

# Serving Georgia's Youngest Children with Disabilities and Developmental Delays

**The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)** is a federal law that outlines critical services that will **improve the educational experiences of children with disabilities**. The statute includes **four sections: Part A**, which outlines general provisions of the law; **Part B**, which addresses services for school-age children (ages 3-21); **Part C**, which addresses early intervention services for children from birth through 36 months of age; and **Part D**, which improves services for children with disabilities and their families through federal grants.

Together, Parts B and C help ensure that young children and their families can access needed supports, through early intervention services for babies and toddlers (Part C) and special education and related services for preschool-aged children (Part B, section 619).

**Early intervention** refers to the services and supports determined to meet the developmental needs of infants and toddlers with disabilities and developmental delays.<sup>1</sup>

**According to the most recently available data, about 5% of Georgia's infants and toddlers received services under part C, which is 2.7% lower than the national average.<sup>2</sup> About 4.6% of Georgia's 3-5 year-olds participated in Special Education Preschool, which is about 2% lower than the national average.<sup>3</sup> Both comparisons indicate that there may be additional ways to ensure all children are being identified.**

## Part C: Early Intervention for Georgia's Infants and Toddlers

The federal government allocates grants to states to fund initiatives that satisfy Part C of IDEA, which Georgia calls Babies Can't Wait (BCW). Georgia uses these federal dollars, along with allocations through the Georgia Department of Community Health (DCH), to fund BCW. Administered by the Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH), BCW is an early intervention program that evaluates and serves infants and toddlers (from birth to 36 months) with disabilities and developmental delays.

While children with specific conditions, like autism, blindness, or Down Syndrome, are automatically eligible, those who are experiencing a developmental delay but do not have a diagnosis may also qualify if they are displaying a significant need or delay that aligns with eligibility criteria. For example, children may be referred for language development because they require support to effectively interact with their parents or caregivers. In another case, a child may not have developed the fine motor skills needed to grasp their bottle or toy and require additional support to strengthen their hands.

Babies Can't Wait provides evaluation and eligibility determination as well as service coordination that supports families and the various professionals providing services to the child—all at no cost to the family. The specific services or interventions (e.g., occupational, physical, or speech-language therapy, behavioral interventions, etc.) are provided on a sliding fee scale and can be billed through Medicaid or private insurance. State funds are available to assist families who are determined by the local BCW pay.<sup>4</sup>

BCW Service Coordinators work with families to create an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP), which describes the interventions that the child needs to progress toward developmental milestones. This plan is used to connect families with contract providers or special instructors who offer the necessary therapies and learning opportunities tailored to children on their caseload. For a baby diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy, for example, service coordinators may coordinate physical therapy to help the baby stand and speech services to support communication. This individualized support can curb long-term effects from symptoms related to the child's disability and close the gap between their current developmental level and their age-appropriate one.

## IDEA at a Glance

**Part A:** General Provisions of the Law

**Part B:** Services for School-Age Children Ages 3-21 which includes Preschool Special Education in Georgia

**Part C:** Early Intervention Services for Children Birth-36 months (Babies Can't Wait in Georgia)

**Part D:** Federal Grants that Improve Services for Children with Disabilities and their Families

In 2021, BCW served 17,151 families, which is approximately 3% of Georgia's 0-4-year-old population.<sup>5</sup>



## Part B: Preschool Special Education

The federal government funds state initiatives that satisfy Part B of IDEA through allocations to the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE), which oversees its implementation in local school districts across the state. Part B offers children the opportunity to receive special education services in a preschool setting at no cost to the family. To qualify, a child must be age three to five and meet the criteria for at least one of 12 categories, as defined by the state's criteria on eligibility determination, to receive special education services. Some children transition from Babies Can't Wait to Preschool Special Education as they turn three; however, three-year-olds are underrepresented in the total number of children receiving special education services.

If a child is deemed eligible for special education services, school representatives, teachers, and family members form a team to outline an Individualized Education Program (IEP) to develop goals, determine the best classroom placement, formulate intervention strategies, and identify the special education services that will help the child make progress toward their developmental goals. Additionally, special education teachers utilize the Georgia Early Learning and Development Standards (GELDS) to help meet IEP goals and provide developmentally appropriate instruction. This program offers flexibility in the amount and type of support needed to meet the varying needs of children who are eligible for services. Each child's IEP is unique and designed to meet the specific needs of the child. Preschool Special Education plays a critical role in preparing students to meet grade-level expectations in the K-12 system.

Preschool Special Education served 3.25% of Georgia's 3-5 year-olds in 2021.<sup>6</sup>

## Why It Matters

Both **Babies Can't Wait** and **Preschool Special Education** aim to support children in meeting their **developmental milestones** by targeting and implementing specialized strategies to strengthen speech-language, cognition, fine and gross motor skills, and more. These programs recognize the integral and rapid period of brain development that occurs during the first years of life and provide important supports to families during this critical period. Cultivating developmentally appropriate skills through **early intervention** contributes to the likelihood that children will succeed in the K-12 system, be able to care for themselves, and attain self-sufficiency as an adult.

## Footnotes

- 1 Section 303.13 Early Intervention Services. (2017). US Department of Education. <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/c/a/303.13>
- 2 Percentage of Infants/Toddlers Receiving IDEA Part C Services (2022). Zero to Three. <https://stateofbabies.org/state/georgia/>
- 3 Percent of the Population, Ages 3-5, Served Under IDEA, Part B in the United States: (2019). Office of Special Education Programs. <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/osep-fast-facts-children-3-5-20>
- 4 Babies Can't Wait Frequently Asked Questions. (2019). Department of Public Health. <https://dph.georgia.gov/babies-cant-wait>
- 5 FFY1 State APR and Local Program Performance. (2021). Georgia Department of Public Health. <https://dph.georgia.gov/babies-cant-wait/data-and-monitoring>
- 6 Georgia State Profile: Percentage of Children Age 0-6 Receiving Early Intervention or Special Education (2021). National Institute for Early Childhood Research. [SE\\_Georgia.pdf \(nieer.org\)](https://nieer.org)