



A Parent's Guide to ESE in Florida

1. What Is ESE?	2
2. Your Child's Rights	2
3. Who Can Get ESE?	3
4. Birth to Age 3: Early Steps	3
5. Ages 3 to 21: The School District	3
6. How to Start: Ask for an Evaluation	4
7. Bring Your Own Information	5
8. The IEP: Your Child's Plan	5
Who Comes to the IEP Meeting?	5
Tips for IEP Meetings	6
9. After the IEP	6
10. ESE vs. a 504 Plan	6
If your child does not qualify for ESE, ask about a 504 plan.	6
11. Gifted Students	7
12. Getting Ready for Adult Life: Transition Planning	7
13. When You Disagree with the School	8
14. Money and School Choice Options	8
15. Free Places to Get Help	8
16. Words to Know	9
Letter Template: Request for an ESE Evaluation	10
Tips for Sending the Letter	11
Step-by-Step Summary	11
ESE Parent Checklist	12
Getting Started	12
Evaluation and Eligibility	12
The IEP	12
Every Year	12
Every 3 Years and Beyond	12
If I Disagree	12
A Parent's Guide to ESE in Florida	1
A Parent's Guide to ESE in Florida	1



A Parent's Guide to ESE in Florida

ESE stands for Exceptional Student Education. It is Florida's help for students who learn differently or need extra support at school. This guide explains how it works, in plain words. You know your child best. You are an equal member of the school team. This guide will help you use that power.

1. What Is ESE?

ESE is a set of special services and supports. Public schools give them for free. They help children with disabilities learn and grow. In Florida, ESE also includes gifted students.

ESE can include:

- Extra help from a special education teacher
- Speech or language therapy
- Occupational therapy (OT) for hands and daily skills
- Physical therapy (PT)
- Counseling
- Changes to how your child learns or takes tests
- Help from an aide or assistive tools, such as a tablet

2. Your Child's Rights

A federal law protects your child. It is called IDEA. It says:

- Your child gets a free and appropriate public education.
- Your child learns with other students as much as possible. This is called the least restrictive environment.
- You must agree in writing before the school tests your child the first time.
- You must agree in writing before ESE services start.
- You can see all your child's school records.
- You can bring people to meetings, like a friend, a doctor, or an advocate.
- You can disagree and ask for help to solve problems.

The school must give you a paper called the Procedural Safeguards. It lists your rights. Keep it.



A Parent's Guide to ESE in Florida

3. Who Can Get ESE?

A child can qualify if two things are true:

1. The child has a disability that fits one of the school's categories.
2. The disability affects learning, and the child needs special education to do well.
- 3.

Some Florida categories are:

- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Specific Learning Disability (like dyslexia)
- Speech Impairment
- Language Impairment
- Other Health Impairment (like ADHD or a health problem)
- Intellectual Disability
- Emotional or Behavioral Disability
- Deaf or Hard of Hearing
- Visually Impaired
- Orthopedic Impairment
- Traumatic Brain Injury
- Developmental Delay (for young children)

A doctor's diagnosis is not enough by itself. The school team must decide that your child meets its rules. A doctor's report is still very helpful. The school must look at it.

4. Birth to Age 3: Early Steps

If your baby or toddler is not meeting milestones, call Early Steps. This is Florida's program for children from birth to 3 years old.

- Services often happen at home.
- At about age 3, your child moves to the school district's program.
- Planning for this move should start before the 3rd birthday.

5. Ages 3 to 21: The School District

Schools must look for children who may need help. This is called Child Find. It also covers children in private school and homeschool.

ESE services can last until age 21 or 22 in Florida. Ask your school for the exact rule for your child.



A Parent's Guide to ESE in Florida

6. How to Start: Ask for an Evaluation

You do not have to wait for the school to act. You can ask.

Step 1: Put your request in writing. Use a letter or email. Keep a copy. Write the date and request for confirmation that the email was received. If you bring a physical letter to the school, request that the person receiving the letter signs both copies (yours and theirs) upon receipt.

Say something like this:

"I think my child may need special education. I am asking for a full evaluation. Please send me the consent form."

A full letter you can copy is near the end of this guide.

Step 2: The school answers you. The school decides if it will test your child. If it says no, it must tell you why, in writing. This letter is called Prior Written Notice.

You do not have to accept "no." You can appeal. Your steps are in our separate guide: "What to Do If the School Says No to ESE Testing." A short version is in Section 13 below.

Step 3: You sign consent. Testing cannot start until you sign.

Step 4: Testing happens. Testing is a set of checks. It may include:

- Learning and reading tests
- Classroom watching
- Speech, language, or OT checks
- Talking with you and the teacher
- A psychologist's tests, if needed
-

In Florida, the school generally has 60 **school days** after you give consent to finish the evaluation.

Step 5: The team meets. You are part of the team. The team looks at the results. Then it decides if your child is eligible.



