



# Help Guides for Children with Behavior and Learning Challenges

State of Georgia



**GEORGIA<sup>TM</sup>**  
**APPLESEED**

*Center for Law & Justice*

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# Help Guides for Children with Behavior and Learning Challenges

## What are these guides? Who are they for?

These Help Guides are for parents and caregivers. They may also be helpful for teachers, advocates, and others concerned about school children with behavior or learning challenges. These children may have trouble following school rules and controlling strong feelings at school. They may have trouble learning what the school teaches.

Sometimes these troubles are caused by mental health issues, disabilities, trauma, or language challenges. Children with these challenges will succeed in school with the right help. These guides have information about how you can find that help at public schools and in your community.

## How do I use these guides?

The guides work as a single document or as separate information sheets. You can read the guides together as a single document. Or you can use the table of contents to find the topics that interest you.

We want you to share the information in these guides. If you use the information in these guides to create your own document to share with others, please give us credit in your

document. We want people to know that they can come to Georgia Appleseed for more information and help.

### **Can I help you improve the guides?**

Yes! We hope that you will help us improve these guides. We wrote these guides as introductions to the topics. We wrote them to be easy to read and understand. But we left out some information to keep the guides short and simple.

Let us know if you think that we should add information. Also tell us about other ways that we can improve these guides. Please send any suggestions that you have to [programs@gaappleseed.org](mailto:programs@gaappleseed.org) or call (678) 426-4640.

### **Who created these guides?**

The Georgia Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, [GaAppleseed.org](http://GaAppleseed.org), and its Young Professionals Council created these guides with help from our partners. Georgia Appleseed's mission is to increase justice in Georgia through law and policy reform and community engagement. As part of our work to keep kids in school, we advocate for improving school climate and improving systems of care for children with mental illness, autism, and other intense needs. Georgia Appleseed is the lead organization for the Georgia Education Climate Coalition (GECC), a public-private partnership that is comprised of state agencies, advocacy groups/nonprofits, educators, centers,

schools, and districts championing statewide improvement to school climate.

These guides were created by attorneys at Georgia Appleseed with a combined 25 years of experience in public interest law. Pro bono research and interviews of stakeholders and experts were done by the following law firms to support each of the guides:

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*This information applies only in the State of Georgia and does not constitute legal advice. Anyone seeking specific legal advice should contact an attorney.*

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# Behavior and Learning Challenges in School

Children succeed at school when they feel physically and mentally well enough to learn.

If your child has trouble at school, your child may have behavior or learning challenges. Some children may have mental health challenges that cause them to act out or struggle to learn.

Other children may have disabilities and physical challenges.

Your child may need special behavior or learning supports. Your school and community can help.

This section provides information about the following behavior and learning challenges:

- Mental Health
- Trauma
- Disabilities
- Learning Disabilities
- Language Impairments
- Bullying
- Alcohol and Drug Use



# Mental Health

Struggling to learn or acting out may be a sign of a mental health challenge. All children can have mental health challenges.

If you think that your child has a mental health challenge, your school and community can help you.

## What mental health challenges could affect my child?

There are many different types of mental health challenges that affect school children. Some of these challenges are listed below.

- Anxiety may cause a child to be nervous or irritable.
- Depression may cause a child to be sad and lack interest in being active or spending time with friends and family.
- Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder may make it difficult for a child to pay attention or sit still. This challenge is also known as ADHD or ADD.
- Post-traumatic Stress Disorder may make a child sad, anxious, irritable, or frightened. If your child has experienced stress from things like death or violence,



# Mental Health

your child may develop this challenge. This challenge is also known as PTSD.

## **What should I do if I think my child is struggling with mental health?**

Ask the school for help. You can ask the school to do an evaluation. You may also ask the school for a special education assessment.

Ask your friends, family, and community to suggest mental health professionals who can help.

Call the Georgia Crisis and Access Line at (800) 715-4225 or a local mental health provider for help.



# Trauma

Sad, violent, or scary events can have long-term effects on a child's behavior. These effects are called **Trauma**. Accidents, abuse, neglect, bullying, and other disturbing events can cause trauma. Children suffering from trauma can have trouble learning and following school rules. These children can also develop serious mental health challenges if they do not receive help.

## What can the school do?

If you think that your child suffers from trauma, you should tell a school teacher or counselor you trust.

The school can provide special care for students with trauma. This special care is called **Trauma-Informed Care**. School teachers need to have special training to give trauma-informed care. Trained teachers help children feel safe physically, mentally, and emotionally in school.

Ask the school to train your child's teachers in trauma-informed care. Schools can get free training from the Georgia Department of Education. You can ask the school to schedule a training through its local **Regional Education Service Agency**.



