FACT SHEET
School Transportation for Children with Special Needs:
An Overview and Resources for School-Based Physical Therapists

This document is designed to be a resource for school-based physical therapists (PTs) seeking general information on school-based transportation services for students with special needs. It also provides information on the role of school-based PTs in developing student-specific transportation plans. Additionally, this document may serve as a reference for other IEP/504 plan team members.

Federal and state legislation mandates the provision of transportation services to students with special needs as a related service through an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 plan. Like all students enrolled in public schools in the US, students with special needs are at risk of injury and death if appropriate transportation plans are not in place. School-based PTs play a key role in ensuring safe access to public education for students with special needs, including access to safe transportation.

Providing a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) as documented in each student’s IEP/504 plan requires a supportive team approach. Because a diverse team of professionals provides each student with safe transportation between school, school-related activities, and home, it is important that IEP/504 team members also work together to ensure student safety during travel by creating a transportation plan that should be included in the IEP/504 plan.

TRANSPORTATION FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Students in public schools are eligible for transportation services if required to access FAPE. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act mandates transportation services, and the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) details their scope as a related service:
Services that involve transportation includes:
   (i) Travel to and from school and between schools,
   (ii) Travel in and around school buildings, and/or
   (iii) Specialized equipment (such as special or adapted buses, lifts, and ramps), if required to provide special transportation for a child with a disability.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 also mandates transportation services. The CFR pertaining to nondiscrimination on the basis of disability in preschool, elementary, and secondary education lists transportation as a nonacademic service. Additionally, the CFR explicitly includes transportation as necessary to access all aspects of FAPE in the preschool, elementary, and secondary setting, regardless of location.

Transportation service needs are determined, addressed, documented, and implemented by the IEP/504 team. Needs for transportation are driven by assessment by qualified personnel and student data. The student, caregivers, representatives from transportation services, instructional and support staff, school nurses, related service providers, and other professionals (e.g., durable medical equipment providers, physicians) may participate in determining the needs of students. The type of vehicle, specialized equipment, behavioral supports, and any other accommodations needed for safe transportation are determined by the IEP/504 team relying on student-specific data. At a student’s IEP/504 meeting, participation by transportation services...
ensures all aspects of safe transportation are discussed, addressed, documented, and practically implemented. School districts can utilize various modes of transportation, including district services, private vehicles, public transportation, or contracted agencies. Law, policy, regulations, practice acts, and best-practice guidelines can vary at and between all levels - national, state, regional, municipal, and local/district. Compliance can be complicated, and teams can seek consultation from their school district attorneys as needed. The least-restrictive environment for the student is sought as they are safely transported.

**ROLES OF THE PT IN SUPPORTING TRANSPORTATION NEEDS**

PTs should act within their training, knowledge, expertise, and experience, as well as the scope of their state practice acts and district policy and/or best practice.

- Evaluate students and their ability to physically access transportation, including:
  - Physical ability including strength, balance, and motor control/coordination to get on/off a vehicle and on/off a seat
  - Postural control and sitting balance when seated
  - Skills using equipment, including wheeled mobility devices
- Identify appropriate equipment, accommodations, and/or goal areas related to transportation to be addressed in the IEP/504 plan
- Ensure safe vehicle access (e.g., getting on/off vehicles), including:
  - Identify whether a mechanical lift or steps are appropriate
  - Identify the need for equipment and/or physical assistance for going up/down stairs and accessing the bus seat as appropriate (including mobility in the bus aisle and into/out of the seat)
- Assist in ensuring student safety while riding in vehicles, including:
  - Identify whether sitting in a wheeled mobility device or a standard seat is appropriate
  - Identify the need for additional postural support(s)
- Ongoing equipment review/monitoring of safety for transport and/or securement
- Assist in identifying temporary backup options when usual equipment is absent, unavailable, or unsafe
- Promote student independence and self-determination in accessing transportation
- Consult regarding student mobility, equipment, and staff training for emergency evacuations
- Address transportation-related mobility needs through IEP/504 plan goals, including providing direct intervention and/or consultation related to accessing school-based and/or public transportation services
- Train staff on body mechanics, as well as safe provision of physical assistance and equipment use
- Train staff on specific disabilities, diagnoses/conditions, precautions
- Assist in the development of student-specific transportation plans included in the IEP/504 plan

**ADDITIONAL TASKS TO BE ADDRESSED AS APPROPRIATE**

The tasks listed below should be delegated to appropriately trained personnel. Some PTs may have the relevant experience and/or transportation-specific training to perform these tasks.