A Parent's Guide to ESE in Florida

7. Bring Your Own Information

You know things the school does not. Bring:

- Reports from your child's doctor or therapist
- Past report cards and test scores
- Notes about what you see at home
- Your own list of worries

Share your doctor's or therapist's reports with the school in writing. Keep a copy.

If you disagree with the school's testing, you can ask for an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE). This is testing by an outside expert. In some cases, the school must pay for it or must explain why it will not.

8. The IEP: Your Child's Plan

If your child is eligible, the team writes an IEP. That stands for Individualized Education Program. It is a written plan made just for your child.

An IEP includes:

- Present levels: How your child is doing now
- Goals: What your child will learn this year
- Services: What help your child gets, how often, and for how long
- Accommodations: Changes to *how* your child learns or shows what they know (like extra time or a quiet room)
- Modifications: Changes to *what* your child is expected to learn
- Testing supports: Help on state tests
- Placement: Where your child gets services
- Progress reports: How you will hear about progress

The school should hold the IEP meeting within 30 days after your child is found eligible.

Who Comes to the IEP Meeting?

- You (the parent)
- A special education teacher
- A general education teacher
- A school leader or district person
- Someone who can explain the test results



A Parent's Guide to ESE in Florida

- Your child, when it makes sense
- Anyone else you invite

Tips for IEP Meetings

- Ask for the draft before the meeting.
- Write down your top 3 goals.
- Ask questions. It is OK to say, "Please explain that in plain words."
- You do not have to sign right away. You can take the paper home.
- Ask for anything important to be written in the IEP. If it is not written, it may not happen.

9. After the IEP

- The IEP is reviewed at least once a year.
- Your child is tested again (a reevaluation) at least every 3 years.
- You can ask for a meeting any time you have a concern.
- You get progress reports. Read them. Ask questions if goals are not being met.

10. ESE vs. a 504 Plan

If your child does not qualify for ESE, ask about a 504 plan.

	IEP	504 Plan
Law	IDEA	Section 504
Who	A child with a disability who needs special education	A child with a disability who needs accommodations to take part
What	Services, goals, and supports	Mostly accommodations
Written plan	Detailed IEP	Individual Accommodation Plan (IAP)



A Parent's Guide to ESE in Florida

11. Gifted Students

In Florida, gifted students are also part of ESE. They get an Educational Plan (EP). It is not the same as an IEP. Some children are twice exceptional. They are gifted and also have a disability. They may need both.

12. Getting Ready for Adult Life: Transition Planning

Planning for life after high school begins early. In Florida, the IEP must include transition planning by the time your child turns 14.

Transition planning looks at:

- Goals for school, work, and living
- Classes that match those goals
- Skills for jobs and daily life
- Help from adult agencies

Your child should come to these meetings. Their voice matters.

At age 18, education rights move from you to your child. This is the age of majority. The school will tell you before this happens. Talk with your family about options, such as supported decision-making or guardianship, and get legal advice if you need it.

Florida has different diploma paths. Ask the school which path fits your child and what each one means for the future.



A Parent's Guide to ESE in Florida

13. When You Disagree with the School

You have choices. Start small.

1. Talk to the teacher or case manager. Many problems end here.
2. Ask for an IEP meeting. Put it in writing.
3. Ask for a facilitated IEP meeting. A neutral person helps everyone talk and listen. It is free.
4. Ask for mediation. A neutral person helps you and the school reach an agreement. It is free.
5. File a state complaint. You send it to the Florida Department of Education.
6. Ask for a due process hearing. This is like a court case. You may want a lawyer.

Keep calm and keep records. Always follow up phone calls with an email.

If the school says no to testing, these same steps apply. See the separate guide, "What to Do If the School Says No to ESE Testing," for the full process and sample letters.

14. Money and School Choice Options

Florida has scholarship programs for some students with disabilities. These can help pay for private school or other services. Rules and amounts change, so check the Florida Department of Education website or ask your district for current details.

15. Free Places to Get Help

- Your school's ESE contact or district ESE office
- Family Network on Disabilities (FND): Free help for Florida families
- FDLRS (Florida Diagnostic and Learning Resources System): Support for families and schools
- Disability Rights Florida: Legal help for people with disabilities
- Florida Department of Education, Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services (BEESS): State information and help with complaints
- Early Steps: For children from birth to age 3
- Your child's doctor: Ask for reports and letters



A Parent's Guide to ESE in Florida

16. Words to Know

Word	What It Means
ESE	Exceptional Student Education
IEP	Individualized Education Program, your child's written plan
IDEA	The federal special education law
FAPE	Free Appropriate Public Education
LRE	Least Restrictive Environment, learning with peers as much as possible
Evaluation	Testing to see if your child needs ESE
Eligibility	The decision that your child qualifies
Accommodation	A change in how your child learns
Modification	A change in what your child is taught
Case manager	The person who runs the IEP
Consent	Your written yes
Prior written notice	A letter from the school when it changes or refuses something



A Parent's Guide to ESE in Florida

Letter Template: Request for an ESE Evaluation

Copy this letter. Fill in the blanks. Send it by email, or hand it to the school and ask them to sign and date your copy. Keep a copy for yourself.

