

K12 ACADEMICS — A FIELD GUIDE FOR FAMILIES

Understanding Special Education

25 topics — IEPs, 504s, dyslexia, autism, ADHD, evaluations & more — explained with clarity and care for every family.



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Your Rights & the System

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IDEA & Your Rights

WHAT IT IS

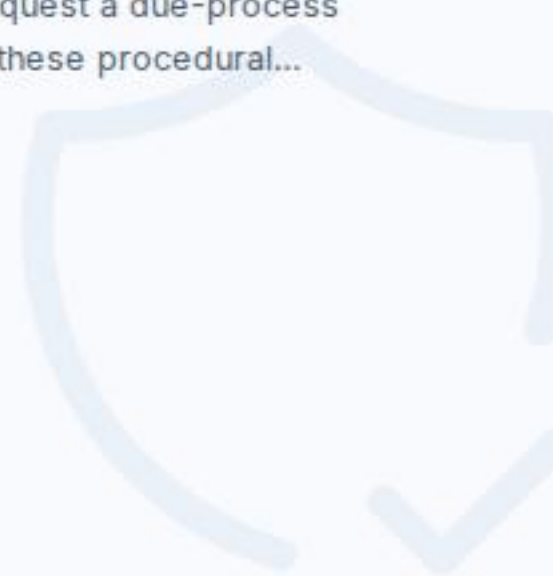
Federal law gives children with disabilities strong rights to a public education . The key law is IDEA (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) , backed by Section 504 and the ADA (civil-rights laws). Together they guarantee a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment , and give families a set...

HOW IT WORKS

- ✓ **FAPE** — A free appropriate public education, at no cost to families
- ✓ **LRE** — Educated with non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate
- ✓ **13 categories** — IDEA covers 13 disability categories (learning disabilities, autism, speech/language, other health impairment, and more)
- ✓ **IEP** — The individualized plan that delivers services
- ✓ **Evaluation & re-evaluation** — A full evaluation to determine eligibility, revisited at least every 3 years

THE PROCESS, STEP BY STEP

If you disagree with the school, you have escalating options : work it out with the team, request an Independent Educational Evaluation , use mediation (a neutral facilitator), file a state complaint , or request a due-process hearing (a formal legal proceeding). The school must give you a written explanation of these procedural...



AT A GLANCE

Main law	IDEA
Also	Section 504 & the ADA
Guarantees	FAPE in the least restrictive...
Categories	13 disability categories (IDEA...
You have	Procedural safeguards
If you disagree	Mediation, complaint, or due p...

YOUR RIGHTS & PROTECTIONS

- ✓ **Consent** — The school needs your consent to evaluate and to first provide services
- ✓ **Participation** — You're an equal member of the team
- ✓ **Access to records** — You can review all your child's education records
- ✓ **Independent evaluation** — You can request an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE) if you disagree with the school's
- ✓ **Prior written notice** — The school must notify you in writing before changing (or refusing to change) services
- ✓ **Dispute resolution** — Mediation, a state complaint, or a due-process hearing if you disagree

TERMS TO KNOW

- ✓ **IDEA** — Individuals with Disabilities Education Act — the main special-ed law
- ✓ **Section 504 / ADA** — Civil-rights laws barring disability discrimination
- ✓ **FAPE** — Free Appropriate Public Education
- ✓ **LRE** — Least Restrictive Environment
- ✓ **Procedural safeguards** — Your legal protections in the process
- ✓ **Due process** — A formal hearing to resolve disputes

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The IEP

WHAT IT IS

An IEP (Individualized Education Program) is a legal document that maps out the special-education services and supports a child will receive. It's required under the federal IDEA law for eligible students, and it's built by a team that includes you, the parent, as an equal member . The IEP guarantees a free appropriate public education...

HOW IT WORKS

The IEP describes your child's current levels of performance, sets annual goals , and lists the special-education services, related services (like speech or occupational therapy), accommodations, and placement they'll receive — in the least restrictive environment (LRE) appropriate for them. It's reviewed at least annually and the child...

