

Why is having the Right Eligibility Important?

Eligibility affects educational planning and placement. If your child has autism, the category of autism best defines the unique set of differences that your child has and unique needs in the areas of social, communication adaptive, behavioral. Eligibility in this category means that the team *recognizes* this unique pattern of differences in your child and will take steps to address these and related areas of need.

Other disability categories would not account for the combination of social, communication play, behavioral and sensory deficits seen in autism that are not seen in other disabilities. While the law says that services should be based on need and not be tied to the disability category, the reality is that many school districts may be reluctant to provide service and placements that are specially designed for children with autism (such as behavioral services) to a child who is not eligible in that category. For example, children found eligible for services in the category of speech and language impairment rarely receives behavioral services.

Why would the team be reluctant to give the child an eligibility of *autism*?

Sometimes the school team may pick up that the parents are reluctant to have their child labeled as having autism. The team may be concerned that the parents will not be happy with that eligibility, so they give the child a different eligibility. This may be considered a kind way to ease the parent into special education. Yet even if it is hard for parents to hear, choosing a correct and accurate category may be the best thing to do. It can also be difficult to change to an inaccurate category later.

Some school teams feel that they are “protecting the child” by not giving an autism label, especially when the child is a young preschooler. The fact is, there is no shame in having autism, and this type of attitude can be seen as a throwback to the days of autism stigma. The child is not being labeled. His pattern of differences is being described.

Another reason, especially for a child who does not have a confirmed diagnosis, may be that the school team members did not see autism. How can this be? There are many reasons that a snapshot in time, in controlled adult-mediated settings will not capture the same information as the video of your child’s life that you witness every day. If this is the case, there are ways to gather more information and resolve this disagreement (This is described in the **What to Do If** section).

Finally, members of your IEP team might tell you that it does not matter what your child’s eligibility is as long as your child is eligible for special education. This is somewhat true. The problem is the inaccuracy of how the child and his needs are viewed. The whole team needs to be in the same boat, rowing in the same direction, so your child can get where he needs to go!

It is very difficult to go through the process of assessment and eligibility. It can be very emotional to believe or admit that your child has a disability, let alone autism. As hard as it may be to do, at this point in the process you may need to take your emotions out of the equation. Learning about your child's disability and the IEP is a process. You can and will learn as you go along.

Think about what is the right thing for your child. Would it be better to wait and see what happens or would it be better to have them get as much help that they can as early as possible? This is something only you can decide.

We hope to offer is good information so that you can make an informed decision for your child. No one should try to talk you into anything. Do not let school district personnel tell you what is best for your child. You need to do what you believe is in the best interest of your child.