# Trauma

## Where can I find support for trauma outside of the school?

Ask your friends, family, and community to suggest mental health professionals who can help.

Call the Georgia Crisis and Access Line at (800) 715-4225 or a local mental health provider for help.



# Disabilities

Sometimes children have physical and mental challenges called **Disabilities**. Students with disabilities can have trouble learning and following rules. All schools must give free special help to students with disabilities.

## What are eligible disabilities that schools must help with?

1. Autism Spectrum Disorder
2. Emotional Disturbance
3. Speech or Language Impairment
4. Visual Impairment, including Blindness
5. Deafness
6. Hearing Impairment
7. Deaf-Blindness
8. Orthopedic Impairment
9. Intellectual Disability
10. Traumatic Brain Injury
11. Other Health Impairments

Schools also provide special help for some disabilities not named on this list.



# Disabilities

Some disabilities are called learning disabilities. Our guide on Learning Disabilities has more information.

## What can the school do?

Schools have programs, special teachers and classes, technology, and other tools to help your child. The school should pick the right learning tools to help your child.

Our guides on Student Support Teams, Section 504 Plans for Children with Disabilities, and Special Education and IEPs for Children with Learning Disabilities provide more information.



# Learning Disabilities

Some disabilities are called **Learning Disabilities**. Any disability can cause learning and behavior challenges. But learning disabilities always make it harder to learn at school.

Schools must provide help for children with learning disabilities. Our guides on Student Support Teams, Section 504 Plans, and Special Education and IEPs provide more information.

## What are some learning disabilities?

### Dyslexia

Children with dyslexia have trouble matching sounds to written words. These children may have challenges with reading comprehension, spelling, and writing. Sometimes children with dyslexia can't answer questions about something they read even though they can answer questions about something that you read to them.

### Dysgraphia

Children with dysgraphia have trouble writing, typing, and spelling. They may have very messy handwriting. They may struggle to hold and control a pencil. Dysgraphia is also called





# Learning Disabilities

## **Impairment in Written Expression.**

### **Dyscalculia**

These children have trouble with math. They may not understand concepts like bigger and smaller. They may have trouble understanding that the numeral 5 is the same thing as the word *five*.

### **Auditory Processing Disorder**

Children with auditory processing disorder may trouble understanding speech. They may have trouble ignoring background noise and remembering things they heard. They may have trouble following instruction. They often need you to repeat what you said. These children have these troubles even if their hearing is fine.

### **Nonverbal Learning Disability**

Children with nonverbal learning disability have trouble understanding body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice. They often have trouble making friends.



# Language Impairments

Trouble with speech and language are common and can cause learning and behavior challenges.

Having trouble with language or speech makes learning harder. Language and speech trouble can also make children act out. Speech and language challenges are called **Language Impairments**.

Schools must give free help to children with language impairments.

## How do I know if my child has a language impairment?

Language impairments can be hard to recognize. Children who have language challenges may feel embarrassed. They may not want people to know. Children may act out or break school rules to hide that they are having trouble.

Children with language impairments may:

- have more trouble understanding speech or writing than other children.
- have difficulty putting thoughts into words. Maybe they can draw or describe something but can't think of the



# Language Impairments

word for it.

- not understand sarcasm, jokes, or figures of speech. They may only understand when instructions are very clear and direct.
- not read body language well.

## What should I do if I think my child is struggling with a language impairment?

If you believe that your child may have a language impairment, you should seek help.

- Talk with your child's teachers about your concerns.
- Ask your school to screen or evaluate your child and provide the services that your child needs.

## What can the school do?

Public schools can help. The school may screen your child for a language impairment. Ask the school to have a **Speech Language Pathologist** test your child. The school should work together with you to decide on a plan to help your child.



# Bullying

Sometimes children or adults use words or actions to hurt or scare a child. Harmful words and actions can affect a child's behavior. When an adult or child uses words or actions to frighten or threaten a child, it may be **Bullying**.

Bullied children often feel anxious, lonely, or fearful. Children who bully other children may have challenges that cause them to bully. They may have been bullied by someone else or experienced trauma. Children who bully need help and children who are bullied need help. Without the right help, children can develop long-term behavioral challenges.

## What does bullying look like?

Bullying can be done out loud in front of other people. Bullying can happen on the internet and through social media. Bullying can happen in private where no one else sees or hears. Bullying may include physical threats to a child or doing things to embarrass the child.

Bullying can be teasing, name calling, making threats, spreading rumors, or harming the victim or the victim's property.



