

Making Sense of “Alphabet Soup” — A Special Education Glossary

AAC — Augmentative and Alternative Communication

Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) is an assistive technology (AT) that supports communication and encompasses a broad spectrum of modalities, such as symbols, gestures, pictures, and icons, to enhance communication.

Note: The use of AAC applications does not prevent someone from talking.

Also see: AT — Assistive Technology

ABA — Applied Behavior Analysis

Applied behavior analysis is not a specific program but rather a behavioral framework from which specific therapeutic interventions (e.g., Lovaas therapy, verbal behavior, discrete-trial training) have been developed. As such, there may be substantial variability across ABA programs. It is essential to recognize that systematic instruction, careful ongoing assessment, positive reinforcement, and attention to the antecedents, behaviors, and consequences (ABCs) of behavior are integral components of any successful therapeutic program, regardless of whether it is designated as “ABA.”

Also see:

- ABCs — Antecedents-Behaviors-Consequences
- BCBA — Board-Certified Behavior Analyst
- ITT — Intensive Table Teaching

ABCs — Antecedents-Behaviors-Consequences

An antecedents-behaviors-consequences chart is a tool used in behavioral analysis — especially in applied behavior analysis (ABA) therapy — to understand why someone does something by tracking events before (antecedent), the specific observable action (behavior), and what happens immediately after (consequence) to identify patterns, triggers, and the function of a behavior, helping to create strategies for positive change in home, school, or clinical settings.

Also see:

- FBA — Functional Behavioral Assessment
- ABA — Applied Behavior Analysis

APE — Adaptive Physical Education

Adaptive physical education is a specialized form of PE designed to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities.

AT — Assistive Technology

Assistive technology is any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of children with disabilities.

Note: Assistive technology must be considered on every individualized education program (IEP).

BCBA — Board-Certified Behavior Analyst

A board-certified behavior analyst is a professional certified by the Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB) to provide and oversee applied behavior analysis (ABA) services.

Also see: ABA — Applied Behavior Analyst

BIP — Behavior Intervention Plan

A behavior intervention plan is a formal, written strategy to stop challenging behaviors in students by teaching and rewarding positive alternatives, based on a functional behavior assessment (FBA) that identifies why the behavior occurs.

Also see: FBA — Functional Behavioral Assessment

BOCES — Boards of Cooperative Education Services

The Board of Cooperative Education Services is a program of shared educational services provided to school districts by the New York State Legislature.

Also see: ESA — Educational Service Agency

BSP — Behavior Support Plan

A behavior support plan is used to identify behaviors of concern and to provide carers with evidence-based prevention and response strategies to reduce and address a child's behaviors.

CBA — Cognitive Behavioral Approaches

Cognitive-behavioral approaches are therapeutic and instructional strategies adapted to improve mental health and learning.

Communication Terminology (SLP, ST, LSH)

- SLP — Speech-Language Pathology (or Pathologist)
- ST — Speech Therapy (or Therapist)
- LSH — Language, Speech, and Hearing

SLP, ST, and LSH are often used interchangeably — though LSH is typically only used in school settings.

Communication is an “umbrella” that includes many concepts. Here is a breakdown that we find helpful:

What is Speech? Speech is the production of phonemes (sounds), voice, and fluency. In other words, articulation.

What is Language? Language is the functional domain most crucial for cognitive and social development. Language includes both verbal and visual input and is comprised of:

- **Receptive Language:** The understanding, or what the individual receives via communication in the environment.
- **Expressive Language:** Ability to communicate or express wants and needs.

What is Pragmatics? Pragmatics is the use of language, sometimes referred to as “social language” (taking turns, waiting, sharing, eye contact, and facial expressions). Pragmatics also encompasses the flexibility of thought and language use depending on the situation.

What do speech-therapy services in schools primarily focus on?

- Socialization and pragmatics.
- Design of a language-rich environment.
- Encouraging language through various modalities on an everyday basis.
- Language, speech, and hearing (LSH) therapists are support staff who can assist in developing communication tools that should be used consistently and embedded in the IEP.

CTP — Comprehensive Transition Program

Comprehensive transition programs are designed to support students with intellectual disabilities who want to continue academic, career, and independent living instruction to prepare for gainful employment.

DTT — Discrete Trial Training

Discrete-trial training is a structured applied behavior analysis (ABA) teaching method that breaks complex skills into small, manageable steps and teaches each step individually through intensive repetition, clear instructions, and positive reinforcement. It follows a clear antecedent-behavior-consequence (ABC) pattern — cue, response, reinforcement or correction — to build skills systematically, progressing from basic to complex steps.

Also see:

- ABCs — Antecedents, Behaviors, and Consequences
- ITT — Intensive Table Teaching

DVR — Division of Vocational Rehabilitation

The Division of Vocational Rehabilitation is a state-run program that helps people with disabilities find, keep, or improve their jobs by providing free, personalized employment services, including career counseling, job training, assistive technology, job placement, and support for both individuals and employers, thereby helping to overcome barriers to work.

