

IEPs understood: A journey, not a destination

Parents often mistakenly believe that getting their child an Individualized Education Program is their final destination. But it's just one milestone on a long journey.

Qualitative research with families of children who learn and think differently, at different points of the journey

What is an IEP?

An Individualized Education Program, or IEP, is a legally binding document used in U.S. public schools. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that schools develop IEPs for students who need special education services. The IEP describes the instruction, supports, and services that a specific child will receive.

How common are IEPs?

In the 2022–23 school year, about 7.5 million U.S. public school students had IEPs. That's about 15% of students. The percentage varies by state, with a low of 12% and a high of 21% ([NCES, 2024](#)). The total number has been steadily climbing for the last 10 years, with the exception of a slight dip during the COVID-19 pandemic ([Schaeffer, 2023](#)).

Among students with IEPs, almost one-third (32%) qualify based on having a specific learning disability, such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, or dyscalculia ([NCES, 2024](#)).



Families are often unprepared for the IEP process

Many parents face significant barriers along the way. They often have gone through years of uncertainty. They've watched and waited, wondering if their child's challenges were just a phase. Or if they were doing something wrong as parents. They may have had a hard time finding someone who could identify their child's challenges. Then they went through evaluations and the long process of finally getting their child's first IEP. They've jumped through hoop after hoop. Understandably, getting this first document is a moment of relief for parents and their children to get answers and support.

Getting an IEP is one milestone on a long journey. Once a child has an IEP, parents still have work to do to make sure the IEP is the best it can be. For instance, an IEP must be re-evaluated every year – or even more often. Parents new to the process may not realize that they can schedule an IEP meeting at any point. They also need to:

- Monitor their child's progress and performance
- Stay in touch with school staff
- Make sure the supports and services laid out in the IEP are being implemented
- Keep track of paperwork
- Have potentially difficult conversations with their child about school challenges and accommodations

All of this takes a lot of commitment.

Why this matters

If parents are more aware of the IEP process and their rights, it's easier for them to work with the school. Their child will get the support they need more quickly. Then they can make progress and start building on this early success.

Our approach

As part of resource and product development, Understood routinely conducts qualitative research. We've interviewed around 500 parents since 2020 – parents of kids who learn and think differently and parents who are on their IEP journey. While the specific topics may vary, we've accumulated a wealth of knowledge about how the IEP process impacts parents and their kids.

Two specific studies contributed a bulk of these insights:

- Understood's qualitative research with parents specific to IEPs¹
- Understood's 12-month longitudinal parent study, completed in 2025²

Here's what we found.

The IEP is a living document, not a box to check off

A false finish line

We spoke to parents whose child had recently gotten an IEP, as well as parents who were more experienced and looking back on those early days. And we noticed a trend: the afterglow effect.

These parents had overcome multiple hurdles to get their child this far in the process. They'd navigated complex school systems. They'd learned about their child's differences. They'd advocated for their child's needs — often experiencing friction with school staff. And they finally had an IEP in place. The relief and sense of accomplishment that came with this victory often led parents to believe that the hard work was over.

[The school] wouldn't even have mentioned an IEP with me had I not called and wanted to talk to the psychologist. She's the one that mentioned it to me and I was grateful for it ... he needs something individualized, because he is definitely different from the norm. So, it took so long. It took years for them to even mention it.¹

— Parent

The long-term work

However, parents soon realize that the IEP must be continually reviewed. Parents need to be vigilant about making sure it's being followed. This ongoing responsibility, along with other challenges, can persist years into their child's experience with an IEP. The work and advocacy continue far beyond the initial success of securing the IEP.

You have to research and really figure out what you need. I still research every time I have a meeting, because his academic needs are changing, and he's changing, so I still have to go about and research. And no, it's not always clear [if the school has implemented requested supports].¹

— Parent

One milestone

It's easy to see the IEP as the finish line. But in reality, it's just one milestone along the way. And parents must run the IEP circuit at least annually.

All the while, they need to keep in mind that what worked last year — or even last semester — might not cut it now. Kids grow. Their challenges shift. Every new teacher has a different teaching style. School transitions bring new expectations. Social dynamics evolve. The IEP needs to keep up with these changes if it's going to keep serving the child well.