WHO QUALIFIES

A child qualifies for an IEP if they have a disability under one of IDEA's categories (such as a specific learning disability, autism, speech/language impairment, ADHD under "other health impairment," and others) and need specialized instruction as a result. Eligibility runs from ages 3 to 21 (early intervention covers birth to 3...



AT A GLANCE

What	A legal, individualized educat...
Under	IDEA (federal law)
For	Students who need specialized...
Team includes	Parents as equal members
Reviewed	At least once a year
Re-evaluated	Every 3 years

THE PROCESS, STEP BY STEP

- ✓ **Referral** — You or the school requests an evaluation
- ✓ **Evaluation & eligibility** — A full evaluation determines whether your child qualifies
- ✓ **IEP meeting** — The team writes the plan — goals, services, accommodations, placement
- ✓ **Services begin** — The school delivers what the IEP promises
- ✓ **Annual review** — The team meets each year to update the plan (and re-evaluates every 3 years)

YOUR RIGHTS & PROTECTIONS

As a parent you're an equal member of the IEP team . You have the right to consent to (or refuse) evaluations and services , to see all records , to request a meeting any time, to bring people who know your child, and — if you disagree — to use procedural safeguards (an independent evaluation, mediation, a state complaint, or a...

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504 Plans

WHAT IT IS

A 504 Plan provides accommodations to a student with a disability that substantially limits a major life activity — so they can access learning on an equal footing. It comes from Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (a civil-rights law), and its eligibility is broader than an IEP's . A 504 Plan gives accommodations , not specialized...

HOW IT WORKS

A 504 Plan lists accommodations — for example, extended time on tests, preferential seating, movement breaks, use of technology, a health/medication plan, or modified assignments' format . Unlike an IEP, it doesn't change what a student is taught or provide special-education services; it changes how they access the same curriculum.

WHO QUALIFIES

A student qualifies if they have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity (learning, reading, concentrating, walking, and more). This is a broader standard than IDEA , so some students who don't qualify for an IEP still qualify for a 504 Plan — for example, a student with ADHD, a health condition...



AT A GLANCE

What	A plan of accommodations
Under	Section 504 (civil-rights law)
Provides	Access & accommodations (not s...
Eligibility	Broader than an IEP
Examples	Extra time, seating, breaks, a...
For	K-12 and college students

THE PROCESS, STEP BY STEP

- ✓ **Request in writing** — Ask your child's school for a 504 evaluation
- ✓ **Provide documentation** — Medical or other evidence of the disability and its impact
- ✓ **504 meeting** — A team reviews information and decides eligibility and accommodations
- ✓ **Plan in place** — Teachers implement the accommodations
- ✓ **Review periodically** — The plan is reviewed and updated (often yearly)

YOUR RIGHTS & PROTECTIONS

Section 504 is enforced by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) . You have the right to be informed, to participate, to see records, and to file a complaint if the school doesn't follow the plan or discriminates.

TERMS TO KNOW

- ✓ **Accommodation** — A change in how a student accesses learning (not what they learn)
- ✓ **Major life activity** — Learning, reading, concentrating, walking, etc.
- ✓ **Section 504** — The civil-rights law behind the plan
- ✓ **OCR** — Office for Civil Rights — enforces Section 504

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Accommodations vs. Modifications

WHAT IT IS

Two terms families hear constantly are accommodations and modifications — and the difference matters. In short: an accommodation changes how a student learns or shows what they know (same goal), while a modification changes what a student is expected to learn (a different goal or content). Both can appear in an IEP; 504 Plans generally...

HOW IT WORKS

- ✓ **Accommodations** — Change the method or conditions — the student still works toward the same grade-level goal . Examples: extended time, text-to-speech, a quiet room, a...
- ✓ **Modifications** — Change what the student is learning or is expected to master — a different (often reduced or alternate) goal or content . Examples: shorter or...
- ✓ **Why it matters** — Accommodations keep the student on grade-level standards; modifications change the expectation — which can affect diploma paths, so teams weigh them...

