



To identify or not to identify

by Ed Mahony

**“There is really
no need to identify
your child. He can get the
support he needs without a
formal identification.”**

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THE QUESTION OF WHETHER OR NOT to identify a child with a formal exceptionality through the Individual Placement and Review Committee process lingers as an issue in many Ontario schools. For the most part, the vast majority of students are appropriately identified and receive services.

However, some parents have encountered resistance to the idea of holding an IPRC and identifying their children on the basis of their disability.

Why?

Some educators advance the position that is not necessary to identify their child as having a formal exceptionality because teachers and schools are enabled, under such documents as Education for All, to provide educational accommodations and even modifications without a formal identification, or even an IEP. Other individuals might stress that they can write an Individual Education Plan for your child without a formal diagnosis and that even having a formal diagnosis does not actually mean that



your child will receive additional supports, such as an educational assistant. In a sense, all these statements are true to a point. A dedicated and focused staff can provide an IEP and support without a formal identification and it is not a given that a formal IPRC identification will result in additional support. And yet, for several reasons that will be discussed in this article, it is advisable that parents invoke an IPRC and formally identify their child.

First, the education act as it was written, anticipated that children with an exceptionality be formally identified.

A formal diagnosis as a result of an IPRC provides several protections to a child and his/her family. First, it requires a formal meeting with a principal or administrator on at least a yearly basis. During this meeting, parents are consulted on a list of strengths and needs, whether their child is exceptional, what the exceptionality is and what the placement is. This allows the parent a regular venue to advocate for their child's needs. Secondly, the existence of an IPRC requires the creation of an IEP that meets the needs as stipulated in the IPRC within 30 school days. Without an IPRC, schools are under no compulsion to generate an IEP. A third consideration is that Policy Program Memorandum 144 offers some protections for children with ASD that anticipate that students will be identified with ASD to come under its umbrella. Finally, the IPRC designation provides the parent with an option to appeal elements of the IPRC if the need arises. These protections combine to create a sense of gravity and urgency around a student.

Often, when everything is going well with your relationship to a school, it is tempting to think, "Why invoke such regulations?" Think of the IPRC as the fence in your backyard or the laws that direct you to drive on the right or when to turn. You might be on good terms with your neighbour but nevertheless both of you expect that the laws that surround us



be respected. It is the hallmark of a civilized nation that my needs are met not by generosity on the part of others but because my rights are respected. Finally, it is the documentation afforded by such vehicles as an IPRC determination that in the long term advances the cause of your child. Your child's school history may stretch over 15 years and it is more than possible that in that time issues might arise that will best be solved by the protection provided by the IPRC.

Autistic Enough?

A more specific issue has arisen in some schools. Some educators have taken issue with identifying some students with autism who do not seem to display the fairly rigid and archaic definition included in the Educational Act.

"A severe learning disorder that is characterized by disturbances in

- rate of educational development
- ability to relate to the environment
- mobility
- perception, speech and language.

Lack of representational symbolic behaviour that precedes language

Clearly, on the face of it, some students on the ASD spectrum are not adequately described by this disorder. This is compounded by the term *autism* being used in the Act as distinct from ASD. Fortunately, the Ministry of Education has developed a more nuanced and complete description of ASD in "Special Education Monographs No 4: Students with Autism." This resource, in tandem with a variety of other program

documents produced by the ministry, would make it difficult for any position taken by a board not identify a child with autism to withstand scrutiny and appeal.

The bottom line

Students with ASD have the right to and in most cases should be identified as exceptional with autism/ASD. The formal exceptionality provides a series of protections for the child and family that allow parents to more effectively advocate for their child's needs.

Resources

Highlights of regulation 181/98, Ontario Ministry of Education
<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elem-sec/speced/hilites.html>

Special Education Monographs No. 4: Students With Autism
<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elem-sec/speced/monog4.html> ■