I do have my annual meeting coming up. You know, as he gets older it gets harder; so we'll see what else he might need. Just academically wise as you get into high school, it gets more difficult.¹

— Parent

Hard-earned lessons along the way

Parents need to stay involved.

The IEP isn't just a box to check off once a year. It's a living document that needs to evolve as a child's needs change. Parents, who know their child best, need to stay involved — not just when it's time for the annual meeting, but throughout the school year. It's important not to assume that the school is monitoring the IEP's implementation or effectiveness closely enough.

- Schools aren't always quick to suggest updates unless a parent pushes for them.
- Teachers may not notice when accommodations are no longer effective or when specific needs aren't being met. This is especially true if resources are limited or if teachers lack training in how to support students with learning differences.
- Small gaps in implementation can quickly snowball into larger issues. This can happen if no one is making sure the supports in place are still appropriate — or if they're being followed at all.

One parent shared that after her child's performance improved, teachers mistakenly believed her child no longer needed accommodations. The supports were stopped. This led to a drop in performance. In reality, her child's improvement had been directly tied to the accommodations. Without them, her child was unable to perform at the same level.

[The school and I] spoke months ago. They said, “Oh, wow, he’s getting good grades ... we’re so proud of you.” It was more of cheering him on. Then they actually took back some of the supports originally listed on his IEP. They said they are taking away the full-on notes support. His level of support on his IEP went from 80% to 50% to 20% because he was ... getting straight A’s. He was doing really well.²

— Parent

IEP meetings can be tough.

The more involved parents are in the IEP process, the better it can help their child succeed. But the IEP meetings where decisions are made can be overwhelming and anxiety-provoking. The technical language and complexity often make it difficult for parents to understand what’s being decided and why. The documents themselves are often full of jargon and difficult to digest.

Even experienced parents run into challenges. Our research with parents whose child had an IEP for three years or more showed that no matter how familiar parents were with the process, IEP meetings could still be frustrating and unpredictable. But the more experience they had, the more they understood:

- They knew how much persistence it takes to keep an IEP working.
- They had a better understanding of their rights — like that they don’t have to wait for the annual IEP meeting to raise concerns.

When parents stay engaged and advocate for their child, they’re helping ensure that the IEP provides the support their child needs to make progress.

In sum

Securing an IEP is an important milestone. But it doesn't mean a parent's work is over. Staying engaged over time helps make sure the plan keeps up with a child's changing needs. School environments shift, expectations evolve, and what worked last year may not be a good fit anymore. It's important that parents understand their rights, keep track of implementation, and speak up for adjustments when needed. While the process can be challenging, parents who stay involved often find that their persistence pays off in real, lasting benefits for their child.

How we're acting on this

[Understood.org](#) offers a variety of free resources to support parents, educators, and children on their IEP journey. A few are listed here. We encourage you to explore further.

- On our [IEP topic page](#), find basic definitions, learn about the IEP process, get tips for keeping up with a child's IEP, and more.
- *Understood Explains* is a [podcast series](#) that goes through the ins and outs of IEPs with Juliana Urtubey, the 2021 National Teacher of the Year.
- Our downloadable [binder checklist](#) helps parents keep their IEP documents organized.
- We also offer a [toolkit for teachers](#) to help them navigate the IEP process.
- We offer resources in response to the rapidly evolving news cycle around [education policy change](#).

For more information

We'd love to discuss this research with you, hear about your research, and partner with you on new research. Reach out at knowledge@understood.org.



Methodology

¹Understood.org IEP research

Understood conducted 10 virtual in-depth interviews with parents of children who learn and think differently. Each interview lasted about one hour. Participants were divided into two groups: five parents whose children had an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for two years or less, and five whose children had an IEP for over three years. This allowed us to gather insights from both newer and more experienced parents in the IEP process. We hypothesized that parents with more experience would face different challenges, which was a key focus of the interviews.

[Conducted in 2023, select findings referenced here. Not published externally.]

²Understood.org Longitudinal Parent Research

Understood conducted a 12-month longitudinal study with approximately 11 parents through monthly qualitative virtual interviews, each lasting about one hour, from February 2024 to February 2025. Although this study was not specifically designed to explore the challenges related to the IEP process, it provided valuable insights that supported and expanded upon the primary research.

[Findings referenced here. Full study not published externally.]