

What is the difference between an IFSP and an IEP?

My 2-year-old son has an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP). We are told that when he turns 3, he will have an Individualized Educational Program (IEP). What is the difference?

“The difference between the IFSP and the IEP is philosophical, in part,” said Judy Swett, PACER parent advocate.

“An IEP is an education document for children ages 3 to 21. It focuses on special education and related services in schools. An IFSP is much broader. It serves children from infancy through age 2, involves the family more, and includes professionals from several disciplines in planning for the child.

“An IFSP is based on an in-depth assessment of the child’s needs and the needs and concerns of the family. It contains 1) goals for the child; 2) services the child will receive to help him or her achieve the goals; and 3) how the family, with support from professionals, can help the child reach the goals.”

Swett adds that services available through the IFSP are usually provided in the child’s home. Changes in the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), however, state that services are to be provided in the child’s “natural environment.” This could include a child care setting, preschool or other community setting in which young

children without disabilities would typically be found.

An IFSP is a document or written plan. The term “IFSP” also refers to the process of determining what services a young child with disabilities needs. It uses an “interagency” approach by involving representatives of several agencies (usually education, health, and human services) and other resources that can help the child and family. A “service coordinator” is assigned to assist the child’s family through the IFSP process. The service coordinator convenes IFSP planning meetings after contacting professionals who should be involved in the child’s plan and others the family would like to attend the meeting. The main purpose of the IFSP meeting is to offer information and resources to the family and talk about their concerns. A planning meeting must also define each agency’s role and financial responsibility in the child’s plan.

Many school districts extend a child’s IFSP document past age 2, using it as an IEP. The interagency approach, required for children through age 2 by IDEA, ends in most states when a child turns 3 years old. Local school districts, working under state’s regulations, then take up management of the children’s IEPs.