A Teacher's Guide to IDEA: Supporting Students with Disabilities



Reviewed by Alyson Lewis

Working with children with disabilities might seem like a challenge, but it can also be an incredible gift. Not only do these students contribute to the classroom, but they also help their peers and teachers grow. Students can learn patience and empathy, and educators can strengthen their skills and add to their teaching strategy toolboxes.

Unfortunately, most teachers aren't adequately trained in working with special education students, as the majority of teacher preparation programs require few special education courses. While each student's needs will be different, and disability alone doesn't define a learner, it's important to have a basic understanding of various disabilities and how you can work with students who have them. This guide serves as a starting point for you to navigate the waters of serving students with special needs.

Important Terms to Know

Before jumping into the guide, you may find it helpful to review the following terminology.

Individuals with Disabilities Act

IDEA is the U.S. law that mandates all children with disabilities receive free and appropriate public education to meet their learning and educational needs.

Individual Education Program

EPs are educational roadmaps for students who use a school's special education services. They're created by a team made up of school staff and a student's parent(s), guardian(s), or other educational decision-maker(s). They're unique to each student to ensure the individual learner is receiving what they need to succeed in the classroom. IEPs are revised yearly to meet a student's changing needs. Teachers are legally required to meet the requirements of the IEPs.

504 Plans

"504s" (named for Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973) are for students with needs not covered by IDEA. These include temporary or permanent mental or physical health problems that require few to no services from special education teachers. Like IEPs, these plans require that the school makes appropriate accommodations regarding learning environments, instruction, and curricula to ensure that the students thrive. The document is legally binding.

Accommodations and modifications

Though often used interchangeably, these two terms don't mean the same thing. According to Understood.org, "An accommodation changes *how* a student learns the material. A modification changes *what* a student is taught or expected to learn." For example, when taking a vocabulary test, a student needing accommodation may be allowed to take a large-print version of the complete exam. In contrast, a student needing modification may only be required to learn half of the vocabulary words.

Inclusion

Inclusion is simply ensuring an environment where all students are welcome, accepted, and supported in the general education classroom.

Pull-out services

These are special education services provided outside the general education classroom, with a special education teacher or

specialist working one-on-one or with a smaller group of students. These services are provided with peers who are also identified, with no general education peers involved.

Push-in services
These services, which are also called inclusive education, are provided within the general education classroom environment. Teachers teach both special needs students and their general education peers in the same classroom, using the student's IEP to guide instruction. General education instructors collaborate or consult with the child's SPED teacher to ensure they're meeting the students' needs. Student's IEPs often include a combination of pull-out and push-in services.

Types of Special Education Teachers

Though there are special education teachers who work with students in a variety of areas—including all of the 13 below—they tend to fall into two basic categories: resource teachers and center-based teachers. Resource teachers' students typically spend a great deal of time in general education settings and receive supports as needed based on their IEPs; these students fit more under the "push-in" category above. Center-based teachers generally work with students who need more time in the special education classroom itself, i.e., "pull-out" expectations. You'll likely encounter both types of teachers during your career.

The 13 IDEA-Recognized Disabilities and How to Help Diagnosed Students

The IDEA of 2004 has defined 13 categories of disability covered by special education services and IEPs for learners in the public school system. This doesn't mean there are no other kinds of disabilities; however, such challenges are often covered through 504 plans or standard classroom differentiation.

Below, you can find information about each of these 13 categories, along with recommended best practices a classroom teacher can use with students who have these diagnoses. Keep in mind, however, that *best practices aren't necessarily the best options for every student*. The most important things you can do are implement the IEPs—which you're legally required to use—and communicate with the child's special education teacher and support team. Don't be afraid to ask for help!

1. Autism

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder impacting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interactions. Because the range of indicators is so broad, Autism is described as a spectrum. As of 2018, around one in 59 children had an Autism diagnosis. Children are typically diagnosed between the ages of two and four—though the American Academy of Pediatrics suggests screening for Autism and other challenges as early as 18 months.

As ASD is a spectrum, the indicators vary widely and might be subtle in some cases. Common signs include challenges with typical social situations (e.g., lack of eye contact, not responding to direct interaction, misunderstanding common social cues), repetitive behaviors, and unusual reactions to changes in schedule or expectations.

The Organization for Autism Research (OAR) recommends these five support strategies in working effectively with ASD students:

Tips for Teaching Students with Autism

Prime your student for activities.
This involves providing an overview of what subjects and topics you'll be covering ahead of time. You should also alert them to changes like fire drills before they occur, even if they're supposed to be surprises to students at large. Preparation helps reduce anxiety and allows the student to prepare mentally.

