

**GEORGIA[™]
APPLESEED**

Center for Law & Justice

Help Guides for Children with Behavior and Learning Challenges

STATE OF GEORGIA

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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 and/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 can succeed in school with the right help. These guides have information about how you can find that help in 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 our programs team at programs@gaappleseed.org.



Who created these guides?

The Georgia Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, GaAppleseed.org, and its Young Professionals Council created these guides with help from our partners.

Georgia Appleseed is a nonpartisan, nonprofit law center that advances justice and equity for all of Georgia's children through law and policy reform, community engagement, and legal representation of children. 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 decades 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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SECTION 1: 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](#)



SECTION 1: MENTAL HEALTH

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

If you think 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 disorders** 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 (ADHD/ADD)** may make it difficult for a child to pay attention or sit still.
- **Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)** may make a child sad, anxious, irritable, or frightened. If your child has experienced stress from things like death or violence, your child may develop this challenge.

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

- (1) 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.
- (2) Ask your friends, family, pediatrician, and community to suggest mental health professionals who can help.
- (3) Call the **Georgia Crisis and Access Line** at **1-800-715-4225** or a local mental health provider for help.



SECTION 1: 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 (RESA)**.

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

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

Call the **Georgia Crisis and Access Line** at **1-800-715-4225** or a local mental health provider for help.



SECTION 1: DISABILITIES

Sometimes children have physical or 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 disabilities that schools must help with?

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

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

If you suspect your child has a disability and observe behavior challenges, ask the school to conduct an evaluation for services. *Our guide on [Common Disabilities and Behaviors](#) 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.



SECTION 1: 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 examples of 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 **Impairment in Written Expression**.

Dyscalculia

Children with dyscalculia 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*.





SECTION 1: LEARNING DISABILITIES

Auditory Processing Disorder

Children with auditory processing disorder may have trouble understanding speech. They may have trouble ignoring background noise and remembering things they heard. They may have trouble following instructions. 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.



SECTION 1: LANGUAGE IMPAIRMENTS

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



SECTION 1: 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 a child.

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

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-kids-involved>.

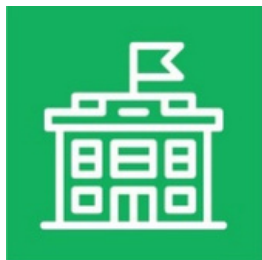
How can my child's school help?

If the bullying is affecting the child's mood and behavior, tell someone at the school you trust and ask 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.





SECTION 1: 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 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/wholechild/Pages/Bullying-Prevention.aspx>.



SECTION 1: 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.

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/talk-they-hear-you/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.





SECTION 1: ALCOHOL AND DRUG USE

Where can I go for help outside of school?

Ask your friends, family, pediatrician, 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 website** at <https://dbhdd.georgia.gov/bh-prevention/substance-abuse-prevention>.



SECTION 2: 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](#)



SECTION 2: SCHOOL RULES, DISCIPLINE, AND BEHAVIOR

School leaders set rules to support learning and keep students 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. As a result, schools have rules against things like fighting, profanity, threats, bullying, weapons, and drugs, etc.

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

How do schools avoid discipline issues?

Schools should teach expectations and reward positive behavior. Schools should train their staff to help students 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.

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; or
- Other health impairments.

*Please see our other guides for more information about [Mental Health](#), [Trauma](#), [Disabilities](#), [Learning Disabilities](#), and [Language Impairments](#).





SECTION 2: SCHOOL RULES, DISCIPLINE, AND BEHAVIOR

What do schools do when students break the rules?

Schools often punish students who break the rules. Schools may take away certain student privileges. They may require a student to do extra school work, go to detention, or go to separate classrooms for **in-school suspension (ISS)**.

Sometimes students also cause danger when they fight or bring weapons or drugs to school. In these cases, a school may want to remove a student from school. A school calls this punishment expulsion or **out-of-school suspension (OSS)**. *Find out more in our guide on [Expulsion, Out-of-School Suspension, or OSS](#).

To learn more about your child's school punishment range, check the school's **code of conduct** or student handbook.

Where can I learn about my school's OSS rates?

Visit <https://gaappleseed.org/resource/find-my-schools-suspension-rate/> to see state, district, and school OSS rates over the years.



SECTION 2: EXPULSION, OUT-OF-SCHOOL SUSPENSION, OR OSS

A school may want to remove a child from school for breaking certain rules, disrupting class, or causing danger. A school will call this punishment **expulsion** or **out-of-school suspension (OSS)**.

