



Frequently Asked Questions: Families of Students with Behavioral, Emotional, or Mental Health Challenges at School

How do I know if my child needs behavior supports in the classroom?

Some common signs may include:

- Your child is repeatedly disciplined in school with suspensions or classroom removals or given detention or time-outs
- Your child is told they are not allowed to participate in field trips or after-school activities
- The school regularly calls you to complain about your child's behavior or asks you to pick your child up from school early
- Your child avoids going to school, often arrives late to school, or often stays outside the classroom when in school
- There is a big drop in your child's school performance

*** While these are examples of signs to look out for, it is important to note that every child, family, and educational situation is different. To best help your child, it's important to figure out why the behavior is occurring to improve or change it.*

Who should I contact if I notice my child is having behavioral, emotional, or mental health challenges at school?

TEACHERS

Your child's teacher should be your first point of contact. You can try speaking with them before or after school, emailing your child's teacher(s) about your concerns, or requesting a parent-teacher conference.

SCHOOL COUNSELORS AND SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS

Every child in a New York City Public School run by the Department of Education (DOE) should have access to support from social workers and guidance counselors at school.

A School Counselor or Social Worker can provide individual and group counseling, help find after-school programs, help you understand issues related to the [DOE Discipline Code](#), and work with you to create a plan to address behavioral challenges your child is facing.

Ask your child's teacher about how to get in contact with your child's counselor or social worker, call the school, or check the school's DOE web page or school's website.

PARENT COORDINATORS

Every DOE School has a parent coordinator who is responsible for identifying family concerns and working with school leaders to address issues in a timely manner. The Parent Coordinator should be aware of all the services available for your student at school.

You can find your school's parent coordinator's contact information on [the school's DOE web page or school's website](#).

SPECIAL EDUCATION EVALUATORS

Sometimes school staff cannot provide the help your child needs. If your child needs more direct support, consider having them evaluated for special education. Learn more in [AFC's guide to special education evaluations](#).

PRINCIPAL

If other contacts are unresponsive, we recommend you reach out to the school's principal. You can find your school's principal's contact information including their email address on the school's DOE web page or school's website.

SUPERINTENDENT

If you are unable to get a response from the school, or would like more support, we recommend you reach out the Family Support Coordinator in the [Superintendent's Office](#). Superintendent Office information is available on your school's DOE web page or school's website.

What is an IEP and what are my rights as a parent of a student with a disability?

An Individualized Education Program (IEP) ensures that a child with an identified disability under the law receives specialized instruction and related services. It is a legal document, an agreement between you and the school district so they can provide your child with services. To obtain an IEP your child must be evaluated and found eligible first. For more information on the process and timeline for IEPs, learn more in [AFC's Guide to Special Education](#).

What resources can be included in an IEP to address behavioral challenges?

As a parent you can participate in the development of an individualized education (IEP) plan for your child. You are also allowed to request an IEP meeting at any point of the year which can tell you a little bit more about your child's progress with the IEP in place and to ask for additional services. The following are examples of supports you can request:

POSITIVE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTION SUPPORTS (PBIS)

The Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) requires schools to use evidence-based approaches to support the behavioral needs of students with disabilities. PBIS ensures that schools teach about behavior expectations and strategies. The focus of PBIS is prevention, not punishment.

Some forms of PBIS in the classroom include an effectively designed physical classroom, predictable classroom routines, 3-5 positive classroom expectations posted, varied opportunities to respond, and acknowledgments for expected behavior

Check out AFC's fact sheet on [Positive Interventions for Students with Disabilities](#) and Additional Resources at the end of this fact sheet for more information.

FUNCTIONAL BEHAVIOR ASSESSMENTS (FBA)

An FBA is the process of collecting and studying behaviors to better understand what may be prompting them in school. The results of the FBA are helpful for teachers, parents, and providers in finding strategies and supports that reduce or replace behaviors with more appropriate ones. You can request an FBA by reaching out to your student's teacher, school social worker, school psychologist. Learn more about how to request an FBA in [AFC's Special Education Guide](#).