Employ academic modifications.
These modifications are deemed necessary by the student's IEP to ensure they have what they need to thrive academically.

Create a "home base."
Setting up space in your classroom or somewhere else in the school, away from other students and distractions, as a "home base" may help your student cope with challenges. There, they can "regain control" when they're experiencing high levels of stress.

Provide visual supports.
By presenting materials and schedules visually, your students can see where the content is going and have some sense of control of their learning experience. Visuals can include the day's schedule, agendas, labels for materials, and content-tracking charts.

Give positive reinforcement.
Positive reinforcement of productive behaviors encourages positive momentum and growth. This involves praising specific actions such as using listening skills and keeping on task.

2. Deaf-Blindness

Deaf-blind students have simultaneous hearing and visual impairments that impact their ability to access the general education curricula. These students may otherwise be fully capable of achieving grade-level or above success, so accommodations and modifications are imperative. Not all children with deaf-blindness will have complete vision or hearing loss, though they may. But, both senses must be impaired for them to fit under this category. According to the National Center on Deaf-Blindness, just under 10,000 children in the United States live with this disability. While there isn't an average age of diagnosis, hearing and vision tests begin at birth, and pediatricians perform regular checkups as children age.

Indicators for hearing loss include not responding or reacting to sounds or voices. Signs for sight loss include children not following the motions of other people, holding objects close to their faces, and squinting and/or adjusting their heads as if they're trying to focus on something.

The Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired and TTAC Online highlight ways to support your deaf-blind students in the class, including the following:

Tips for Teaching Students with Deaf-Blindness

Create a safe classroom.
Ensure there is ample space between desks and remove any potential tripping hazards. Instruct all students to keep items off the floor and pick up any materials after use. Once you've introduced your student to their space, don't make changes if possible—and, if alterations are required, re-introduce them to the room.

Create methods of communication.
By creating means of communication understood by both you and your student (e.g., a different number of taps for "yes" and "no" and physical symbols for numbers), you have a basis on which you can communicate lessons.

Make lessons tactile and hands-on.
Use tangible objects and employ gestures to create a tactile learning environment.

Incorporate visuals.
As not all students with deaf-blindness may experience total blindness, visuals can be key for those with significant hearing loss. Make sure they're created according to the students' needs, such as ensuring the visuals are larger than usual or include clear outlines.

3. Developmental Delay

IDEA recognizes interventions for children with developmental delays only between the ages of three and nine. Children are said to have developmental delays when they don't reach their designated milestones in cognitive, social and emotional, speech and language, fine and gross motor, and daily activity skills on time. These delays go beyond "falling behind." Remember, only doctors can diagnose developmental delays, especially as developmental milestones are averages, not universalities.

While the meanings behind developmental delays and developmental disabilities are similar, the latter indicates longer-term or life-long challenges. Interventions for a child with developmental *delays* might assist that child in catching up to the typical developmental milestones. In contrast, developmental *disabilities* will likely be reclassified as a different sort of disability by the time the child "ages out" of the developmental delays range. It's federally required that an IEP re-evaluation occurs before the child's 10th birthday to ensure the team has time to decide if the child will make progress or catch up with peers or will need an IEP for a long-term issue. The team will determine which new exceptionality, if any, the student will qualify under.

According to the 2017 Annual Disability Statistics Compendium, in 2016, the number of children with developmental delays served under IDEA was 153,391. Children can be diagnosed with a developmental delay as early as 18 months, though diagnosis often happens a bit later.

Because developmental delays aren't all created equal, there are different accommodations and interventions required for the various delays. To know exactly how to work with a child's needs, you also need to understand their challenges. Scholastic and Understood highlight ways you can work with children with developmental delays:

Tips for Teaching Students with Developmental Delays

Create opportunities for play.
Both unguided and guided playtimes are essential for building skills. Playing with other children, especially on the playground, and engaging in tactile activities encourages the development of gross motor, communication and language, and social skills. Examples include using hide-and-seek as a means for kids to practice using their direction and creating games with simple instructions for children with language delays.

Use visuals.
Because children with developmental delays might have a harder time remembering what you tell them or understanding written materials, it's important to use visuals to further explain topics. Additionally, visuals such as diagrams or charts (e.g., a visual description of how to wash hands) are helpful ways to remind kids about what to do or what they learned.