[Find your state's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation](#)

EI — Early Intervention

Early intervention provides vital support and services for children from birth to age 3, helping them build foundational skills in areas such as physical movement, communication, thinking, and social-emotional development through therapies (speech, occupational, and physical therapy) and family support. Early intervention is available in every U.S. state through federally funded programs.

Also see:

- OT — Occupational Therapy (or Therapist)
- PT — Physical Therapy (or Therapist)

ESA — Educational Service Agency

An educational service agency is a state-authorized regional public body that supports local school districts by providing shared programs and operating as a middle layer between state education departments and local districts, often under names such as BOCES (New York) to enhance efficiency and capacity in public education.

[Find your state's education department](#)

ESY — Extended School Year

Extended school year refers to specialized instruction and related services for students with disabilities, provided beyond the regular school year (e.g., summer), to prevent significant skill loss (regression) and maintain progress toward their individualized education program (IEP) goals, thereby avoiding the need to relearn material each fall. The IEP team determines it and focuses on essential skills, providing services such as therapy or tutoring. ESY is not the same as general summer school.

Also see: IEP — Individualized Education Program

FAPE — Free and Appropriate Public Education

Free and appropriate public education is central to IDEA and is a protected right of children eligible for special education. Just like all other children, students with special needs have the right to a free public education.

Also see: Notice of Procedural Safeguards

FBA — Functional Behavioral Assessment

A functional behavioral assessment analyzes the antecedents, behaviors, and consequences (ABCs) to pinpoint what triggers the behavior and what reinforces it, leading to a tailored behavior intervention plan (BIP) that teaches positive replacement behaviors to meet the same need.

Also see:

- ABCs — Antecedents-Behaviors-Consequences
- BIP — Behavior Intervention Plan

HEOA — Higher Education Opportunity Act

The Higher Education Opportunity Act is a 2008 U.S. federal law that reauthorized the Higher Education Act, with key provisions aimed at making college more affordable and transparent. It also added an accessibility provision to improve access to materials for students with disabilities.

IDEA — Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 is the federal law that ensures early intervention and special education services for students with disabilities.

Also see: EI — Early Intervention

IEE — Independent Educational Evaluation

An independent educational evaluation is a private assessment of a student's needs by a qualified professional not employed by the school, often requested by parents who disagree with the school's evaluation to get a "second opinion" for special education services under laws like IDEA, with the school district usually responsible for the cost if they can't prove their assessment was appropriate.

Also see: Notice of Procedural Safeguards

IEP — Individualized Education Program

An individualized education program is a written document for each child aged 3–21 with a disability. It is developed, reviewed, and revised in accordance with IDEA requirements. IEPs are typically held annually, but the timing may vary depending on your child's needs. (Tip: You can call an IEP meeting any time.) IEPs typically outline the sequence of how things will proceed. Each team is different, but generally, the team should collaboratively brainstorm the following:

- Identify present levels of performance.
- Develop goals and objectives.
- Discuss and document necessary therapy supports.

Also see: ESY — Extended School Year

IFSP — Individualized Family Service Plan

An individualized family service plan is for children under age three after they have been evaluated and found eligible for early intervention services. It is developed, reviewed, and revised in accordance with IDEA requirements. This plan is created by a team that includes the family, the Part C coordinator, and other service providers. Using their understanding of the child, the assessment results, and the family's priorities, the plan is developed to guide everyone toward the desired outcome. It typically comprises and outlines several supports and services, including where and how they will take place.

Also see:

- IDEA — Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004
- Part C

IHP — Individualized Healthcare Plan

An individualized healthcare plan is a formal document, typically drafted by a school nurse, that coordinates the student's specific health needs, services, and emergency actions for a medical condition. It ensures the student's safety and full participation by detailing medical information, treatments, goals, and emergency protocols, and it requires collaboration among parents, the student, the school nurse, and other healthcare providers. It includes necessary accommodations, such as adjustments to the school day, schedule, or environment.

ITP — Individual Transition Plan

The individual transition plan guide is a comprehensive resource for students, families, and educators that details key steps, legal requirements, and best practices for developing effective post-high school transition plans within the individualized education

program (IEP) process. It provides guidance on postsecondary education, employment, independent living, and community participation to help students with disabilities achieve their long-term goals and transition successfully into adulthood.

Also see: IEP — Individualized Education Program

ITT — Intensive Table Teaching

Intensive table teaching is a structured teaching method, often used in applied behavior analysis (ABA), that breaks skills into small, manageable steps and is delivered in short, focused sessions at a table, using clear cues, responses, and consequences, along with frequent reinforcement, to build foundational skills such as communication and compliance.

