

# IEP or 504 Plan?

A parent-friendly guide to understanding the difference, what each plan can include, and what to ask next.

## At a glance

Both IEPs and 504 Plans support students with disabilities. The right plan depends on how your child's disability affects school and what kind of support your child needs.

### IEP = Specialized instruction

An **Individualized Education Program** is for an eligible student who needs special education. It usually includes individualized goals, services, accommodations, and progress monitoring.

### 504 Plan = Access and accommodations

A **504 Plan** is often used when a student has a disability and needs accommodations or related aids/services to access school, but may not need special education instruction.

### The simplest way to remember it

**IEP:** My child needs individualized instruction and services to make progress.

**504 Plan:** My child needs accommodations or supports to access school fairly.

## Quick reminder

A medical diagnosis alone does not automatically determine which plan a child receives. Schools look at the child's individual needs, educational impact, evaluation data, and what supports are needed at school.

## What is an IEP?

An **IEP**, or **Individualized Education Program**, is a written plan under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for a student who is found eligible for special education. IDEA makes a free appropriate public education available to eligible children with disabilities and ensures special education and related services.

### An IEP may include:

- Present levels of academic achievement and functional performance.
- Measurable annual goals and how progress will be measured.
- Special education services, related services, service minutes, and location.
- Accommodations, modifications, assistive technology, or behavior supports.
- Participation in state/district assessments and least restrictive environment decisions.

## What is a 504 Plan?

A **504 Plan** is a common way schools document accommodations and related aids/services under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Section 504 is a civil rights law that helps ensure students with disabilities have equal access to educational opportunities in programs that receive federal financial assistance from the U.S. Department of Education.

At the K-12 level, Section 504 requires public schools to provide FAPE to qualified students with disabilities. That can include regular or special education and related aids/services designed to meet a student's individual educational needs.

### A 504 Plan may include:

- Extra time, reduced-distraction testing, or breaks during the day.
- Preferential seating, copies of notes, visual schedules, or assistive technology.
- Health, safety, sensory, anxiety, behavior, transportation, or access supports.
- Clear responsibilities for staff members who implement the accommodations.

### Important distinction

A 504 Plan can include related aids or services, but it usually does not include the same individualized special education goals and specially designed instruction that are central to an IEP.

# IEP vs. 504 Plan: Side-by-side

Use this chart as a conversation starter. Eligibility and services should always be based on the individual student.

Question	IEP	504 Plan
<b>Legal basis</b>	IDEA	Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act
<b>Main purpose</b>	Special education, related services, goals, and individualized instruction	Equal access, accommodations, modifications, and related aids/services
<b>Best fit when...</b>	A disability affects school performance and the student needs specially designed instruction	A disability substantially limits a major life activity and the student needs access supports
<b>Written goals</b>	Usually includes measurable annual goals	Usually does not include annual academic goals
<b>Progress updates</b>	Progress toward IEP goals should be reported	Monitoring varies; ask how the plan will be checked
<b>Examples</b>	Resource instruction, speech therapy, OT, counseling, behavior goals, reading or math goals	Extra time, breaks, seating, reduced-distraction testing, health plan, sensory supports

## Which plan might fit?

**504 example:** A student with ADHD is doing grade-level work but needs extra time, breaks, and a reduced-distraction test setting.

**IEP example:** A student with dyslexia needs explicit reading instruction, measurable reading goals, and progress monitoring.

**Autism example:** A student may need an IEP, a 504 Plan, or another support approach depending on evaluation data and individual needs.

## Questions parents can ask

1	What evaluation data, classroom data, and parent input are we using to make this decision?
2	Is my child making meaningful academic, behavioral, social, emotional, and functional progress?
3	Does my child need specially designed instruction, or are accommodations/access supports enough right now?
4	Which supports will be provided, how often, by whom, and in what setting?
5	How will we know if the plan is working, and when will we meet again to review it?
6	Can I receive copies of the plan, evaluation reports, meeting notes, and procedural safeguards?

### Simple next steps

- Write your concerns down before the meeting. Include examples from home and school.
- Gather work samples, report cards, behavior notes, medical reports, private evaluations, and teacher emails.
- Ask the school to explain decisions in writing, especially if a request is denied.
- After the meeting, send a polite follow-up email summarizing what was discussed and any next steps.

#### Parent advocacy phrase

"I want to make sure we are matching the support to my child's documented needs. Can we review the data and discuss whether my child needs specialized instruction, accommodations, or both?"

# Printable meeting prep worksheet

Use this page before an IEP or 504 meeting to organize your thoughts.

<b>My child's strengths</b>	
<b>My top concerns</b>	
<b>What I notice at home</b>	
<b>What I want the school team to consider</b>	
<b>Questions I need answered</b>	

## Sources & notes

- U.S. Department of Education: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).
- IDEA Regulations: Sec. 300.101 Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE).
- U.S. Department of Education: Section 504.
- U.S. Department of Education: Frequently Asked Questions: Section 504 and FAPE.

Reviewed May 2026. This guide is educational information for families and is not legal advice. For advice about a specific situation, consult your state parent training and information center, school district procedures, or a qualified professional.