# Bullying

## How can I help my child?

If you think someone is bullying your child, talk to your child. Explain what bullying is. Listen carefully to what they say. Tell your child that you support them. Tell your child that the bullying is not their fault. Ask your child if they feel safe. Identify ways to help them feel safe. You can find information about how to help your child and stop bullying at <https://www.stopbullying.gov/prevention/support-kidsinvolved>.

If the bullying is affecting the child's mood and behavior, tell a counselor you trust and ask for help.

## How can my child's school help?

Ask the school for help. Tell the child's teacher, school counselor, or other school employee about the bullying. Georgia law requires schools to create a plan to stop bullying at school and protect your child from bullying.

The school may have counseling services to help your child. Ask the school about counseling services.



# Bullying

## What should I do if my child is bullying other children?

If you think your child may be bullying other children, talk to your child about bullying and listen carefully. Try to figure out what may be causing the bullying. Together create a plan to stop the bullying. If the bullying continues, talk to a counselor you trust and ask for help. You might also talk with your child's teachers and school counselor to discover why your child may be bullying other children. They can help you create a plan to stop the bullying.

## Where can I find more support?

You can call the Georgia School Safety Hotline at 1-877-SAY-STOP (1-877-729-7867) for help. You do not need to share names or other personal information to receive help.

The Georgia Department of Education Bullying Prevention Resource webpage has additional information at <https://www.gadoe.org/schoolsafetyclimate/Pages/Bullying-Prevention.aspx>.



# Alcohol and Drug Use

All children feel pain, sadness, and frustration at times. Some children use drugs or alcohol to feel better. Alcohol and drug abuse can cause long-term health, learning, and behavior challenges in children. Alcohol or drug use can also cause children to have trouble at school. Without help, children can develop addictions to alcohol and drugs.

## How will I know if my child is abusing alcohol or drugs?

You know your child best. Look for changes in your child's behavior that concern you. Here are some common signs of potential problems:

- Your child wants to be alone more than usual.
- Your child often has mood swings.
- Your child has trouble at school.
- Your child lost or gained an unusual amount of weight.
- Your child's group of friends changes quickly or in a strange way.
- Your child is more secretive than usual.



# Alcohol and Drug Use

## **What do I do if I think my child is abusing alcohol or drugs?**

Talk with your child about your concerns. Talk to your child about the importance of not using drugs or alcohol. Explain to your child that they can talk with you about the pressures they feel. Tell them that they can talk with you about whether they have a desire to drink or use drugs. Listen to your child without judgment.

You can find more information about how to talk with your child at <https://www.samhsa.gov/underage-drinking/parent-resources/why-you-should-talk-your-child>.

Talk to a counselor or behavioral health professional you trust for help. Form a plan with your child to seek help and treatment.

## **How can my child's school help?**

Your school may have services to help your child. Ask the counselor at your child's school about supports and programs. One type of program is called a Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment program. Schools with this program help you determine what kind of help your child needs.





# Alcohol and Drug Use

## Where can I go for help outside of school?

Ask your friends, family, and community to suggest behavioral health or mental health professionals who can help. If you have health insurance, ask your insurance company about help for your child.

Call or text the Georgia Council on Substance Abuse Warmline at 1-844-326-5400 or Georgia Crisis and Access Line at 1-800-715-4255.

You can find more information at the Department of Behavioral Health & Developmental Disabilities

<https://dbhdd.georgia.gov/bh-prevention/substance-abuse-prevention>.



# School Discipline

Children sometimes act out or break school rules. Schools should try to correct a student's behavior by providing the supports that a child needs to succeed. Punishing a child may not change the child's behavior.

This section provides information about:

- School Rules, Discipline, and Behavior
- Expulsion, Out-of-School Suspension, or OSS



# School Rules, Discipline, and Behavior

School leaders set rules to support learning and keep children safe. You can find these rules in the school's **Code of Conduct** or **Student Handbook**. These rules are sometimes called expectations.

Schools expect students to be respectful, stay in certain places, and do their class work. Schools have rules against fighting, profanity, threats, bullying, weapons, and drugs.

Sometimes children get in trouble for behavior that happens away from the school.

## Why do some children need extra support for their behavior?

Some students may need extra supports when they have

- Experienced trauma
- Mental health or emotional challenges
- Learning disabilities
- Language or communication impairments
- Other health impairments



# School Rules, Discipline, and Behavior

Please see our other guides for more information about Learning Disabilities, Disabilities, Trauma, Mental Health, and Language Impairments.

## How do schools avoid discipline issues?

Schools should teach expectations and reward positive behavior. Schools should train their staff to help children feel safe and supported. Schools that provide the right services to students with disabilities and other challenges will have fewer discipline issues. Schools should also keep their buildings clean, well-maintained, and safe.