Know when to bring in specialists.
If you don't see much progress in an area, it's crucial to tap into the knowledge and experience of specialists such as speech-language pathologists or occupational therapists—many of whom are employed by schools or districts.

4. Emotional Disturbance

Children with emotional disturbances experience adverse educational effects due to mental health challenges. According to the 2017 Annual Disability Statistics Compendium, in 2016, the number of children with emotional disturbances served under IDEA was 333,434.

Because "emotional disturbance" is an umbrella term including a variety of disorders, there isn't one typical age for diagnosis. They may be problems the child has experienced from a young age with no external reason, or they could be caused by trauma. Indicators include displaying aggressive behavior, lacking empathy, disrupting activities, struggling with concentration, having inexplicable physical illnesses or fears, and difficulty complying with rules or social norms. Though teachers can't diagnose children, they can communicate their concerns to parents and, if they desire support in this conversation, school counselors or psychologists.

Both the National Science Teaching Association (NSTA) and the National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET) suggest the following interventions:

Tips for Teaching Students with Emotional Disturbances

Create a safe environment.
Caroline E. Guardino and Elizabeth Fullerton of the Council for Exceptional children suggest you use physical space to decrease opportunities for disruptive behaviors. Examples include creating a specific, comforting space for students who need to decompress, delineating places for group activities and personal work, and adjusting lighting and airflow to modify the mood of the classroom.

Allow students to weigh in on their progress.
By involving the student in their learning and understanding their behaviors, you can work with them toward growth. For example, you can ask the student about their strengths and build on those. You can also involve the student in developing a plan for appropriate consequences for certain behaviors.

Reinforce and model good behavior.
Positive reinforcement is essential for all students, but particularly for those with emotional disturbances. You need to be direct and clear when you model positive behaviors, as well as when giving praise—tell students *precisely* what they're doing well, rather than a generic "good job." While you'll need to reinforce rules consistently, it's vital to reward more often than you issue consequences.

5. Hearing Impairment (Including Deafness)

Hearing impairment refers to a lessened ability to hear, and deafness involves significant or near-complete loss of hearing. Two to three out of every 1,000 children are diagnosed with hearing loss in one or both ears, usually between 14 months and three years old.

While there are many potential accommodations for students with hearing impairments, here are some overall suggestions:

Tips for Teaching Students with Hearing Impairments or Deafness

Include all the senses.
Because so much of teaching happens verbally, this may require re-thinking old habits. Make sure you're creating visual, interactive, and tactile lessons that engage hearing-impaired students.

Switch up your classroom.
Arrange seats so all students can see each other and ensure your face is completely visible to the student. Face the class when you talk, and if you have facial hair, consider shaving so students can read your lips.

Ensure easy accessibility.
Bring in relevant technology whenever possible, use videos with captions, and create written materials. Additionally, allow your students to record lectures and give additional time for processing materials. If a student has a microphone that connects to a hearing aid, make sure you get the device from them every day. At the college level, the school's learning assistance department may pay a student scribe for their notes and pass them on to a hearing-impaired student.

Support the sign language (ASL) interpreter.
This can be a daunting task for teachers, particularly those with no ASL training. Ensure the classroom is structured so that the interpreter can easily be seen by the student and collaborate with them to find solutions. They will likely know the best ways to accommodate the student.

6. Intellectual Disability

A child diagnosed with an intellectual disability displays two primary indicators: challenges with intellectual functioning and difficulties with adaptive behavior, i.e., the ability to perform everyday tasks and social interactions. These initially appear during the developmental period, so students with developmental delays may be recategorized as having intellectual disabilities once they turn 10, if not before. As of 2016, 1.19% of children ages three to 17 were diagnosed with an intellectual disability. Due to the all-encompassing nature of the term, there is no typical age of diagnosis.

Early indicators look like developmental delays, including severe delays in language development and physical functioning. Additionally, children show an inability to perform everyday functions, such as personal care, social and work skills, and keeping themselves safe.

As the Center for Parent Information & Resources (CPIR) notes, children with intellectual disabilities should be involved in the general education curriculum but supported by appropriate accommodations and modifications per the their IEP. CPIR has some concrete tips for teachers to ensure they're helping their students with intellectual disabilities, including the following:

Tips for Teaching Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Learn about your student's disability.
By having a deeper understanding of your student's needs, you'll have a better grasp of how to work with them. Research independently, ask their special education teacher questions, and speak to their parents about things that help or hinder their child's success.

Begin with your student's strengths.
All children have strengths, so find out what they're good at and build on those skills.

