

# Presuming Competence ≠ Skipping Instruction

## Understanding Appropriate IEP Goals

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### What “Presuming Competence” *Actually* Means

Presuming competence means believing that students with disabilities:

- are capable of learning
- deserve dignity and respect
- should be given meaningful instruction and opportunity

It does **not** mean assuming a child can bypass foundational learning steps or master complex skills without instruction.

High expectations are important — but expectations must be paired with **appropriate teaching, realistic timelines, and instructional sequencing**.

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### IEP Goals Are Not Aspirational

An IEP goal is **not** a statement of hope or long-term potential.

An IEP goal is a **one-year instructional commitment**.

It should reflect what a specific child can reasonably be taught, supported, and expected to demonstrate **within one year**, based on:

- the child’s present levels of performance
- documented rate of progress
- prerequisite skills already in place

If a goal is not reasonably attainable within one year, it does not meet the legal purpose of an IEP.

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## Why Skipping Steps Is a Problem

Math makes this especially clear.

A child who is currently learning to add single-digit numbers typically needs **multiple years of instruction** before reaching multi-digit multiplication. This progression includes:

- number sense
- place value
- multi-digit addition and subtraction
- conceptual understanding of quantity

Assigning a goal that skips these steps does not reflect confidence in a child's ability. It reflects a disconnect between the goal and how learning actually occurs.

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## Performing Steps ≠ Meaningful Learning

A child may be trained to follow the steps of an academic procedure without understanding what those steps mean.

For example:

- lining up numbers
- applying memorized rules
- producing a correct-looking answer

If a child does not understand the underlying concept, the skill may not:

- transfer to new situations
- support independence
- result in meaningful educational benefit

IEP goals should be designed to build **understanding**, not just rote performance.

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## What Parents Are Allowed to Ask

Questioning whether a goal is appropriate is **not limiting a child**.  
It is ensuring instructional alignment.

Parents may reasonably ask:

- “What skills will be taught between my child’s current level and this goal?”
- “How does this goal build on skills my child already demonstrates?”
- “What understanding is required for this goal, and how will that be taught?”
- “Is this goal reasonably attainable within one year, given my child’s rate of progress?”

If these questions cannot be clearly answered, it is appropriate to request that the goal be revised.

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## Key Takeaway

**Presuming competence does not mean skipping instruction.**

Appropriate IEP goals are built step-by-step from what a child already knows, not from where others expect them to be.

High expectations matter — but only when they are paired with appropriate instruction and realistic timelines.

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