Schools where students feel safe and supported have a positive **School Climate**. There is more information in our School Climate guide.

## What do schools do when children break the rules?

Schools often punish children who break the rules. Schools may take away certain student privileges. They may require children to do extra school work, go to detention, or go to separate classrooms for in-school suspension. In-school suspension is called ISS.



# Expulsion, Out-of-School Suspension, or OSS

Sometimes children make it difficult for other students to learn. Sometimes children also cause danger when they fight or bring weapons or drugs to school. In these cases, a school may want to remove a child from school. A school calls this punishment expulsion, OSS, or out-of-school suspension. Find out more in our guide on Expulsion, Out-of-School Suspension, or OSS.

Punishments should be explained in the school's code of conduct or student handbook.

## What should I do if the school wants to remove my child from school?

The school must hold a special meeting when it wants to remove a child for more than ten days. This meeting is called a **Tribunal**. The tribunal will decide whether your child broke the rule and what the punishment will be.

You can advocate and defend your child at a tribunal. You can call witnesses or question the school's witnesses.

You should talk to a lawyer if your school tells you that the school will hold a tribunal for your child. For free legal help, call Atlanta Legal Aid Society at (404) 524-5811 or the Georgia



# Expulsion, Out-of-School Suspension, or OSS

Legal Services Program at (888) 408-1004.

## What if my child is in special education?

If a child has an IEP or is in special education, a school cannot remove that child from school for more than ten days in a row without a meeting called a **Manifestation Meeting**.

A manifestation meeting may also be required if a child is repeatedly suspended. At this meeting, the school will decide if your child's disability caused the behavior. If the disability did cause the behavior, the school usually cannot suspend or expel for more than ten days.

You can advocate and defend your child at a manifestation meeting. You should talk to a lawyer if the school tells you they are holding a manifestation hearing.

## What if my child is in preschool through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade?

A school must give these children extra help and support before the school can expel or suspend them for more than *five days total* each year. This extra help and support is called a multi-tiered system of supports, or MTSS. Learn more about MTSS in our guide on Multi-Tiered System of Supports and



# Expulsion, Out-of-School Suspension, or OSS

Responses to Intervention.

A school must provide extra protections for children who are in preschool through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and have an IEP or Section 504 plan. The school must give these children MTSS and a new IEP or Section 504 meeting. Learn more in our guides on Section 504 Plans for Children with Disabilities and Special Education and IEPs for Children with Learning Disabilities.



# School Supports for Behavior and Learning Challenges

Schools provide extra support to children who have behavior and learning challenges. State and federal laws require that the schools provide some of these supports. Some schools choose to provide more support than the law requires.

This section provides information about the following supports

- Student Support Teams
- Behavior Intervention Plans and Functional Behavioral Assessments
- Section 504 Plans for Children with Disabilities
- Special Education and IEPs for Children with Learning Disabilities
- Behavioral Health Supports in Schools
- Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports





# Student Support Teams

Schools can create a team to help a student who struggles to learn or behave in school. This team is called a **Student Support Team**.

## What can the student support team do for my child?

The student support team will:

- Learn why your child is struggling to learn or behave. The team may give your child an **educational evaluation** to learn about your child's challenges.
- Create a plan to help your child succeed. The plan may involve tutoring, counseling, or other activities.
- Check whether your child and the team are doing what the plan says. They will also check to make sure that the plan is working. The team can change the plan.

## How can I get my child a student support team?

Ask your school for a student support team. State the reason why you are making the request. Ask in person and write the school a letter or email. Put the date on the letter or email. Keep a copy of your letter or email.



## Student Support Teams

You may ask the principal, classroom teacher, special education teacher, counselor, school psychologist, or social worker. These school employees may be on your child's student support team. Make sure you keep copies of all student support team documents.



# Behavior Intervention Plans and Functional Behavior Assessments

Schools create plans to help students with serious behavior challenges. These plans are called **Behavior Intervention Plans**.

## How do I get my child a Behavior Intervention Plan?

Ask the school for a **Functional Behavior Assessment**. This assessment looks at why a child acts out and breaks school rules. Tell the school you want the assessment done by a professional who is trained to do this assessment. This could be a behavior specialist or a **Board Certified Behavior Analyst**. State the reason why you are making the request. Ask in person and write the school a letter or email. Put the date on the letter or email. Keep a copy of your letter or email.

The school should create a behavior intervention plan after the assessment. The plan will list the ways that the school can support changes to your child's behavior. It is important that all of a child's teachers understand and follow the behavior intervention plan.