Also see:

- ABA — Applied Behavior Analysis
- ABCs — Antecedents, Behaviors, and Consequences
- DTT — Discrete Trial Training

LEA — Lead Education Agency

A lead education agency (also referred to as a local education agency) is a public board of education or another public authority that is legally established within a state. Its primary role is to oversee the administrative functions of a group of schools. This includes managing educational services and ensuring compliance with state regulations.

LRE — Least Restrictive Environment

The least restrictive environment is a core principle of IDEA, requiring students with disabilities to be educated with non-disabled peers as much as possible, only removed from general education when their needs, even with aids and services, can't be met.

MTSS — Multi-Tiered System of Supports

A multi-tiered system of supports is a school-wide framework that provides academic, behavioral, and social-emotional support to all students through a tiered system, aiming to meet needs with high-quality instruction and early intervention, and integrating approaches such as response to intervention (RTI) into a coherent system to improve outcomes.

Also see: RTI — Response to Intervention

Notice of Procedural Safeguards

A notice of procedural safeguards outlines the legal protections under IDEA ensuring rights for students with disabilities and their parents, guaranteeing access to free appropriate public education (FAPE) and involving rights like parental consent, access to records, participation in IEP meetings, prior written notice, independent educational evaluations (IEE), mediation, and due process, with a [notice of procedural safeguards](#) provided annually to keep families informed.

Also see:

- FAPE — Free and Appropriate Public Education
- IEE — Independent Educational Evaluation

OT — Occupational Therapist

Occupational therapy supports students in meeting annual goals as outlined in their individualized education program (IEP). In school settings, OTs support students' learning, access to educational opportunities, and overall participation in educational routines, both academic and non-academic. Sensory processing differences are the most common reason for needing occupational therapy.

The word “occupation” comes from how we “occupy” our time. Roles and activities in daily life, including self-care, play, work, social engagement, leisure, and learning, constitute daily occupations. Occupational therapy teaches daily life skills.

Also see:

- IEP — Individualized Education Program
- PT — Physical Therapist

Part B

Part B is the federal grant to states under IDEA that applies to children ages 3 to 21.

Also see: Part C

Part C

Part C is the federal grant to states under IDEA that applies to children aged birth to 3 years.

Also see: Part B

PBIS — Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports

Positive behavioral interventions and supports are an evidence-based framework that schools can use to create a safe and positive learning environment for all students. It focuses on identifying, teaching, and reinforcing positive behaviors in students as well as using proactive strategies to address problematic behaviors. Overall, the purpose of PBIS is to improve social, emotional, and academic outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities and those from underrepresented groups.

PE — Physical Education

Physical education is a vital school subject that teaches lifelong physical activity, fitness, motor skills, and health habits through structured movement, sports, and games. It aims to develop physically literate individuals who understand and value health, fostering physical, mental, and social well-being for a healthy, active life.

PT — Physical Therapist

Physical therapy helps students access and participate in school by addressing motor skills, mobility, and positioning, ensuring they can function in the educational setting, from sitting at a desk to navigating the playground, by developing strength, balance, and coordination through targeted, individualized interventions integrated into their special education plan.

Also see: OT — Occupational Therapist

RTI — Response to Intervention

Response to Intervention, mandated by IDEA, is a multi-tiered school framework (Tier 1: universal, Tier 2: small-group, Tier 3: intensive) that uses data to provide early academic and behavioral support and improve instruction. It aims to identify learning disabilities and ensure timely help for struggling students before special education referral, while preserving IDEA's evaluation rights.

Also see:

- EI — Early Intervention
- MTSS — Multi-Tiered System of Supports

SI — Sensory Integration

Sensory integration issues, also known as sensory processing differences, have been well documented among individuals with FXS. These issues can impact attention and focus, behavior, language processing, learning, and overall functioning.

SLD — Specific Learning Disability

One or more specific learning disabilities qualifies students for special education services under IDEA. A specific learning disability is a neurological disorder that affects a person's ability to process language or perform academic tasks, including reading (dyslexia), writing (dysgraphia), or math (dyscalculia).

SSI — Supplemental Security Income

Supplemental Security Income is a federal program that provides support to disabled individuals, many of whom face significant employment barriers.

UDL — Universal Design for Learning

Universal design for learning is a proactive framework that designs flexible, accessible education from the start, shifting focus from “fixing” learners to “fixing” the curriculum by offering varied ways for students with a disability to engage (why), perceive and understand (what), and act and express (how) learning, ensuring all students can become purposeful, expert learners without needing constant modifications.

WES — Work Experience Studies

Work experience studies refer to programs or assessments that evaluate and facilitate work experience, often for students or individuals with disabilities, helping them gain skills, understand career paths, and plan job accommodations.

WIOA — Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act is a U.S. federal law from 2014 that strengthens the public workforce system, helping job seekers get skills, education, and training for high-quality jobs, while also assisting employers in finding skilled workers, serving vulnerable groups like youth, veterans, and individuals with disabilities through integrated services and data-driven strategies for a competitive economy.