



DSM-5 Autism Changes: Impact on Special Education

“Changes in the DSM-5 diagnostic categories do not alter a student’s current eligibility status or IEP.”

(see Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Advisory, p. 1)

What is DSM?

- The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (“DSM”) is the handbook used by health care professionals to diagnose autism spectrum disorders and other conditions.
- DSM-5 is the most recently released version of the Manual.

What are the changes in the definition of autism?

- DSM-5 now has only one new broad autism diagnosis: Autism Spectrum Disorder (“ASD”). Autism Spectrum Disorder will encompass all the previous autism spectrum disorders. DSM-5 no longer separately names Asperger’s syndrome, Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (“PDD-NOS”), Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, and Rett’s Disorder.
- Social (Pragmatic) Communication Disorder is a new diagnosis in DSM-5. “Individuals who have marked deficits in social communication, but whose symptoms do not otherwise meet criteria for autism spectrum disorder, should be evaluated for social (pragmatic) communication disorder.”¹

What does this mean for your child’s autism spectrum diagnosis?

- Your child should not be re-evaluated by the school district solely because of the new DSM-5. The definition of autism in federal special education law (which is different than DSM-5 definition) has not changed and is not impacted by DSM-5 changes.
- DSM-5 notes that: “[i]ndividuals with a well-established DSM-IV-TR diagnosis of autistic disorder, Asperger’s disorder, or pervasive development disorder not otherwise specified should be given the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder.”² In the future, children without a history of repetitive behavior or interests may be diagnosed with Social (Pragmatic) Communication Disorder and no longer fall into the autism diagnosis.

¹The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders [hereinafter DSM-5], § 299.0 (Am. Psychiatric Ass’n 5th ed.) (2013).

² DSM-5, *supra* note 1.

What does this mean for your child's education and IEP?

- Your child's IEP should not change. Even if your child were to receive a new clinical diagnosis, their educational needs will remain the same. The school district is required to provide special education and/or services necessary to meet a child's unique needs regardless of the category of their disability. State special education law emphasizes that the child's disability category cannot be used as a basis for "defining the needs of the child and shall in no way limit the services, programs, and integration opportunities provided to such child."³
- The district must have educational or legal reasons for trying to change your child's IEP. The new DSM-5 is not a legal nor an educational reason to change your child's services.
- The school district must have your consent in order to re-evaluate your child.

What are your rights if the school district attempts to change or eliminate your child's IEP services because of the new DSM-5?

- The Department of Education has issued an advisory concerning DSM-5 changes. You have the right to remind the school district that the state has emphasized that DSM-5 will not change your child's IEP. (Click here for advisory) <http://massadvocates.org/documents/sped-advisories.pdf>
- You have the right to ensure the district has followed required procedures. According to special education law, in order to decide that your child is no longer eligible for an IEP the school district must: 1) conduct a new evaluation with your consent; 2) convene a Team meeting to discuss the new evaluation; and 3) provide written notice that the Team believes your child is no longer eligible for special education.
- You have the right to seek an independent evaluation by outside experts paid for by the school if you disagree with the school's re-evaluation.
- You have the right to reject, in writing, a district's proposal to end your child's IEP eligibility or to change your child's IEP services.
- If you reject the school's proposal to change or eliminate IEP services, your child's IEP services remain the same until the dispute is resolved. This is sometimes called the "stay put" protection.
- If you need additional support, contact the Autism Center of Massachusetts Advocates for Children, your local Autism Support Center, or another advocacy organization for advice and assistance.

8-19-13

³ MGL Ch.71B § 1