# Behavior Intervention Plans and Functional Behavior Assessments

## **Do I have to wait until my child is suspended to ask for a Behavior Intervention Plan?**

No. If your child is getting in trouble often, tell the school you want a functional behavioral assessment and a behavior intervention plan.

## **Does my child have to be in special education to get a behavior intervention plan?**

No. Your child does not have to be in special education to get a behavior intervention plan.



## Section 504 Plans for Children with Disabilities

Health issues, disabilities, and other issues can make it hard for children to learn or follow rules at school. A school can create a plan for children who need extra help due to a disability. They call these plans **Section 504 Plans**. The plan might say that your child can get extra time to take tests, receive special equipment to help see or hear, or receive other types of help.

### How do I get my child a Section 504 Plan?

Ask the school for a Section 504 Plan if you think that your child has a disability. State the reason why you are making the request. Ask in person and write the school a letter or email. Put the date on the letter or email. Keep a copy of your letter or email.

The school must do a free **Educational Evaluation** of your child if your child has a disability. The school will talk with you and your child to learn why your child is having trouble learning or behaving.

After the educational evaluation, the school must create and follow a Section 504 plan if your child has a disability. Schools provide a different plan called an **IEP** for students with certain



## Section 504 Plans for Children with Disabilities

**Learning Disabilities.** Your child does not need to have a learning disability to get a Section 504 plan.

Our guide on Special Education and IEPs for Children with Learning Disabilities provides more information on IEPs.

### What if the school says that my child does not need a Section 504 plan or an IEP?

Talk to an education lawyer for advice. Parents and caregivers living on low incomes might find free legal help at Atlanta Legal Aid Society (404-524-5811) or Georgia Legal Services Program (888-408-1004).



# Special Education and IEPs for Children with Learning Disabilities

Children can have health issues, disabilities, and other issues that make it hard to learn or follow rules at school. We call these challenges **Learning Disabilities**. Some children with learning disabilities may need extra help or time with specially trained teachers.

A school must create a plan to help a child with a learning disability. This plan is called an **IEP** or an **Individualized Education Plan**. The IEP is a plan for **Special Education Services** that will help the child learn better at school.

## What does an IEP do?

The IEP gives school employees instructions on how they must help your child. An IEP might include extra time to take tests, special equipment to help see or hear, or other types of help.

The school must teach your child in the **Least Restrictive Environment**. This means that the school must teach your child with other children as much as possible. In most cases, the school should place your child in a classroom with children who are receiving special education services and children who are not receiving special education services.



# Special Education and IEPs for Children with Learning Disabilities

## How do I get my child special education services?

Ask the school to provide special education services. State the reason why you are making the request. Ask in person and write the school a letter or email. Put the date on the letter or email. Keep a copy of your letter or email.

The school must do a free **educational evaluation**. The school does this evaluation to learn whether your child has a learning disability. The school will talk with you and your child to learn why your child is having trouble learning.

The school must create an **IEP Team** for children with learning disabilities. The IEP team has teachers, parents, a school administrator, and others. The team must create a special plan for your child. The plan is called an IEP. Your child should be on the IEP team when you feel the child is mature enough.

The school must follow the IEP until the IEP team changes it.





# Special Education and IEPs for Children with Learning Disabilities

## What if the school says that my child does not need Special Education Services or an IEP?

- Ask the school for a Section 504 plan and a student support team. Learn more in our guides for Section 504 Plans for Children with Disabilities and Student Support Teams.
- Talk to an education lawyer for advice. Parents and caregivers living on low-incomes can find free legal help at Atlanta Legal Aid Society (404-524-5811) or Georgia Legal Services Program (888-408-1004).



# Behavioral Health Supports in Schools

All children can have strong emotions that they have difficulty coping with. These feelings might be caused by the school environment, learning or mental health challenges, or something going on at home.

These feelings may cause children to act out and have trouble following school rules.

Some schools offer **Behavioral Health Services** to help these children and their families. All public schools provide services to children in Special Education with IEPs.

## What kind of services are available in school?

- Students may speak with a counselor alone or in a group.
- Counselors can talk to parents and caregivers and give them additional tools and skills to support themselves and the child.
- Counselors may use art or playrooms to help the student.

## Do these services cost money?

Some services may be free and others may cost money.



## Behavioral Health Supports in Schools

You can ask the school for a free evaluation, when necessary, to help understand what is going on with your child.

Talking with counselors may cost a fee. Government help like Medicaid or PeachCare may pay the counselor. See our section on Paying for Your Child's Care for more information.



# Multi-tiered System of Supports

When a child has trouble learning, the child might have a physical or medical challenge that could make it hard to learn at school. The child might also have behavior challenges that could make it hard to learn.