These 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 your child for more than ten school days. This meeting is called a **School Disciplinary Hearing** (also known as a **"Tribunal"**). At the tribunal, a hearing officer will decide whether your child broke the rule and what the punishment will be.

You can defend and advocate for your child at a tribunal. To do so, you can call witnesses and question the school's witnesses. *For more information, read our guide on [Preparing for a School Tribunal](#).

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 Legal Services Program** at **1-833-457-7529**.



SECTION 2: EXPULSION, OUT-OF-SCHOOL SUSPENSION, OR OSS

What if my child is in special education or has a suspected disability?

If a child has an IEP, is in special education, or may have a disability, they get special protections. A school cannot remove these children from school for more than **ten cumulative days** without a meeting called a **Manifestation Meeting (MDR)**. 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, then the school usually cannot suspend or expel the child for more than ten days. Instead, the school must conduct a **Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA)**. *Visit our guide on [Behavior Intervention Plans and Functional Behavior Assessments](#) for more information.

You can advocate and defend your child at a manifestation meeting. If the school tells you they are holding a manifestation meeting, then you should talk to a lawyer. For free legal help, call **Atlanta Legal Aid Society** at **404-524-5811** or the **Georgia Legal Services Program** at **1-833-457-7529**. *For more information, read our guide on [Preparing for a Manifestation Meeting](#).

What if my child is in preschool through 3rd 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 Responses to Intervention](#).

A school must provide extra protections for children who are in preschool through 3rd 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](#).



SECTION 3: SCHOOL SUPPORTS FOR BEHAVIOR AND LEARNING CHALLENGES

Schools provide extra support to children who have behavior and learning challenges. State and federal laws require schools to 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 Behavior 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](#)



SECTION 3: 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 meeting?

Ask your school for a student support team meeting. 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.

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



SECTION 3: BEHAVIOR INTERVENTION PLANS AND FUNCTIONAL BEHAVIOR ASSESSMENTS

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

How do I get my child a Behavior Intervention Plan?

Ask the school for a **Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA)**. 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 (BIP)** 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 your child's teachers understand and follow the Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP).

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 Behavior Assessment (FBA) and a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP).

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 (BIP).



SECTION 3: SECTION 504 PLANS FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Disabilities 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. This type of plan is called a **Section 504 Plan**. 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.

If you suspect that your child has a disability, then the school must complete a free **educational evaluation** of your child. For this evaluation, 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 **Individualized Education Program (IEP)** for students with certain **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 through **Atlanta Legal Aid Society** at **404-524-5811**, or **Georgia Legal Services Program** at **1-833-457-7529**. If you think the school may have discriminated against your child, you can also reach out to the **Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (OCR) Hotline** at **1-800-421-3481**.



SECTION 3: SPECIAL EDUCATION AND IEPs FOR CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Children can have health issues, disabilities and other challenges 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 **Individualized Education Program (IEP)**. 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 that includes children who are also receiving special education services and children who are not receiving special education services.

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. Once assembled, the team must create the IEP for your child. Your child should also 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.





SECTION 3: 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 through **Atlanta Legal Aid Society** at **404-524-5811** or **Georgia Legal Services Program** at **1-833-457-7529**. If you think the school may have discriminated against your child, you can also reach out to the **Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (OCR) Hotline** at **1-800-421-3481**.



SECTION 3: 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.

What are examples of Behavioral Health Services 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?

Sometimes services may be free, and others may cost money.

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.



SECTION 3: MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORTS

A child might have a physical or medical challenge that could make it hard to learn at school. A child might also have behavior challenges that could make it hard to learn.

Your school can help. Schools have 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 MTSS 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 tier one. Other children might need tools from tier two or three. The school will call its MTSS plan a **Response to Intervention** strategy (**RTI**).

Tier One Tools

Tier one tools are for all children. School teachers and staff teach children the school rules and behaviors 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.

Tier Two Tools

Tier 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 an **educational evaluation** to find out whether the child has trouble learning.

If there is a physical or learning challenge, the child may need tier two help. The school should create a plan for these children.





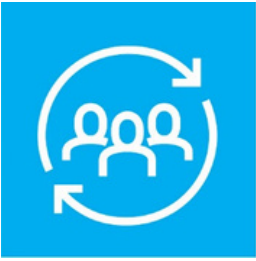
SECTION 3: MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORTS

Tier Three Tools

Tier three tools include even more help for children when tier one and tier two tools are not enough. These children may need special teachers or classes.

For example, a child may speak English as a second language and need special classes. Another child may 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](#).



