

Optimizing the Autism Eligibility Process in Schools: A Team-Based Approach

Introduction

The purpose of this toolkit is to introduce a framework for engaging in team-based, family and student-centered autism evaluations that are data-focused and designed to identify the specific areas of educational impact to be targeted for intervention. This toolkit will progress through a series of five key steps, starting from the time a concern is first initiated by caregivers or a school team and ending with the development of the student's IEP. The information provided in this toolkit is intended to be used by members of the school team who are involved in the autism eligibility process.



The autism eligibility process is often emotionally taxing for caregivers and can be stressful and confusing for school teams. Given these experiences, caregivers and schools must work collaboratively throughout the evaluation process. Having a framework in which to conduct a school-based autism evaluation can be helpful in getting everyone on the same page and in gathering the most important information from all team members for determining eligibility. The process must be student-centered, focused on gathering information to describe the student's strengths and developmental differences.

A more detailed review of this material and additional resources can be found in the online version of this toolkit, which can be accessed by registering for a free account at [triad.vkclearning.org](https://www.comcast.com/triad/vkclearning.org) and accessing the information in the **School-Age Services** folder.



Step 1: Exploring Initial Concerns

The following are questions you want to be able to answer during the initial part of the process:

1	Is there sufficient evidence to warrant a referral for an evaluation for autism?
2	Does the student have any social communication/interaction challenges and/or restricted and repetitive interests/behaviors that are interfering with the student's access to the educational environment?
3	Are caregivers in agreement with the school?

During this step, school staff members gather informal observations as a team to identify a student's strengths and developmental differences in both social communication and restricted and repetitive interests and behaviors. This will determine whether a referral to the evaluation process is warranted. Once the initial observations have been gathered, contact the caregivers to schedule a **team meeting** to review the information and determine whether there is sufficient concern to initiate an evaluation for special education services.

Defining Adverse Impact

Especially when determining autism eligibility, it is essential to consider "educational" needs beyond academics to also include social, health, emotional, communicative, physical, and vocational skills. It is important to remember that these are often the areas most impacted for students with autism, which may not show itself in things like grades or test scores. If a student is not accessing the educational environment in the same way as his or her peers, adverse educational impact is present.

❑ What is a team meeting?

At the team meeting, the school staff reviews the information from their observations and gathers additional information from caregivers. The goal of this meeting is to get the school team and caregivers on the same page with the strengths and developmental differences observed across settings and to determine as a team whether the possibility of autism needs to be looked at further.

❑ Who should be present at the meeting?

Identify a small group of people who interact with the student regularly. Participants may include:

- The caregiver
- The child's general education classroom teacher
- A licensed special education teacher
- A licensed school psychologist
- A licensed Speech-language pathologist (SLP)
- Other professional personnel as needed (e.g., occupational therapist, physical therapist, licensed physician, neurologist, licensed nurse practitioner, physician's assistant, or school counselor).
- **TIP:** It is recommended that one member of the school's evaluation team be designated as a caregiver liaison to facilitate ongoing communication.

❑ Considerations

Before you talk to caregivers, understand that if the concern is initiated by the school, it is possible that caregivers have not considered the possibility of autism before now. It will be crucial to help the family understand the developmental differences and spectrum of behaviors encompassing autism.

❑ Deciding to Evaluate

If the team decides to evaluate, move to step 2 of this toolkit and initiate the evaluation process.

If the team decides not to evaluate or if there is a disagreement, use your best judgement on the best way to proceed (e.g., with caregiver consent, provide informal support to student to determine how student responds and set a time to reconvene, review progress, and determine next steps).

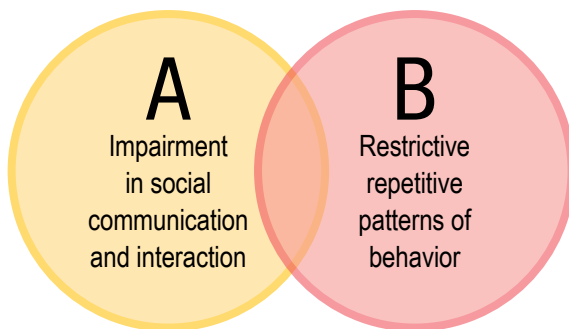
Step 2: The Evaluation Process: Gathering Information

The following are questions you want to be able to answer during the information gathering process:

1	Is there adverse educational impact?
2	Are we gathering information from caregivers that helps us understand the child's developmental differences over time?
3	In considering the classification of autism, are we approaching our data collection to best capture autism's unique presentation?
4	Are we gathering information in a way that will guide the development of IEP goals and effective interventions?

It is important to gather evaluation information in a way that leads us to the appropriate classification if eligibility is met. Think about what makes autism unique compared to other classifications.

Core Features of ASD



Diagnostic Criteria for Autism

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)

Assessment

There are different types of information gathered throughout the assessment process. We often tend to rely on quantitative information. However, for autism evaluations, the qualitative information gathered through interviews and structured observation is often crucial in making determinations with confidence.