Your school can help. The school has many different tools to support your child. Schools may call these tools their **Multi-Tiered System of Supports** or **MTSS**.

## What are the MTSS tools?

The tools that schools may use depend on your child's needs. They can include tutoring, special equipment, smaller classes, and even setting up steps for school staff to avoid negative behaviors. Schools have other tools as well.

The school places its tools in three levels or "tiers" in the school's multi-tiered system of supports. Some children only need tools from level one. Other children might need tools from level two or level three.

## Level One Tools

Level one tools are for all children. School teachers and staff



# Multi-tiered System of Supports

teach children the school rules and behavior that the school wants. A teacher may give the student special attention but not create a special plan for the student or move the student to a special classroom.

## Level Two Tools

Level two tools are for children who need special help. Parents and caregivers can ask the school for tests called “screenings” to find out whether a child has physical challenges like trouble seeing, speaking, or hearing. They can also ask the school for “educational assessments” to find out whether the child has trouble learning.

If there is a physical or learning challenge, the child might need level two help. The school should create a plan for these children. The school should also check to make sure that the plan is helping. The school will call its plan a **Response to Intervention** strategy. Schools will also call the plan an **RTI**.

## Level Three Tools

Level three tools include even more help for students when level one and level two tools are not enough. These students



# Multi-tiered System of Supports

may need special teachers or classes.

For example, a child might speak English as a second language and need special classes. Another child might have a medical challenge that makes it hard to learn. This child may need extra school staff for support and an IEP.

You can find more information in our guides on Section 504 Plans for Children with Disabilities and Special Education and IEPs for Children with Learning Disabilities.



# Community Supports for Behavior and Learning Challenges

Your community may help children with behavior and learning challenges.

This section provides information about the following community supports:

- Organizations that Can Help: Children's Behavioral Health in Georgia
- Local Interagency Planning Teams, or LIPTs.



## Organizations That Can Help: Children's Behavioral Health in Georgia

**Georgia Crisis and Access Line** – for immediate access to routine or crisis services, 24 hours a day.

(800) 715-4225

**Georgia Legal Services** – provides free legal services to Georgians living on low incomes.

(888) 408-1004

[www.glsp.org](http://www.glsp.org)

**Atlanta Legal Aid Society** – provides free legal services to people across Metro Atlanta living on low incomes.

(404) 524-5811

**Disability Integration Project** – an Atlanta Legal Aid Society project that works with people with disabilities.

(404) 377-0707

**Parent to Parent of Georgia** – network of “parent mentors.” They help other caregivers and children with disabilities.

(800) 229-2038

[www.p2pga.org](http://www.p2pga.org)





# Organizations That Can Help: Children's Behavioral Health in Georgia

**Georgia Advocacy Office (GAO)** – provides services to children with disabilities in Georgia.

(800) 537-2329

[www.thegao.org](http://www.thegao.org)

**United Way** – connects you with mental health services, disaster services, housing, and legal services.

Call 211

[www.unitedway.org](http://www.unitedway.org)

**Georgia Department of Education (GADOE) Division for Special Education** – gives information about children's rights in schools and parents rights.

(404) 656-3963

[www.gadoe.org](http://www.gadoe.org)

**Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD)** – oversees public mental health services for Georgia.

(404) 657-2252

[www.dbhdd.georgia.gov](http://www.dbhdd.georgia.gov)



## Organizations That Can Help: Children's Behavioral Health in Georgia

Visit <https://namiga.org/community-resources/> for National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Georgia's more complete list of behavioral health help.



# Local Interagency Planning Teams

Some children need help with serious mental health issues. Your local government can help these children.

Your county should have teams called Local **Interagency Planning Teams**. These teams help organize mental health services for your child. Sometimes people call these teams LIPTs.

## What does a LIPT do?

LIPTs meet to create a plan for the child and family.

The plan will include services and programs like mental health care, medical care, Boys and Girls clubs, sports, scouting, and others.

## How can my child get a LIPT?

A school teacher, probation officer, or other Georgia government employee can recommend a child to a LIPT. Ask these people to help you get a LIPT for your child.

Call the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities at (404) 657-2252. Ask them about your county's LIPT.



# Local Interagency Planning Teams

## Who is on the LIPT?

You can and should be involved in your child's LIPT.

Other members of the LIPT may include professionals from different Georgia government agencies and community members who care about your child and family. Your child can also come to LIPT meetings.

You can ask other people in the community to be on the LIPT. You might ask your child's sports team coach or a religious leader or someone else who cares about your child and your family. Your child's LIPT will have a main **Case Manager**. Tell your LIPT case manager who you would like to be a member of the LIPT.

