should the school be offering my child a break whenever my child makes a request using a break card or another form of communication?

Learning a safe way to exit a situation is something all students should learn. Honoring a request to exit an uncomfortable situation safely per the request of a student teaches them that their communication has meaning. When break requests are denied, oftentimes, the need to exit doesn't go away. Rather, the student will try other methods to communicate needs. This could lead to unconventional or unexpected communication that is perceived as problem behavior. The response to requests should be determined by the child's individual plan. It is important the team is in agreement and responds consistently when your child does request a break.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- Can we review the expectations for requesting breaks?
- How can we make sure my child knows how to request breaks using a break card or another communication strategy?
- What information has been gathered regarding my child's breaks?
- What ideas can we develop as a team to encourage my child to be more engaged in the classroom, and possibly need fewer breaks out of the class?

Resources:

- [ASHA - Communication Bill of Rights](#)
- [ibestt - Intervention Guide: Teaching a Request for a Break](#)
- [NCLii - Intensive Intervention Practice Guide: Using Student Choice to Decrease Challenging Behaviors for Elementary Students with Comorbid Academic and Behavior Difficulties](#)



How can I assure that school staff are offering my child opportunities to make choices throughout the school day?

Students need to have the ability to make choices to communicate their wants and needs using their communication systems and/or using gestures or verbalizations. They also should have the opportunity to make choices throughout their daily school experiences in academics, enrichment classes, like music, art, and physical education, and in social activities. Having choices allows students to have some power and control over their experiences. This means that the development of choice options should be planned and accessible during all parts of the student's day. Student choices should be regularly offered and honored by staff.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- At what times is my child provided choices to demonstrate wants and needs? Can you give me specific examples?
- Are choices available throughout the day and in different contexts?

Resources:

- [VCU RRTC - How To: Providing Choices](#)
 - [Better Kid Care - Giving Children Choices](#)
 - [IRIS Center - Fundamental Skill Sheet: Choice Making](#)
-



Is there enough structure in my child's classroom? My child comes home very overwhelmed.

Talk with the school team about exploring your child's day to develop a theory on what may be overwhelming them. Share your concern and offer examples of how you organize your home space and materials in a way that is predictable and more easily processed.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- How will my child be prepared for transitions between activities within the classroom as well as transitions between different rooms/spaces within the school? What will the transition supports/systems look like?
- What organization strategies may be helpful (e.g., visual schedule)?

Resources:

- [Understood - 5 Conversation Starters for Discussing Teaching Approaches with Teachers](#)
-



I wish my child would follow directions at home like they do at school. What am I doing wrong?

Your child's school team might be using different strategies that help them follow directions more easily. There can be different expectations, additional role models (peers), and cues that help your child follow directions more independently (visual supports, reinforcement). Sometimes it takes a little time to change expectations and support them to show these skills, but with consistency, this will get better!

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- What strategies do you use to get my child to follow directions? I just can't seem to get them to listen at home the same way. Can you share some ideas with me?

Resources:

- [Understood - 10 Tips to Help Your Child Follow Directions](#)
 - [MDE, OSE - Family Matters Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports \(PBIS\) at Home Fact Sheet](#)
 - [MDE, OSE - Family Matters Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports \(PBIS\) at School Fact Sheet](#)
 - [NJCIE - Quick Tips for Families: Using PBIS at Home](#)
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10. Visual Supports



Sometimes I feel like my child's team relies too heavily on giving verbal directions. They seem to talk a lot when teaching my child, or when my child is doing something wrong, or when they are trying to calm my child. Should they increase the use of visual supports?

Many students respond better to having visual supports. They may not process verbal information as easily, especially when they are stressed. Having something concrete to refer to can be the key to success for some children.

If this is the case for your child, explain to the school team that your child processes visual and written cues more accurately than verbal directives, especially during times of new learning or increased anxiety. Share specific examples of strategies you use to support communication outside of school.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- If my child isn't understanding the verbal language that's being used in class, are there other things we can do to help them?
- Can we try using visuals to build my child's independent skills?

Resources:

- [AFIRM - Visual Supports Tip Sheet for Professionals](#)
- [AFIRM - Visual Cues Home Examples](#)



What visual systems should I be using at home? When I go into the classroom, there are a lot of pictures. What would be helpful at home?

Talk with the school team about what your child responds to in the classroom and what visual supports are effective for them. These are the pieces you may want to carry over at home. Calendars and schedules can be very helpful in the home as they allow your child to know what events are planned, which reduces anxiety caused by unexpected events and changes.

Consider creating checklists or mini schedules that support your child toward independence in routines such as getting dressed in the morning or getting ready for bed.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- If I'm struggling with _____ at home, what is the best way to use visual strategies to support this activity?
- Can you show me some visual strategies that might be useful to use at home?

Resources:

- [Institute on Community Integration Publications - Self-Determined Schedule Making](#)
- [START - School Independence Goal Ideas](#)
- [START - Home Independence Goal Ideas](#)
- [TIES Center - Helping Your Child with Routines at Home](#)
- [Michigan Alliance for Families - Visual Supports - Schedules](#)
- [NJCIE - Using Visual Supports to Facilitate Homework Completion](#)
- [NJCIE - Directions for Using Visual Schedules](#)
- [NJCIE - Using a "Mini Schedule" or Virtual Checklist \(with blank templates\)](#)
- [Understood - Why Kids Struggle With Following Routines and Schedules](#)

? My child is worried about standing out or looking different. Can support be more discreet?

Support should be tailored to your child's unique needs and should consider their input. The goal is to provide students with the help that they need, without making them feel self-conscious about it.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- What do the current supports look like?
- Can we think about ways to make sure they don't stand out from their peers?
- Can we add visual supports that will promote engagement and independence for the entire class?

Resources:

- [Understood - What is Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)?](#)
 - [Five Moore Minutes - Removing the Barriers: Planning for ALL](#)
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? Are there trials available for apps and devices that may meet my child's needs?

Alt+Shift maintains a lending library available to school staff. You can discuss ideas with other members of the team and explore what options you want to trial. Michigan Disability Rights Coalition (MDRC) also maintains a lending library for individuals, their focus is Assistive Technology (AT) for life, not specifically school. Both have great options you may want to check out.

Questions families can ask the educational team:

- Can we request _____ from the Alt+Shift lending library?

Resources:

- [Alt+Shift Lending Library](#)
 - [Michigan Disability Rights Coalition Lending Library](#)
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