Integrate life skills into their learning.
Students with intellectual disabilities have challenges performing everyday tasks, so work with them on building those skills in the classroom. This could include adapting to the daily classroom routine, using the bathroom, and personal safety.

Adapt your teaching methods.
Because giving verbal instructions alone may not be helpful for children with intellectual disabilities, provide visual aids and materials for lessons.

7. Multiple Disabilities

"Multiple disabilities" refers to "concomitant" conditions—that is, a combination of conditions including concurrent developmental, physical, cognitive, and/or learning disabilities; this doesn't include deaf-blindness. As of 2017, 124,544 children served under IDEA had multiple disabilities. As the diagnoses vary, there is no typical age of diagnosis—though, like all other potential challenges, doctors recommend regular visits beginning in infancy so that problems can be recognized as early as possible.

Students with multiple disabilities may have many needs and will likely need additional instruction and support. However, general education teachers can do a lot for these students by creating a supportive and welcoming environment per students' IEPs. While there are numerous strategies for working with these students (and the Center for Parent Information & Resources, Project IDEAL, and VeryWell Family have some extensive lists of ideas), here are a few places to start:

Tips for Teaching Students with Multiple Disabilities

Start with strengths.
When you build on what students can already do well, you create opportunities for success. For instance, if a student is a good artist, you can let them use their art to help explain ideas or as a foundation for written assignments.

Use assistive technology.
Tools like handheld computers can be incredibly helpful in displaying visuals for the lessons and providing students with the opportunity to gain independence.

Include students in all activities.
While students might not be able to participate in the same ways as their classmates, accommodated or modified participation is possible. Create and adapt activities so their involvement is smoothly integrated.

Encourage and support independence.
While it sometimes seems easier to do things for your students with multiple disabilities—especially since they may take longer for them to complete tasks than their peers—they should perform activities on their own as much as possible. This especially includes everyday tasks many of us take for granted.

8. Orthopedic Impairment

Children with orthopedic impairments have disabilities of the bones, muscles, or joints impeding their educational performance. In 2017, 35,929 children served under IDEA had orthopedic impairments. Assessments begin during early developmental checks, but there is no typical age of diagnosis. Even though this impairment is under the umbrella of special education because of IDEA, students with orthopedic impairments don't necessarily have any difficulty with learning itself. They need physical assistance to allow for learning.

Because orthopedic impairments are physical, some indicators might be more evident than others, such as loss of limbs, unsteady gait, or paralysis. But some physical differences—such as muscle spasms or poor muscle control—are subtler and might be harder to detect. In some cases, speech could also be affected by orthopedic impairments.

For students with orthopedic impairments, you need to make physical accommodations based on their specific needs. VeryWell Family, Project IDEAL, and the National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET) provide comprehensive tips, but here are some considerations to take into account:

Tips for Teaching Students with Orthopedic Impairments

Adapt seating arrangements.
Create a physical environment where your students can easily move around the room. At the administrative level, this may also require thinking about the entire school. The specific needs may differ for physical conditions, but examples include creating enough space between all desks for wheelchairs to move and considering the student's need for different seating postures.

Include technology.
Identify adaptive technologies that can help students gain independence in learning, such as specialized desks, speech recognition software, and personal computers or tablets with assistive software.

Teach lessons involving fine motor skills.
You can help your students become more independent by integrating experiences that include using fine motor skills such as drawing or manipulating small objects.

9. Other Health Impairment

Other health impairments include chronic or acute health problems that affect a student's educational performance by impacting strength, alertness, or vitality. A total of 910,699 children with other health impairments were served under IDEA in 2017, and the age of diagnosis varies as each condition behaves differently. Like orthopedic impairments, other health impairments under IDEA

don't necessarily mean students struggle with learning itself—some students do, but others need medical accommodations alone—for the latter, they may be issued a 504 instead of an IEP.

Many challenges fall under this category, including diabetes, asthma, ADHD, and heart conditions. Because the list of potential health impairments is so long, the indicators differ from condition to condition. Some general signs are changes in wakefulness and strength, having a heightened amount of energy in comparison to their peers, and frequent complaints of not feeling well.

Tips for Teaching Students with Health Impairments

Educate yourself.
While some conditions could require minor accommodations like the freedom to use the restroom when needed, others could be life-threatening if not addressed appropriately. While the student's plan will guide your accommodations, you should independently learn how to recognize signs of potential medical episodes or note when a child may be acting out because they forgot to take a medication. Additionally, knowing your student's medication needs, who administers them, and how they're administered helps you ensure your student remains healthy in school.