## How can I support my child's LIPT?

Go to the LIPT meetings. Talk to the case manager to understand what is happening and when the first meeting will happen. Let the case manager know if you can't make it to the meeting or need transportation. The LIPT can help you with transportation or make sure that you can join the meetings by phone.



## Paying for Your Child's Care

Mental health and disability support services can be expensive. Schools and communities do not cover the costs of many services.

Some government programs like Medicaid and PeachCare can help you pay for services.

Insurance companies are required to pay for services for mental health and autism just like they pay for services for physical health.

This section provides information about the following ways to pay for care:

- Signing Up for Medicaid and PeachCare
- Medicaid and Autism Spectrum Disorder



# Signing Up for Medicaid and Peachcare

Some government programs help pay for children's medical care. Medicaid and PeachCare are programs that will pay the behavioral health and medical costs of children in families living on low incomes.

Medicaid will also pay for some schools to help children with hearing and speech challenges, nutrition, mental health counseling, nursing, and some types of therapy.

## How do I get Medicaid or PeachCare for my child?

- Apply online at <https://gateway.ga.gov>.
- Apply in person at your local office of the Division of Family and Children Services. This government agency is usually called DFCS. You can find your local DFCS office online at <https://dfcs.georgia.gov/locations>.
- Call (877) 423-4746.

Unfortunately, applying for Medicaid or PeachCare can be confusing and difficult. Call the Georgia Legal Services hotline (888) 408-1004 for help. If you are in Metro Atlanta, call Atlanta Legal Aid Society's Disability Integration Project at (404) 377-0707.



# Medicaid and Autism Spectrum Disorder

Medicaid pays for services for children with autism spectrum disorder. These services include tests to find out if a child has autism. It also pays for treatment.

Our guide on Signing Up for Medicaid and PeachCare tells you how to sign up for Medicaid.

## What does Medicaid pay for?

Medicaid will pay for a test to find out if a child has autism. These tests are called diagnostic tests or assessments. Your child's doctor can order the tests. Sometimes the doctor will want you to see a special doctor to order the tests.

Medicaid will also pay for a treatment called **Applied Behavioral Analysis**.

Applied behavioral analysis treatment helps a child learn social skills, language, and other life skills. Sometimes the treatment is with a group of children, and sometimes the treatment is one-on-one with a counselor.

## How do I find someone who will provide treatment?

Your child needs to get help as soon as possible. Ask your



# Medicaid and Autism Spectrum Disorder

doctor or a social worker for a list of therapists. You may need to get on a waiting list. You may need to challenge Medicaid if you cannot find a therapist or if it is taking too long to get services. Your challenge is called an **Appeal**.

You can ask a lawyer to help file an appeal. Look at the bottom of this page for information about free legal help from a lawyer.

## What if Medicaid will not pay for treatment?

Medicaid will sometimes refuse to pay for tests and treatment. It may also refuse to pay for as many treatments as your child needs. You can challenge Medicaid if Medicaid refuses to pay. Your challenge is called an appeal. You can ask a lawyer to help file an appeal.

For free legal help, call Atlanta Legal Aid Society's Disability Integration Project at (404) 377-0707 or the Georgia Legal Services Program at (888) 408-1004.





# Advocating for Better Schools and Community

All schools need your help. You can help improve your school and give your child a better learning experience.

In this section, you will find out how you can make your school better.

This section provides information about the following areas of advocacy:

- Getting Involved with Your School and Other Parents and Caregivers
- School Climate
- Improving Student Behavior with PBIS
- Georgia Apex and Behavioral Health
- School-Court Partnerships to Improve School Climate



# Getting Involved With Your School and Other Parents and Caregivers

There are many ways for parents and caregivers to get involved with their school. You can help improve school services for your child and the other school children.

## How can I help at my child's school?

- Join your school parent/teacher group. These groups are called PTAs or PTOs.
- Your school district may have an employee that works with parents to help the school improve. Ask your school about their **Parent Involvement Coordinator** or **Parent Liaison**.
- For Atlanta Public Schools, contact the Office of Family Engagement at (404) 802-2802. For other districts, ask your school principal for contact information.

## How can I connect with other caregivers?

- Call the Georgia Parent Support Network at (844) 278-6945 or visit their website at [www.gpsn.org](http://www.gpsn.org). They connect parents and caregivers to help children with behavior challenges.



# Getting Involved With Your School and Other Parents and Caregivers

- Visit [www.parentmentors.org](http://www.parentmentors.org) to find out ways to connect with other parents and caregivers.