- Train staff on use of transportation-specific equipment such as tie-down systems or lap-shoulder belts
- Consult and/or assist in the acquisition of equipment that would facilitate access to transportation
- Identify appropriate transportation passenger restraint systems such as car seats or harnesses
- Identify wheeled mobility systems that meet the voluntary industry standards of the Rehabilitation Engineering Society of North America
- Identify appropriate tie-down locations on students’ wheeled mobility devices
- Identify appropriate securement methods for equipment
- Consult on child safety restraint systems and wheelchair tie-down and occupant restraint systems
- Create emergency evacuation plans (including involvement of local emergency response teams)
● Assist in the development of a training curriculum for transportation staff and/or participating in a school district’s Transportation Team.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

● Legally, school districts must provide transportation for access to FAPE within the least-restrictive environment for students with special needs, including mobility impairments.
● Identifying and implementing appropriate transportation services in IEP/504 plans requires collaboration between IEP/504 team members.
● PTs can serve as the qualified personnel trained to assess student impairments impacting participation in school-based transportation, to provide recommendations for equipment that may facilitate participation in school-based transportation, and to train appropriate staff members on the safe provision of physical assistance and use of mobility- and positioning-related equipment. Templates such as the Physical Therapy Transportation Checklist included in this document (see APPENDIX A) are helpful tools in identifying and meeting transportation needs for students with special needs.
● PTs may contribute to the creation of IEP/504 plan goals and implementation of interventions to address mobility during transportation.
● School districts should delegate transportation tasks outside of entry-level physical therapy practice to other, more appropriate, staff members or to PTs with extensive experience in the school setting or transportation-specific training.
● Experience and expertise vary widely among PTs and transportation staff! School districts also vary in how they designate transportation responsibilities. PTs should ensure their participation in meeting student transportation needs complies with state-specific practice acts.
● Please find additional resources covering transportation-related information beyond the scope of this fact sheet at the end of this document (see APPENDIX B).

REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A: Physical Therapy Transportation Checklist

Student Name: ____________________________ Date of Birth: ____________

School: ____________________________

Student’s Height (inches): ____________ Weight (pounds): ____________ Waist Size (inches): ____________

Student’s mode(s) of transportation (e.g., personal vehicle, school bus, etc.): ____________________________

Person(s) completing checklist: ____________________________

Date(s) completed: ____________________________

1) Student uses school-based transportation to/from:
   - School
   - Clubs, teams, after/before school activities
   - Work/community sites
   - Field trips
   - Other sites: ____________________________

2) Student gets on/off school-based transportation... (complete the appropriate column):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>...going up/down STEP(S) (complete Section A for all students, Section B as needed)</th>
<th>...using a MECHANICAL LIFT (complete only Section A for manual devices, only Section B for motorized devices)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Section A</strong>: (check the appropriate box)</td>
<td><strong>Section A</strong>: If <em>manual</em> wheeled mobility device (check the appropriate box)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Independent maneuvering <em>manual</em> wheeled mobility device on/off lift, locking brake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With assistance (including supervision) Describe type and level of assistance:</td>
<td>With assistance (including supervision) for maneuvering a <em>manual</em> wheeled mobility device on/off lift and/or locking brake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Section B</strong>: (check the appropriate boxes)</td>
<td><strong>Section B</strong>: If <em>motorized</em> mobility device (check the appropriate box)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With an assistive device Describe device:</td>
<td>Independent maneuvering a <em>motorized</em> wheeled mobility device on/off lift when on ground, disengaging power to device, and locking brake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With adaptation Describe adaptation:</td>
<td>With assistance for maneuvering a <em>motorized</em> wheeled mobility device on/off lift, disengaging power to device, and/or locking brake</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

