



If you've heard about IEPs (Individualized Education Plans), you're probably wondering if your child qualifies or how to get started. This guide will help you get started.

## SO, WHAT EXACTLY IS AN IEP?

An IEP is a legal plan that outlines the support your child will get at school if they qualify under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This plan is tailored to their specific needs—whether it's extra help with reading, a modified curriculum, or sessions with a speech therapist. It's all about helping your child succeed academically, socially, and emotionally.

Note: IDEA is the nation's special education law. It gives rights and protections to kids with disabilities.



## WHO QUALIFIES FOR AN IEP?

To qualify, your child needs a disability recognized by IDEA, like ADHD, autism, learning disabilities, speech or language impairments, emotional disturbances, or physical disabilities. Their disability has to affect how they do in a regular classroom setting, meaning they need some extra support to thrive.



## IEP VS. 504 PLAN: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

One of the biggest questions parents ask is: What's the difference between an IEP and a 504 plan? They're both designed to help, but they work differently.



### 504 PLAN:

This focuses on providing accommodations to give students equal access to education. Think things like extra time on tests or seating adjustments—basically, ways to make sure the school environment works for them.

**Example:** A child with ADHD might get extra breaks during lessons or a seat at the front to limit distractions.

### IEP:

An IEP goes beyond accommodations and provides specialized instruction for kids who need more intensive support.

**Example:** A child with autism might have an IEP that includes speech therapy, sensory breaks, and personalized teaching strategies.

In short, if your child needs changes to the environment (like more time or seating adjustments), a 504 plan could work. But if they need extra instruction or services (like physical therapy or curriculum adjustments), an IEP might be the better fit.



# Step-by-Step: How to Apply for an IEP

## 1. START WITH AN EVALUATION

You can request this through the school, and they have to respond within a set timeframe (usually 60 days). If your child already has a diagnosis (like ADHD or autism), share that with the school—it helps them focus on what to evaluate.

- a. It is critical that this request is in writing. You need to write a letter, date it, and sign it. When you hand it to the school, have them sign and date the day received and make you a copy. This holds the school accountable for responding to you.



## 2. IEP MEETING:

Once the evaluation is done, the school will schedule a meeting with you, teachers, and school specialists (sometimes your child too, depending on their age). This is where you'll go over the evaluation results and talk about what's working and what's not.

## 3. AGREE ON A PLAN:

After the meeting, you'll either agree on services and accommodations or you'll need to keep discussing. If something doesn't feel right, don't be afraid to speak up. You know your child best, and there's room for negotiation.



## After the IEP Is Created



Once the IEP is finalized, the school is responsible for implementing it. The plan gets reviewed once a year, but if things aren't working or your child's needs change, you can ask for a review anytime.

### PRO TIP:

Stay in regular contact with teachers to monitor your child's progress. If something feels off, request a meeting to discuss changes. You've got the right to do that at any point.

## Examples of Accommodations for Different Conditions:

### ADHD:

**Accommodations:** Extra time on tests, frequent movement breaks, or quiet spaces for tasks.

**Example:** Picture taking a test with a thousand distractions running through your mind. For a kid with ADHD, extra time can make a world of difference in lowering their stress and helping them focus.



### AUTISM:

**Accommodations:** Visual schedules, social skills training, or sensory breaks.

**Example:** Imagine trying to focus in an office with bright lights, constant noise, and overwhelming smells. For a child with autism, sensory breaks help them reset when they're overwhelmed.

## DYSLEXIA:

**Accommodations:** Audiobooks, speech-to-text, or breaking down instructions into smaller steps.

**Example:** Think about reading where the words seem to scramble. Audiobooks let kids focus on understanding, rather than struggling to decode each word.



## ANXIETY:

**Accommodations:** A break card, allowing a student to leave class if anxiety spikes.

**Example:** If you've ever had your heart race or your mind start spinning, you know how tough it can be to focus. A break lets kids with anxiety step away and come back when they feel calmer.



## What to Do When Schools Push Back

Schools might not always agree with your requests, and that can be super frustrating. But remember—you've got options.

### STAY CALM AND PERSISTENT:

It's easy to get defensive, but staying calm often gets you further. Keep reminding yourself—you're your child's best advocate.

### KNOW YOUR RIGHTS:

Schools are legally required to provide appropriate services for students who qualify. If they push back, gently remind them of this. You can ask for a re-evaluation or even an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE) if needed.

### BRING IN BACKUP:

Sometimes having another set of eyes helps. You might want to bring a specialist (like your child's therapist) to the meeting to support your case. A letter from your child's medication provider can also help.

### CONSIDER AN ADVOCATE:

Things can always be elevated to the district or beyond. Educational advocates understand the system and can help you navigate how to handle concerns, and when to escalate them.



## Contesting a Denial

If your child gets denied for an IEP, you can still challenge the decision. Schools might say your child doesn't qualify, but if you disagree, you can:



- Ask for a **written explanation** of the denial.
- Request a **re-evaluation** or an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE) at the school's expense.
- Call a **follow-up meeting** to present new info or evaluations.

If all else fails, you can even request mediation to help settle the disagreement.



## Personal Tips to Make It Easier

### **ADVOCATE LIKE A PRO:**

Keep records of everything. Every email, meeting note, and evaluation could be important. Make a folder of everything to have on hand to keep the school accountable.

### **TRUST YOUR GUT:**

If something doesn't feel right—speak up. You know your child better than anyone.

### **FIND YOUR PEOPLE:**

Connecting with other parents who've gone through this can help. Their advice can make the process less overwhelming.