## Where can I find more information for caregivers?

- Grandparents should also visit [grandfamilies.org](http://grandfamilies.org) for a list of supports and services for grandparents.
- Foster and adoptive parents can find help at the Georgia Center for Resources and Support. Call them at (866) A-Parent or visit them at [www.GACRS.org](http://www.GACRS.org).



# School Climate

**School Climate** is how a school feels to children, parents, teachers, and other school workers. In a school with positive school climate, children feel safe. They feel encouraged and supported. Children feel it is okay to make mistakes.

Schools with positive school climate have fewer discipline issues.

## Why does school climate matter?

Children in schools with a positive climate learn more in their academic classes. They develop better social skills. They are better at handling stress. Children in these schools miss fewer school days than kids in schools with poor climates. A positive climate also reduces violence and bullying.

Children with learning and behavior challenges can especially benefit from schools with a positive climate.

## How can I learn more about my school's climate?

Visit your child's school and volunteer to help the school.

You can also find out more about your school's climate at [www.georgiainsights.com/school-climateoverview.html](http://www.georgiainsights.com/school-climateoverview.html). At



# School Climate

this website, the Georgia Department of Education rates each school's climate. The website gives each school up to five stars.

## How do I improve my school's climate?

- Ask your child's teachers and principal how they are improving school climate.
- Visit your child's school or volunteer to help the school. How does the school climate feel to you? Tell your school what you think.
- Find out how often your school suspends or expels students at [www.gaappleseed.org/initiatives/toolkit/suspension-rate](http://www.gaappleseed.org/initiatives/toolkit/suspension-rate).
- If the school does not have a school climate program, tell them about school climate. You can learn more about school climate and school discipline at [www.schoolclimate.org](http://www.schoolclimate.org).
- Read our guide on Improving Student Behavior and PBIS to learn about the PBIS school climate program. Tell your school about PBIS.



# Improving Student Behavior with PBIS

Many schools use the **PBIS** program to help students learn to follow school rules and have a better school experience. PBIS stands for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.

## How does PBIS Work?

PBIS schools teach children how they should act and reward them when they act correctly. Schools that use PBIS often feel safer and the children do better with their classwork. PBIS schools have fewer challenges with bullying, discipline, and substance abuse.

PBIS schools follow a plan with three levels.

- Level 1: Teachers explain expectations for behavior to every child and then reward the students they see acting correctly.
- Level 2: Schools organize special group activities for students who need more help acting correctly. These activities could include group conversations with other students or workshops.
- Level 3: Schools organize special activities for students who need individual attention. This may include



# Improving Student Behavior with PBIS

interventions created in a Behavior Intervention Plan. These activities could include conversations with the school counselor or tests for special education.

## How do I get PBIS in my child's school?

- Check to see if your child's school is using PBIS. Enter your school name on the Georgia Department of Education's School Climate Dashboard at [www.georgiainsights.com/schoolclimate-overview.html](http://www.georgiainsights.com/schoolclimate-overview.html).
- If you are not at a PBIS school, talk with the principal and ask them to learn about PBIS.
- Learn more in our School Climate guide.



## Georgia Apex and Behavioral Health

Georgia has a program to help schools pay for children's behavioral health services. The program is called Georgia Apex. Schools with Georgia Apex have counselors inside the school who can help students.

If your child needs help, ask your school if it has counselors who can help.

### **How does Georgia Apex pay for services?**

Georgia Apex counselors do not charge you directly for services. They might charge Medicaid, PeachCare, or your private health insurance.

### **What can I do if my school doesn't have Georgia Apex?**

Ask your principal and counselors to enroll in Georgia Apex. Schools must apply and be selected for Georgia Apex.

Your community or school may have other resources that can help your child. Read our guides on

- Behavioral Health Supports in Schools
- Organizations that Can Help: Children's Behavioral Health in Georgia





## Georgia Apex and Behavioral Health

- Local Interagency Planning Teams
- Student Support Teams



## School-court Partnerships to Improve School Climate

You can help your child's school and school district be safer, happier, and more successful.

- You can get involved with a special partnership between your local court and the school district. In most counties, these partnerships are called the Student Attendance and School Climate Committees.
- You can improve your school's climate by volunteering at your local school or at school events. Read our guides on School Climate and Getting Involved with Your School and Other Parents and Caregivers.

To attend a Student Attendance and School Climate Committee meeting, call your local superior court or juvenile court and ask for information about the next meeting of the committee. Georgia law requires that every county have a Student Attendance and School Climate Committee.

# Notes



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Georgia Appleseed • [GaAppleseed.org](https://GaAppleseed.org) • Help Guides for  
Children with Behavior and Learning Challenges