May 2022  APTA Pediatrics Fact Sheets | 5
3) During school-based transportation, the student rides in: (check appropriate box and complete section)
   A standard seat, and…
   Transfers to/from the seat independently
   Transfers to/from the seat with assistance
   Describe type and level of assistance:
   ________________________________________________________________
   A wheeled mobility device paired with an occupant restraint system
   Describe type of mobility device:
   ________________________________________________________________
   Describe occupant restraint system:
   ________________________________________________________________

4) During school-based transportation, the student: (check the appropriate box)
   Sits independently with appropriate posture in a standard seat or a wheeled mobility device
   Needs additional postural support for safety
   Demonstrates behaviors that may pose a safety risk

5) Additional equipment to be secured and transported includes: (check all boxes that apply and complete appropriate sections)
   Assistive technology device(s) – Describe: ________________________________
   Medical equipment – Describe: _________________________________________
   Assistive mobility device(s) – Describe: _________________________________
   Wheelchair tray – Describe: _____________________________________________
   Other – Describe: _____________________________________________________

COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING FOR STUDENTS RIDING IN A STANDARD VEHICLE SEAT
Recommended adaptation and/or safety restraint system: (check all that apply)
None
Integrated seat
Staff supervision
Safety vest with crotch strap
Car seat
Other, please specify here: _____________________________________________

COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING FOR STUDENTS RIDING IN A WHEELED MOBILITY DEVICE
Describe type of wheeled mobility device: _________________________________
If the device has a tilt-in-space mechanism, the position during transportation will be: (check the appropriate boxes and complete the section as needed)
Upright/Locked in place
Tilted based on: School Nurse order Physician order PT recommendation
Specify degree of tilt and provide rationale for tilt during transportation:
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
If the device has a **reclining mechanism**, the position during transportation will be: *(check the appropriate boxes and complete the section as needed)*

- Upright/Locked in place
- Reclined based on: School Nurse order  Physician order  PT recommendation

Specify degree of recline, provide rationale for recline, and describe any additional positioning straps or devices recommended to help maintain the student in the specified reclined position:

____________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________

**Safety Check:**

Mobility device components must be assessed (check one box for each numbered item). If “no” is checked for any item, provide additional details below.

1. Wheel locks present/secure and holding properly?  
   Yes  No  Not Applicable
2. Seat of the wheelchair attached securely to the frame?  
   Yes  No  Not Applicable
3. Back of the wheelchair attached securely to the frame?  
   Yes  No  Not Applicable
4. Pelvic positioning belt attached securely to the frame?  
   Yes  No  Not Applicable
5. Anterior chest harness:  
   a. Securely attached?  
      Yes  No  Not Applicable  
   b. Providing proper support?  
      Yes  No  Not Applicable
6. Lateral trunk supports:  
   a. Securely attached?  
      Yes  No  Not Applicable  
   b. Providing proper support?  
      Yes  No  Not Applicable
7. Headrest:  
   a. Securely attached?  
      Yes  No  Not Applicable  
   b. Providing proper support?  
      Yes  No  Not Applicable
8. Footrests:  
   a. Securely attached?  
      Yes  No  Not Applicable  
   b. Providing proper support?  
      Yes  No  Not Applicable
9. Anti-tip bars:  
   a. Present?  
      Yes  No  Not Applicable  
   b. Functioning appropriately?  
      Yes  No  Not Applicable
10. All tires:  
    a. Inflated?  
       Yes  No  Not Applicable  
    b. Functional tread?  
       Yes  No  Not Applicable

Additional details:

____________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________
## APPENDIX B: Additional Resources

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<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Resource</th>
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Look for:  
- **Wheelchair Transportation Safety Standards** – a review of the key voluntary standards for wheelchairs (including WC18 - wheelchair tiedown and occupant restraint systems, WC 19 - wheelchairs, and WC 20 - seating systems)  
- **Knowledge Translation/Web Resources** – a collection of resources for sharing knowledge regarding wheelchair transportation safety geared toward prescribers, consumers, transporters, and manufacturers  
- **Ride Safe Brochure** – a brief review of information on wheelchairs, wheelchair tiedown and occupant restraint systems, how to secure wheelchairs in motor vehicles, and how to safely restrain riders (geared toward individuals that use wheelchairs) |