Be flexible.
This goes hand in hand with educating yourself about your students' conditions. Create time and space for the student to take breaks to restore energy, take their medication, have a medically necessary snack, or visit the school health office when needed.

Prepare for home-based learning and transitions to class.
Because students with significant health challenges could experience extended homebound periods, planning for distance learning activities can keep them on the same academic path as their peers. Additionally, because they will hopefully return to class, create transition plans for them.

10. Specific Learning Disability

Usually simply referred to as a learning disability or learning disorder, "specific learning disability" is an umbrella term for a variety of neurological disorders adversely affecting the way a person learns. These most commonly include problems with reading, writing, and math, but they can be the cause of other challenges in school.

As of 2017, 2,281,197 children with specific learning disabilities were served under IDEA. The American Psychiatric Association estimates 5% to 15% of school-aged children have learning disabilities, and 80% of those are reading disorders or dyslexia. Many conditions could fall under this category, including dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, and auditory processing disorder; therefore, there is no typical age for diagnosis. The Learning Disabilities Association of America provides details about the specific disorders under this category.

It can be hard to tell if a student has a learning disability or just struggles in a particular subject. This is one of the reasons learning disabilities can go undetected until a child is older—even into adulthood. Some indicators the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NIH) highlights include consistent problems with reading, writing, or math (not necessarily all together), trouble paying attention, difficulty with organization, consistent low school performance, and poor memory. Some other non-academic indicators can manifest through behaviors including impulsiveness, not listening to instructions, and difficulty handling schedules or changes.

Early interventions can make a huge difference for students with learning disabilities. Teachers should, of course, adhere strictly to the student's IEP and approach the student with respect and empathy. Some best practices for teachers working with students with learning disabilities by VeryWell Family and LD Online include these tips:

Tips for Teaching Students with Specific Learning Disabilities

Communicate clearly.
You may have to be even more direct and clear than you would normally. For example, you should explain why a lesson matters, show examples of quality work, and provide guidance about how you assess assignments.

Connect with the student.
Focus on the learner before the curriculum. For the student to feel safe and able to work, they need to trust and feel connected to you. You can do this by providing specific positive feedback, showing an interest in what they care about (even television shows or toys), and demonstrating care and attentiveness.

Create lessons appealing to all learning styles.
Students learn in different ways. Creating curricula that engage all the senses and learning styles can help all students, especially those with learning disabilities, engage with the material.

11. Speech or Language Impairment

Speech or language impairments are communication disorders wherein the child has trouble speaking or communicating and includes language or voice impairments, stuttering, and difficulty with articulation. Approximately 7.7% of children in the U.S. ages three to 17 have a speech or language impairment, and they're often diagnosed before the age of three.

CPIR states that the three main indicators of a speech or language impairment manifest through fluency, voice, and language development. Impairments in fluency, or flow of language, usually appear through halting or stilted language. Voice impairments are issues with voice production indicated by differences in pitch, volume, or the quality of their voice. Language impairments refer to how a child processes and understands meaning, manifesting in challenges with vocabulary, inability to follow directions, or the improper use of words.

Most children with a speech or language impairment receive support from a speech-language pathologist (SLP). However, most of the time, your student will be in the general education classroom, and you can do a lot to support them. Here are some strategies based on tips from CPIR and Project IDEAL:

Tips for Teaching Students with Speech or Language Impairments

Consult the experts.
Work with your student's SLP and special education teacher to understand their specific needs and get resources and tips on activities.

Learn about the impairment.
Knowing more about your student's impairment helps you understand how it affects your student's ability to learn. Between doing your research and referring to your student's IEP, you'll have a foundation about how to employ accommodations.

Use assistive technology.
There are software programs that help develop speech and language, as well as those that literally help students communicate—they can type, and the device will "speak." Only use these as recommended by students' IEPs and special education teachers.

12. Traumatic Brain Injury

Traumatic brain injuries (TBIs) are injuries caused by "external physical force" to the head, including being hit, shaken, or experiencing a fall. These injuries can cause changes in behavior, movement, and the way students process information. As of 2017, 25,136 children with TBIs were served under IDEA. There is no typical age of diagnosis because TBIs result from external

events. As early intervention is essential, if a student hits their head with any real force during class, you must seek medical attention for them—even if they say they feel fine. Make sure to record the incident and contact parents as well.