F: Function

Why does the behavior occur?

B: Behavior

What behavior needs to change?

A: Assessment

When does the behavior occur?
Where? How often? For how long?

BEHAVIOR INTERVENTION PLANS (BIP)

Based on the results of the FBA, the IEP team will decide if a Behavioral Intervention Plan (BIP) is needed. A BIP can help students with IEPs who struggle with their behavior in school. The BIP becomes a legal document that is now a part of your child's IEP. This consists of teaching alternate behaviors that meet your child's needs. A BIP could result to changes in instruction, types of support or interventions, or the environment.

Involve your child in creating the BIP, where appropriate, particularly if your child is in middle or high school. Your child may have good ideas for supports to include in the BIP. Involving

your child in the process can also create buy-in to use the BIP. Maybe your child can even suggest a name for their BIP that feels supportive to them.

ADVOCACY TIP for FBAs & BIPs:

Measurements should be in place to ensure your child is making progress in the BIP. It is also important to **review the BIP on a regular basis** to make sure the interventions and supports are working and needed. Sometimes the BIP needs to be changed or different interventions may need to be used if your child is not making progress, and that's ok!

PARAPROFESSIONALS

A paraprofessional may be an option if your child needs one-on-one support to address their behavioral or emotional challenges throughout the school day.

ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

There are many types of technology designed to help children with behavioral and emotional challenges regulate their behaviors. If you think your child needs to be evaluated for an assistive technology device because of a behavior challenge that is impacting their education, the DOE is required to do an evaluation.

STAFF TRAINING AND SUPPORT

If your child has specific behavioral or emotional challenges, staff may need to be trained in how to properly handle situations that may arise. There is a specific section on the IEP for staff training. You can recommend that certain staff who work with your child, such as teachers, paraprofessionals, and other staff, get trained in how to support your child's needs. For example, a behavior specialist or behavior consultant may be needed to train school staff in how to effectively manage a student's behavior and use trauma-informed approaches to safely de-escalate a student if they experience a behavioral crisis.

ANNUAL GOALS

A required part of an IEP is the annual goals for the student and the student's team to work towards. Goals can include specific behavioral challenges that you and your child's team want to address by the end of the school year.

STUDENT CRISIS DE-ESCALATION PLAN

Your child may struggle to manage their emotions and regulate their behavior when they are distressed. These experiences may escalate into a crisis if school staff do not have the necessary knowledge and the skills to lessen the intensity of the situation. A crisis for a child may happen if the child is unable to problem solve or cope with a situation and feels panic, hopelessness, and confusion. Those feelings can then lead to a big change in mood or behavior. **A crisis de-escalation plan is a written document created for use when a student is at risk of**

harming themselves or others or is having behavior that is unsafe. Some schools also call them safety plans. The plan may be based on the most recent FBA and be part of a Positive Behavior Intervention Plan.

A crisis plan should include clear steps school staff will take to support your child during a crisis, including:

- Strategies to use during the crisis to de-escalate and positively support your child
- What to do or not do during a crisis
- Who staff should contact for help, and when
- Strategies for working with your child after the crisis is over
- When you, the parent, should be notified

My child does not have an IEP or was not approved for one but is struggling with behavioral challenges. What is available?

Your child's school can provide behavioral supports to address behavioral challenges for students without IEPs. Talk to your child's counselor or teachers about:

- **At-risk counseling:** Student's without IEPs can still receive counseling or paraprofessionals on an at-risk basis for a short period of time.
- **Informal Behavior Interventions:** Teachers are able to implement informal behavior interventions such as behavior contracts, positive rewards systems, behavior charts, for students without IEPs.
- **School Crisis De-Escalation Plan:** Every school is required to have a Crisis De-Escalation Plan that lists specific staff members trained in how to work with a student experiencing an emotional crisis. If your child is in crisis and the school is not responding appropriately, ask to see the school's Crisis De-Escalation Plan and make sure it is being followed.
- **School Based Mental Health Services:** Some students have access to mental health services in their school. You can find more information about the [School Based Mental Health Services](#) available at your child's school by visiting the [school's DOE's website](#) and clicking on 'Mental Health and Wellness.'

