



# Observations

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**Myth:** An observation is required to meet the eligibility requirements for each of the sixteen disability categories used for special education.

**Fact:** Observations are required for three disability categories of eligibility: Autism, Emotional Disturbance (ED), and Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD). Observations are strongly recommended for all disability categories because observation results can provide support to statements describing adverse educational impact.

**Myth:** Only one observation of the student's learning and behavior is required for Autism, Emotional Disturbance, and Specific Learning Disabilities.

**Fact:** There are different requirements for the three disability categories that require observation. Autism eligibility requires observations **across multiple settings**. Eligibility for ED requires observations **in different environments**, and SLD eligibility requires the evaluation report to document observation in **each area** of suspected disability, including each of the **subcategories for SLD**. SLD criteria requires a statement describing the relationship of that observed behavior to the child's academic functioning be included in the evaluation report. One observation can document a child's academic performance in multiple areas of suspected disability depending on the kinds of classroom activities in which the student engaged during the observation.

**Myth:** When finding a student eligible for services in Autism, Emotional Disturbance (ED), and Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD), it is not important what you note during the observation. Only the test scores are needed for the student to meet the eligibility criteria.

**Fact:** The observation is of equal importance as the test scores when determining eligibility for the three disability categories requiring observations. If the test scores support eligibility but no problems (no adverse educational impact, no relationship between observed behavior and academic functioning) are observed in the classroom, the student should not qualify for services. Multiple sources of information, such as reports from the teachers and parents, observations of the student's functioning in the classroom and other settings, and test scores, are required for eligibility. State Plan Regulation III, page 36

**Myth:** The special education teacher went into the classroom one time and the student was able to do all the classroom teacher required. This child will not qualify because of that observation.

**Fact:** Sometimes a single observation cannot provide a true picture of how the student performs during classroom instruction. Perhaps the task on the first day you observed was an easier task than typical tasks in class. You are allowed to observe as many times as necessary to get the information that provides an accurate description of classroom performance. Remember that observations in multiple setting are required for the category of autism and observations in different environments are required for the category of emotional disturbance.

**Myth:** It's okay to observe during the student's math class, even though we are suspecting a learning disability in reading. That is when an observer can get into the classroom.

**Fact:** It is a requirement to conduct an observation in the area of suspected disability, including each of the subcategories for SLD. If the team suspects a learning disability in reading comprehension, then you must conduct at least one observation at a time when instruction in reading comprehension is being provided or other instruction or classroom activities require the student to use reading comprehension skills.

**Myth:** Anyone can conduct the observation.

**Fact:** Who ever conducts the observation must know what exactly they are looking for in the observation. For instance, if you send the counselor in to complete an observation for basic reading the counselor should be knowledgeable about reading skills, and know what to look for when conducting the observation.

**Myth:** An observation does not need to show adverse educational impact.

**Fact:** Observations can support statements of adverse educational impact if they contain data related to specific skills or behaviors related to the disability. Observations using peer comparison data can be extremely helpful to teams as they determine adverse educational impact. For example, when conducting an observation for off task behaviors, it would be helpful if the observer not only took data on the student being observed, but also 1-2 other peers in the classroom for comparison. Other times, it can be helpful to compare the student's behaviors or responses to prompts with the entire class to see how the student performs in comparison to his/her classmates/peers.

**Myth:** Recording time on task is the only way to collect data on behaviors during an observation.

**Fact:** Observers should write their observations in a clear, objective manner that contains quantifiable data. There are several ways to collect behavior information through direct observations. Frequency recording can be used to tally the number of times a behavior happens in a set period of time. Duration recording can be used to record the length of time a specific behavior lasts. Whereas interval recording collects data on if a behavior occurs during a specific interval of time. The type of data collection will depend on what behavior or skills you are observing and what type of data the team is trying to collect.