



Understanding School Support Options

A helpful guide to understanding IEPs and 504 plans.

There are options to help support your child in school. Understanding the options can be an important step in creating a better learning environment.

Please be aware that this guide is intended for general information only and is not legal advice.

IEP vs. 504 plan: which one fits my child?

Both plans support students with disabilities, but they come from different laws and work differently.

	IEP	504 PLAN
What is it?	A written special education program with individualized instruction, services, and measurable annual goals.	A plan for accommodations that give the student equal access to the general classroom and school activities.
Who is eligible?	A student whose disability fits one of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)'s 13 categories (e.g., specific learning disability, or "other health impairment," which often covers ADHD) and who needs special education because of it.	A student with any physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity (such as learning). Broader than IDEA — many students who don't qualify for an IEP qualify for a 504 plan.
What's in the plan?	A detailed written document: current performance, annual goals, specialized instruction, related services (e.g., counseling), and accommodations.	Accommodations — e.g., extended time on tests, preferential seating, breaks — plus who provides them and who ensures follow-through.
Who creates it?	A legally defined team: you (the parent), your child's teacher, a special education teacher, a school psychologist, a district representative — and often your child.	A school team, typically you, the classroom teacher, a counselor or 504 coordinator, and the principal. Less formally defined by law.
How is progress reviewed?	Reviewed at least once a year; full re-evaluation at least every 3 years.	Periodic review is required; most schools review annually.
When are families notified about changes?	The school has to tell families in writing <i>before</i> the IEP team meets or makes any changes to the IEP.	The school has to tell families about a "significant change" to the 504 plan. Many schools send written notifications.

Helpful Hint: if your child needs *specialized instruction* (teaching that is different from what the class receives), think IEP. If your child can learn from the standard curriculum but needs changes to *how they access it*, think 504 plan.

Where to Start

If you believe your child may benefit from an IEP or 504 plan, the steps below can help with understanding the process and where to start.

1 Document your concerns

Gather report cards, teacher emails, work samples, and any diagnosis or notes from your child's doctor or specialist. A diagnosis is not required to request an evaluation, but it strengthens your case.

2 Request an evaluation — in writing

Send a dated letter or email to the principal. A written request starts legal timelines that a phone call does not. You should keep a copy. The evaluation is free.

3 Give written consent

The school must get your written permission before testing. You may ask to meet the evaluators first so you can share information about your child, and ask for an explanation of the process and all forms.

4 The school evaluates your child

Evaluators assess how your child's condition affects learning and school performance. You may request a copy of each written report so you can review it before the eligibility meeting.

5 Attend the eligibility meeting

The team — which includes you — reviews the results and decides whether your child qualifies under IDEA (IEP), Section 504 (504 plan), or both. You are an equal member: you may ask questions and bring your own documentation.

6 Help build the plan

If eligible, the team writes the IEP or 504 plan. You can push for specifics: exactly what supports, who provides them, how often, and how progress will be measured. When you understand the plan and agree with it, you can sign your agreement.

7

Monitor and review

Plans are reviewed at least annually (IEPs also get a full re-evaluation every 3 years). You may track whether supports are actually happening, and request a meeting any time the plan isn't working — you don't have to wait a year.



If the school says no — to the evaluation, to eligibility, or to the plan you believe your child needs — you have appeal rights under both laws, including mediation and due process hearings. You can ask for the school's refusal in writing, request your “procedural safeguards” notice, and see the resources on the last page.

Helpful Checklist

Keeping track of what is needed when can help make the process and continued reviews smoother.

Before the evaluation _____

- ☐ Collect report cards, test scores, work samples, and teacher notes
- ☐ Get written input or a diagnosis from your child's doctor, if applicable
- ☐ Send a written, dated evaluation request to the principal (keep a copy)
- ☐ Ask to meet the evaluation team before testing begins
- ☐ Provide written consent for the evaluation

At the eligibility / planning meeting _____

- ☐ Request copies of all evaluation reports before the meeting
- ☐ Write down the supports you believe your child needs
- ☐ Bring your documentation and, if you wish, a friend or advocate
- ☐ Ask how each support will be delivered, by whom, and how often
- ☐ Make sure everything agreed to is written into the plan

After the plan is in place _____

- ☐ Keep a copy of the signed plan and share key points with your child
- ☐ Check in with teachers within the first month
- ☐ Track whether accommodations are actually happening
- ☐ Request a review meeting any time the plan isn't working
- ☐ Calendar the annual review (and 3-year re-evaluation for IEPs)

This summary is based upon educational rights information provided by CHADD (chadd.org/for-parents/educational-rights).

Key terms to know

FAPE

Free appropriate public education — the standard both laws guarantee. “Free” means at no cost to you.

Accommodation

A change in how your child learns or is tested (extra time, seating, breaks) — not what they are taught.

Specialized instruction

Teaching that is modified for your child — the core of an IEP.

Related services

Supports like counseling, speech, or occupational therapy that can be written into an IEP.

Procedural safeguards

The written notice of your legal rights, including how to disagree with and appeal school decisions. The school must give you a copy.

Where to learn more

CHADD — Educational Rights

chadd.org/for-parents/educational-rights • Helpline 1-866-200-8098 (M–F, 1–5 pm ET).

U.S. Department of Education — Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)

ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/osep

U.S. Department of Education — “Know Your Rights” under Section 504

www2ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr

Protection & Advocacy Centers (free legal advocacy in every state)

ndrn.org/about/ndrn-member-agencies.

There are many organizations which can support those living with educational services for students with ADHD. We could not list all organization and resources available and have included a selection to consider. The list contains links to third party websites. Collegium Pharmaceutical does not own or manage these websites and is not responsible for their content. As a community partner, Collegium Pharmaceutical provides charitable funding to various patient organizations.