A significant sign of a TBI is if a child is acting differently than they did before an injury. They may display challenges with memory, reasoning skills, and attention span. Additionally, they might exhibit behavioral changes, becoming more erratic, moody, or impulsive, among other signs.

A TBI occurs unexpectedly. Teachers must help the student and their peers adapt to the new reality, as well as work with parents, specialists, and administration on developing an IEP as soon as possible. Some other tips highlighted by CPIR and Project IDEAL include the following:

Tips for Teaching Students with Traumatic Brain Injuries

Plan the student's return to school.
While not all students will miss school due to a head injury, many will be absent—possibly for a significant amount of time. Because both the injured student and their peers will likely attempt to behave as they did before the TBI occurred, it's important to prepare everyone. Work with the parents and your injured student before their return to school to discuss accommodations, modifications, and resources. Additionally, coach their classmates by having discussions around TBI and what this means for their friend's return.

Meet your student where they're at.
Understand what your student can do and adapt your work accordingly. For example, if your student is having trouble with multi-step instructions, start with just the first step and take the rest one at a time.

Create consistent routines.
By keeping routines, students can have a sense of control, especially when their lives may have changed drastically and suddenly.

Be flexible and patient.
A sudden change in one student's needs isn't just difficult for them, but for you as well—both emotionally and in terms of modifying curricula. Be patient with the student and celebrate even the smallest successes. Adjust and be flexible with your expectations for them and yourself.

13. Visual Impairment (Including Blindness)

Visual impairments affect a person's ability to see. While this includes complete blindness, it also refers to people who have partial sight and other vision difficulties. There were 568,202 children with vision impairments in the U.S. as of 2017, according to the American Foundation for the Blind. The age of diagnosis often depends on the cause. For example, Prevent Blindness says Amblyopia, often called "lazy eye," is discovered between six months and six years of age, while Strabismus (misalignment of the eyes) is usually found in children under six. For Refractive Errors (blurry vision because of how light refracts in the eye), the diagnosis ages vary.

Physical signs a child might have a visual impairment include crossed eyes, pupils of uneven sizes, and eyes moving around erratically. Other indicators are increased clumsiness, frequent blinking, squinting, and holding objects close to their face.

While individual support will be based on the IEP, an overarching practice is to ensure children with visual impairments are included in the classroom as much as possible. Remember, many students with visual impairments will not have other learning challenges, so they can often study the same materials as the rest of the class—just with accommodations. CPIR and Danene K. Fast provide some great tips, including the following:

Tips for Teaching Students with Visual Impairments or Blindess

Arrange the classroom to accommodate the student.
This could include ensuring they're close to the front of the room and creating a desk setup that is easily navigable and predictable. Once you've created the best physical arrangements for your student, don't change them, and ensure other students keep the space clean and free of tripping hazards.

Emphasize listening skills for all students in the class.
As Danene K. Fast of The Ohio State University points out, visually impaired students likely won't pick up on nonverbal cues those with full sight take for granted. Encourage all students in the class to speak and listen effectively. Don't point out the needs of the child with vision impairments; instead, generally reinforce these skills.

Start with your student's strengths.
Understand what your student's strengths are and what mediums play to those strengths. Challenge your visually impaired students the way you would all students in the class by using the methods that best suit their learning.

Be creative with your resources.
Utilize adaptive technology or seek out reading materials in Braille to provide your vision-impaired students with the same content as their peers, as directed by their IEPs.

Resources for Teachers of Students with Learning Disabilities

There are many resources out there about students with disabilities. Here are a few with comprehensive information for most, if not all, of the 13 IDEA-recognized disabilities.

Center for Parent Information & Resources: While geared toward parents, this site has excellent resources for teachers who want to understand different disabilities.

Individuals with Disabilities Act: This site lays out the specific legal definitions and information about the act and each disability.

National Association of Special Education Teachers: As the national professional organization for SPED teachers, their site offers resources including robust online guidance and information on different disabilities, publications, and tools for classroom use.

Project IDEAL: Project IDEAL (Informing and Designing Education for All Learners) is a professional development resource for teachers that provides both comprehensive online information about teaching children with disabilities and online training modules.

Understood: This organization provides networking opportunities, educational resources, and advocacy for people with differences.

Meet the Expert



Alyson Lewis

Alyson has a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education, and her master's degree is in Functional Special Education. Alyson taught in the classroom for eight years as Special Education teacher for students with significant and severe disabilities. Alyson is currently a high school vocational teacher who helps students with disabilities transition from school services to life after high school.