NOTE:

If your child was not approved for an IEP but you believe they need one, see [AFC's Special Education Guide](#) to learn more about your rights in challenging that decision.

What resources are available outside of school?

There are community mental health services available outside of school. Your child's school can help you in deciding whether any of these services are the right fit for your child and beginning the process. Some of the available services include [NYC Well](#), [Thrive NYC](#), [HITE](#), and [School Mental Health Services](#), and [NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services](#).

Assistive technology is also an option outside of school. Not all assistive technology options require an IEP, and there are devices that range from stuffed animals that can “eat” worries to wrist devices that use vibrations to help regulate moods. Talk to your child’s teachers or doctors about options that may work for your child.

What are a student’s rights at school? What is my child’s school not allowed to do?

- ▶ **The school should NOT ask you to keep your child at home, ask you repeatedly to pick your child up from school early, or ask you to remain in the classroom with your child because of their behavior.** It is inappropriate for your school to call you every day to pick up your child from school or tell you to find a new school. They are required to provide your child with support. The school should NOT exclude your child from after school activities or field trips because of their behavior.
- ▶ **The school should NOT hold over your child.** A child should never be held back because of behavioral challenges. A child can be held back because they do not have the academic skills to do the work at the next grade level, but not because of a behavioral problem.
- ▶ **The school should NOT repeatedly complain to you.** It is inappropriate for your school to repeatedly complain to you whether in person, on the phone, or over email. Instead, your school must work with you to find solutions that will help address your child’s behavior.
- ▶ **The school should NOT repeatedly suspend your child.** If your child is being suspended or removed from class because of their behavior, speak to the school so they can find an appropriate way to address your child’s behaviors in class. You can also review the [NYC Discipline Code](#), which contains information on supports and interventions schools must provide your child, and explains the standards for behavior in New York City public schools. It describes support, interventions, and disciplinary responses that schools can use when students’ are experiencing behavioral challenges. It also explains how you can appeal decisions you do not agree with. It can be helpful to discuss these standards of behavior with your child at home.
- ▶ **The school should notify you if they use a physical or mechanical restraint on your child, or if a student is placed in a time-out room.** You must be notified within 24 hours if the school places your child in a time-out room or uses a restraint on your child. A restraint can be anything that restricts your child’s ability to move, including holding them with their arms, or using a restraint such as handcuffs or Velcro restraints on your child.



If your child’s school does any of following, reach out to AFC’s Helpline for support: (866) 427-6033

RESOURCE:

Learn more in [AFC’s Guide to School Discipline](#)

- ▶ The school should **NOT** request **School Safety Agent** or police assistance to manage your child’s behavioral or mental health issues or discipline your child.
- ▶ The school should **NOT** call 911 when your child has behavioral or mental health challenges in school unless it is a true emergency.
- ▶ The school should **NOT** refer a student to virtual learning because of their behavior in the classroom.

NOTE:

Students with IEPs have specific rights with regards to school discipline. Learn more in AFC’s fact sheet on [Discipline of Students with Disabilities](#).

Additional Resources

[Behavioral Intervention Guide](#)

This guide covers different approaches to student behavior, including prevention strategies, how to teach appropriate behaviors, tips for reinforcement, and much more. Developed by the [Vermont-NEA](#) (Union of Vermont Educators).

[Examples of Positive Behavioral Intervention Strategies \(PBIS\)](#)

Looking for more strategies to help your child with their IEP goals? This document, developed by the [PACER Center](#), includes information on PBIS and what could work best with your child.

[National Center on Intensive Interventions](#)

This website includes tools to support the implementation of intensive intervention in behavior, reading, and math for students.

[NYC DOE Find a School Website](#)

<https://schoolsearch.schools.nyc/>

[NYC DOE Mental Health Website](#)

<https://www.schools.nyc.gov/school-life/health-and-wellness/mental-health>

[Positive, Proactive Approaches to Supporting the Needs of Children with Disabilities: A Guide for Stakeholders](#)

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