Components of a Meaningful Interview

- Birth and Developmental History
- Infancy and Early Childhood
- Medical History
- Family History
- Educational History
- Behavioral and Mental Health History

Ways to Meaningfully Structure Observations for Autism Evaluations

Select relevant behaviors

Focus on those that directly impact the student's classroom performance rather than symptoms that will be assessed through direct testing. Examples include:

- Joint attention/ Shared enjoyment
- Dropped social bids
- Turn-taking in conversation
- Lack of social insight
- Initiations vs responses
- Quality of social overtures

Select the environment

Think about how to best use the requirement of observing in multiple environments. Especially with autism, presentation of certain behaviors may be highly specific to the following environmental factors:

- Adult-directed vs student-directed
- Structured activities vs unstructured
- Highly preferred activities vs non-preferred



For more information on how to maximize the use of observations and interviews or to download the "Caregiver Interview," "Unstructured Communication Observation," and "Assessment of Play and Social Skills" forms, visit the online version of this toolkit referenced on page one.

- **Utilize different professionals**

Ideally, these observations can be completed by professionals from different disciplines to get unique perspectives. It will be important to see if there are consistent themes across domains.

- **Create appropriate tools for data collection**

Take time to consider what kind of data will best capture the behaviors you want to observe.

- Frequency/ rate
- Interval/ Time-sampling
- Duration
- Latency

❑ **Direct Testing**

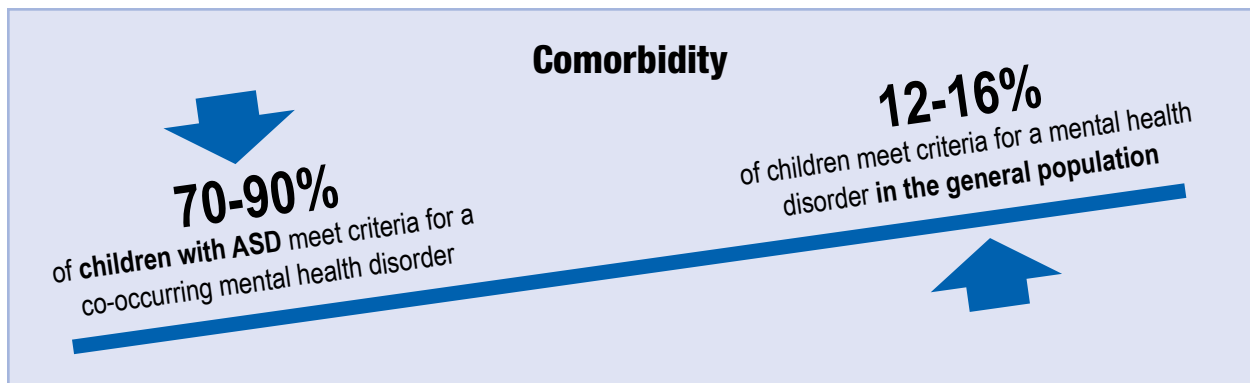
In addition to behavioral observations and structured or semi-structured interviews, a comprehensive psychoeducational battery should be performed by a multidisciplinary team. Professionals should use a variety of sources of information that are sensitive to cultural, linguistic, and environmental factors or sensory impairments. Please refer to your state's evaluation requirements when designing your batteries and consider including the gold standard autism measure, the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule, 2nd edition (ADOS-2) when possible.

STEP 3: School Team Meeting and Data Review

The following are questions you want to be able to answer during the data review process:

1	How did we differentiate between autism and other disorders during the assessment process?
2	Is the child eligible for special education services under the category of autism? If not, is he or she eligible under another category?
3	Does the child have any co-occurring mental health challenges that will need to be addressed?
4	How do we identify developmentally appropriate goals that reflect the student's areas of need and the caregivers' values?

You are now at a point when you can triangulate your data and look at information you've collected from all of your sources. Especially when autism is a consideration, these data should include a comprehensive picture of the student's current functioning and developmental history.





For key differential considerations between autism and intellectual disability, language impairment, ADHD, anxiety, OCD, and selective mutism, visit the online version of this toolkit referenced on page one.

Few evaluations are completely clear cut and oftentimes there are symptoms or challenges present that could be attributed to a number of possible classifications. As you are attempting to differentiate between autism and other classifications, it will be important to focus on what makes autism unique.

Once the evaluation is completed, an eligibility meeting is scheduled with the evaluation team to review the results and discuss whether or not the child qualifies for special education services.

- If the student is found eligible under the category of autism and/or another category... Proceed to Step 4 (Sharing Evaluation Results).
- If the student is not found eligible... Provide caregivers with a written explanation of why their child was not found eligible. As indicated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), they must also receive information about what they can do if they disagree with the school's findings.

Prior to Step 4, each school evaluation team member should identify three priority focus areas for the student.

Consider the following as you develop your goals:

- What is developmentally appropriate for the student?
- What is appropriate and expected for the student's grade level?
- What are the caregivers' values?
- What are the student's goals?