SECTION 4: COMMUNITY SUPPORTS FOR BEHAVIOR AND LEARNING CHALLENGES

The community can also 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 LIPT](#)



SECTION 4: 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

www.dbhdd.georgia.gov/mobile-crisis-services

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

833-457-7529

www.glsp.org

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

404-524-5811

www.atlantalegalaid.org

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

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

Call: 211

www.unitedway.org/local/united-states/georgia#

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

404-656-2800

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

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

800-537-2329

www.thegao.org

Visit the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Georgia’s website for a more complete list of behavioral health help.

<https://namiga.org/community-resources/>



SECTION 4: LOCAL INTERAGENCY PLANNING TEAMS

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

The county should have teams called a **Local Interagency Planning Team (LIPT)**. These teams help organize mental health services for children.

What does a LIPT do?

A LIPT meets to create a plan for the child and their 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 (DBHDD)** at **404-657-2252**. Ask them for more information about your county's LIPT.

Who is on the LIPT?

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

You can also ask other people in the community to be on the LIPT. For example, you can ask your child's sports team coach or a religious leader or someone else who cares about your child and your family. 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.

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 cannot make it to the meeting or need transportation. The LIPT can help you with transportation or make sure that you can join the meetings virtually or online.



SECTION 5: 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](#)



SECTION 5: 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** at **1-833-457-7529** for help. If you are in Metro Atlanta, call **Atlanta Legal Aid Society's Disability Integration Project** at **404-377-0707**. Show your lawyer our [PeachCare and Medicaid Appeals Manual for Attorneys](#).



SECTION 5: 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 testing to find out if a child has autism. These tests are called diagnostic tests or assessments. Your child's doctor can order the testing. Sometimes the doctor will want your child to see a special doctor to order the testing.

Medicaid will also pay for a treatment called **Applied Behavior Analysis**. Applied behavior 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 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. *The lawyer can use our [Peachcare and Medicaid Appeals Manual](#).

For free legal help, call **Atlanta Legal Aid Society's Disability Integration Project** at **404-377-0707** and **Georgia Legal Services Program** at **1-833-457-7529**.



SECTION 6: ADVOCATING FOR BETTER SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITY

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

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

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](#)



SECTION 6: 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 other children at your child's school.

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**.
- Ask your school principal or school administrator for contact information for the local Office for Family Engagement.

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. They connect parents and caregivers to help children with behavior challenges.
- Visit **Georgia Parent Mentor Partnership's** website at www.parentmentors.org to find ways to connect with other parents and caregivers.

Where can I find more information for caregivers?

- Grandparents should also visit grandfamilies.org for a list of supports and services for grandparents.
- Adoptive and guardian families can find help at the **Georgia Center for Resources and Support**. Call them at **866-272-7368** or visit them at www.GACRS.org.



SECTION 6: 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 children 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?

You can find out more about your school's climate at www.georgiainsights.gadoe.org/Dashboards/Pages/School-Climate-Overview.aspx/.

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.
- Ask your school about the School Climate Parent Survey and volunteer to take this anonymous survey.
- Find out how often your child's school suspends or expels students at www.gaappleseed.org/resource/find-my-schools-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.
- *Read our guide on [Improving Student Behavior with PBIS](#) to learn about the PBIS school climate program. Tell your child's school about PBIS.



SECTION 6: IMPROVING STUDENT BEHAVIOR WITH PBIS

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

How does PBIS Work?

PBIS schools teach children what behavior is expected and acknowledge them when they make good decisions. Schools that use PBIS to improve school climate see improved academic outcomes and have fewer challenges with attendance, 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 acknowledge the students they see acting appropriately and making good decisions.
- Level 2: Schools organize group activities for students who need more support to engage in classroom activities. These activities could include group conversations with other students or workshops.
- Level 3: Schools organize activities for students who need individual attention. This may include interventions created in a Behavior Intervention Plan. These activities could include conversations with a school counselor or a referral to the Student Support Team to discuss other strategies to help the child.

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 <https://georgiainsights.gadoe.org/Dashboards/Pages/School-Climate-Overview.aspx>.
- 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.



SECTION 6: 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. *See our other guides for information on:

- [Behavioral Health Supports in Schools](#)
- [Local Interagency Planning Teams](#)
- [Student Support Teams](#)

For more information on how schools can provide mental and behavioral health services, visit our new website: <https://schoolbasedbehavioralhealth.org/>.



SECTION 6: 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 (SASCC) or School Justice Partnerships.
- 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 SASCC or School Justice Partnership 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.