Who to send it to: the school principal and the school's ESE contact (the case manager, ESE specialist, or school psychologist). If you can, also send it to your district's ESE office.

[Your full name] [Your address] [Your phone number] [Your email]

[Date]

[Principal's name] [School name] [School address]

Subject: Request for a full evaluation for ESE services

Dear [Principal's name],

I am the parent of [child's full name]. My child was born on [date of birth] and is in [grade] in [teacher's name]'s class. [Student ID number, if you know it.]

I am worried about my child's progress at school. I am concerned about:

- [Example: reading and writing]
- [Example: speech and language]
- [Example: focus, behavior, or getting along with others]
- [Example: daily skills or movement]

I am asking the school to do a full and individual evaluation to see if my child has a disability and needs special education and related services. Please include all areas of concern. Please test in any area where my child may need help, such as learning, speech, language, motor skills, social skills, and behavior.

Please send me:

1. The consent form for the evaluation
2. A copy of the Procedural Safeguards (my rights as a parent)
3. A written answer to this request. If the school decides not to evaluate, please tell me why in writing.



A Parent's Guide to ESE in Florida

I would like to be part of every meeting about my child. Please tell me which dates and times work. I am also happy to share reports from my child's doctor or therapists. [Delete this line if it does not apply.]

You can reach me at [phone number] or [email]. [Optional: I speak [language], and I would like an interpreter at meetings.]

Thank you for your help. I look forward to hearing from you soon.
Sincerely, [Your name]

Tips for Sending the Letter

- Use the word "evaluation."
 - Keep it short and clear. You do not have to prove anything.
 - Send it by email so you have the date in writing. You can also hand-deliver it and ask for a signed, dated copy.
 - Write the date on your own calendar. The school's timeline starts from there.
 - Follow up. If you hear nothing in a week or two, send a short email: "I am following up on my request for an evaluation dated [date]."
 - Keep everything in one folder: letters, emails, reports, and notes from phone calls.
-

Step-by-Step Summary

1. Notice a concern. Your child struggles with learning, speech, behavior, or skills.
2. Write it down. List what you see and when.
3. Talk to the teacher. Share your worries.
4. Request an evaluation in writing. Keep a copy with the date.
5. Get the school's answer. If it says no, ask for the reason in writing. Then use the appeal guide. You can appeal.
6. Sign consent for testing.
7. Testing happens. The school has about 60 school days after your consent.
8. Go to the eligibility meeting. Bring reports and your notes.
9. If eligible, go to the IEP meeting. The school should hold it within 30 days.
10. Review the IEP. Ask questions. Make sure goals and services are clear.
11. Sign consent for services when you are ready.
12. Watch progress. Read progress reports.
13. Ask for changes any time you need them.
14. Meet every year for the IEP review.
15. Retest every 3 years.
16. Start transition planning by age 14.



A Parent's Guide to ESE in Florida

17. Plan for age 18 and adult life.
 18. If you disagree, use meetings, mediation, a complaint, or a hearing.
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ESE Parent Checklist

Getting Started

- ☐ I wrote down my concerns and dates
- ☐ I talked with my child's teacher
- ☐ I asked for an evaluation in writing
- ☐ I kept a copy of my letter or email
- ☐ I signed the consent for testing

Evaluation and Eligibility

- ☐ I gave the school my child's doctor and therapy reports
- ☐ I asked for a copy of all test results
- ☐ I went to the eligibility meeting
- ☐ I know if my child qualifies, and under which category

The IEP

- ☐ I asked for the draft IEP before the meeting
- ☐ I wrote down my top 3 goals
- ☐ I understand the goals, services, and accommodations
- ☐ I know how often my child will get services
- ☐ I got a copy of the final IEP
- ☐ I received the Procedural Safeguards

Every Year

- ☐ I read each progress report
- ☐ I went to the yearly IEP meeting
- ☐ I asked for a meeting when I had a concern
- ☐ I kept all papers in one folder

Every 3 Years and Beyond

- ☐ I know when the next reevaluation is due
- ☐ Transition planning started by age 14

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A Parent's Guide to ESE in Florida

- ☐ My child goes to their own IEP meetings
- ☐ I learned about the rights change at age 18
- ☐ I asked about diploma options and adult services

If I Disagree

- ☐ I asked for a meeting in writing
- ☐ I considered a facilitated IEP meeting or mediation
- ☐ I called a free support group, such as FND
- ☐ I kept notes and emails from every contact

This guide is for general information. It is not legal advice. Rules and timelines can change, and each school district has its own forms. Check with your district or the Florida Department of Education for the latest details