STEP 4: Sharing Evaluation Results

The following are questions you want to be able to answer during the process of sharing the evaluation results with the caregivers:

1	Do the caregivers understand and agree with the assessment results?
2	Do caregivers share the priority goals of the school? Do the caregivers have any additional goal areas they would like included?
3	Are caregivers prepared to be active participants in the IEP meeting?

After collecting and analyzing your data, it will be important to have some form of communication prior to the IEP meeting that is between the caregivers and select members of the school evaluation team who know the caregiver best. The purpose is not to make decisions regarding special education eligibility or classification category. It is solely intended to

- Review the evaluation results with caregivers,
- Prepare the caregivers for what to expect in the IEP meeting, and
- Share initial priority goal areas with the caregiver.

The goal of sharing the results beforehand is to give caregivers the information they need to be an active participant during the IEP meeting.

❑ Communicating about Eligibility

Keep the following points in mind when sharing the evaluation results with caregivers:

- **Be prepared.** Have a summary sheet ready for the caregivers with the testing results and a brief conceptualization.
- **Discuss strengths.** The caregivers need to understand that you saw a full picture of the student, not just their challenges.
- **Put challenges in context.** How are the student's challenges getting in the way of them being happy, active participants in school?
- **Be clear.** After you summarize the results of testing, be clear about the conclusion you have come to.
- **Encourage questions and input.** Ask a specific question to the caregivers allowing them to reflect on whether the team's description of the student's strengths and developmental differences match their perception of their student's current profile. If it doesn't, allow them time to explain what additional information could be included.
- **Send information.** Provide caregivers with information on the IEP process and how they can prepare for the meeting.



STEP 5: IEP Meeting

The following are questions you want to be able to answer during the process of creating the student's IEP with the caregivers:

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Do the student's individual goals address the areas of adverse educational impact identified through your assessment? |
| 2 | Do the proposed services specifically address the characteristics of autism that are impacting the student at school? |
| 3 | Are caregiver priorities reflected in the goals and services proposed for their student? |

The important part of this stage is making sure the autism-specific needs, and the environments in which they occur, are reflected within the goals you create and the supports you propose.

❑ Consider the following examples as ways we can include areas of impact into IEP goals:

- **Transition:** Consider focusing on appropriate transitioning with visual supports.
- **Recess:** Consider focusing on social skills during unstructured play (recess, choice time), such as participating, sharing, following directions/rules, taking turns with peers.
- **Lunch:** Consider focusing on peer initiation and response, either verbal or non-verbal.
- **Group instruction:** Consider focusing on following group expectations, such as maintaining personal space and using a respectful voice.
- **Independent Work:** Consider focusing not only on work completion, but appropriate ways to request help and a break.

**MORE
INFO**



For more detailed information and supplemental handouts to navigate Steps 4 and 5, visit the online version of this toolkit referenced on page one.

❑ **Consider the following tips when communicating with a family during the IEP process:**

- **TIP 1:** When sharing your impressions of the student's behavior, be sure to tie each behavior to a specific data source while continuously highlighting the student's strengths and the caregivers' input in the process. Discuss the different providers that have been involved in the assessment process and any consistencies (or inconsistencies) they are seeing.
- **TIP 2:** If the caregiver is upset about the autism classification or qualifying for special education, use your discretion based on your district's policies and the relationship with the family in determining how best to proceed. Try to identify if the concern stems from their student receiving special education services or if the concern is more directly related to an autism classification in deciding how to move forward.
- **TIP 3:** If there seems to be a large discrepancy between the family's perception of school-based service need and the information the school has gathered, it may be important to revisit aspects of this toolkit, such as your definition of educational impact, your approach to data collection, and the data sources used. If you feel you have captured an incomplete picture of the student's strengths and needs, you may need to gather additional information. It may also be helpful to provide the caregiver with a written list of informal supports and interventions within a multi-tiered system of supports being used to help their student be successful.



While this process may seem daunting, following a family-centered and team-based approach during the autism evaluation process can be helpful in getting everyone on the same page and in gathering the most important and relevant information for determining eligibility.

Resources

Visit triad.vkclearning.org for resources, information, and brief trainings related to autism spectrum disorder and evidence-based practices. Online trainings have been developed for educators and caregivers on topics including educational practices, mental health needs, and more.

This publication was authored by Liliana Wagner, PhD, LEND (Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities) and TRIAD (Treatment and Research Institute for Autism Spectrum Disorders) fellow; Whitney Loring, PsyD, Assistant Professor of Pediatrics and Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences, Assistant Director of Training, and TRIAD Families First Coordinator; and Verity Rodrigues, PhD, Instructor in Pediatrics, Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, and TRIAD Educational Consultant. We would like to thank Joanna Bivins, Ed.S., NCSP Director of School Psychology and Behavior Services, for her review and contribution.

This toolkit was edited, designed, and produced by the Dissemination and Graphics staff of the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities. This publication may be distributed as is or, at no cost. View more printable resources and materials online at: vkc.vumc.org

This project is supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) under grant number T73MC30767, Vanderbilt Consortium LEND. This information or content and conclusions are those of the authors and should not be construed as the official position or policy of, nor should any endorsements be inferred by HRSA, HHS or the U.S. Government. May 2019