SUPPORTS & ACCOMMODATIONS

- ✓ **Common accommodations** — Extended time, preferential seating, breaks, technology, notes, oral testing
- ✓ **Common modifications** — Alternate assignments, reduced content, modified grading, alternate assessments
- ✓ **On the plan** — Both are written into the IEP; 504 Plans list accommodations
- ✓ **Review regularly** — Adjust as the student grows and needs change



AT A GLANCE

Accommodation	Changes HOW a student learns/s...
Modification	Changes WHAT a student is expe...
Accommodation keeps	The same learning goal
Modification changes	The goal or content
Both appear in	IEPs and (accommodations) 504...
Key	Match the support to the need

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- ✓ **What's the simple difference?** — Accommodations change how a student learns; modifications change what they're expected to learn.
- ✓ **Which keeps grade-level standards?** — Accommodations — the goal stays the same.
- ✓ **Do both go in an IEP?** — Yes; 504 Plans generally provide accommodations only.
- ✓ **Do modifications affect a diploma?** — They can affect diploma paths — teams consider this carefully.
- ✓ **Who decides?** — The IEP/504 team, based on the student's needs.

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Related Services

WHAT IT IS

Related services are the supportive services a child needs to benefit from special education — things like speech-language therapy, occupational therapy (OT), physical therapy (PT), and counseling . They're written into the IEP, delivered at no cost to families , and chosen by the IEP team based on the child's needs.

HOW IT WORKS

Related services appear on the IEP with a frequency, duration, and setting (for example, "speech therapy, 30 minutes twice a week"). Providers collaborate with teachers and family, and services are reviewed and adjusted as the child progresses. If your child needs a service to benefit from their education, ask the team to consider it.

SUPPORTS & ACCOMMODATIONS

- ✓ **Speech-language therapy** — For speech, language, fluency, or social-communication needs
- ✓ **Occupational therapy (OT)** — For fine-motor, sensory, self-care, and daily-function skills
- ✓ **Physical therapy (PT)** — For gross-motor, mobility, and physical access
- ✓ **Counseling & psychological services** — For social-emotional and behavioral support
- ✓ **Other related services** — Transportation, school nursing, orientation/mobility, interpreting, and more — whatever a child needs to access their education



AT A GLANCE

What	Supportive services on an IEP
Examples	Speech · OT · PT · Counseling
Also	Transportation, nursing, psych...
Purpose	Help a child access & benefit...
Provided at	No cost to families
Decided by	The IEP team

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- ✓ **What are related services?** — Supportive services (like speech, OT, PT, counseling) that help a child benefit from special education.
- ✓ **Do they cost anything?** — No — they're provided at no cost as part of the IEP.
- ✓ **Who decides which services?** — The IEP team, based on the child's evaluated needs.
- ✓ **Can I request a service?** — Yes — ask the team to consider it if your child needs it.
- ✓ **Are these only in special schools?** — No — they're provided in the child's school as part of the IEP.

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RTI & MTSS

WHAT IT IS

Response to Intervention (RTI) and the broader MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Supports) are frameworks schools use to help struggling students early, within general education, using increasing levels (tiers) of support matched to need. They are not special education — but they're often part of the path, and a lack of progress can prompt a...

HOW IT WORKS

- ✓ **Tier 1 — for everyone** — High-quality instruction for all students in the general classroom
- ✓ **Tier 2 — targeted** — Extra small-group support for students who need more
- ✓ **Tier 3 — intensive** — Individualized, intensive intervention for students who need the most
- ✓ **Data-driven** — Schools monitor progress and move students between tiers based on how they respond
- ✓ **MTSS is broader** — It covers academics and behavior/social-emotional supports

YOUR RIGHTS & PROTECTIONS

Important: RTI/MTSS should never delay a special-education evaluation. If you suspect a disability, you can request an evaluation in writing at any time — the school can't require a child to move through all the tiers first. RTI data can, however, be useful evidence in an evaluation.



AT A GLANCE

What	Tiered support in general educ...
MTSS	Multi-Tiered System of Support...
Tiers	Tier 1 → 2 → 3 (Increasing sup...
Uses	Data to match support to need
Not	Special education itself
But	Can lead to an evaluation

WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

- ✓ **Ask where your child is** — Which tier, and what support they're getting
- ✓ **Ask to see the data** — Progress-monitoring data shows how they're responding
- ✓ **Request an evaluation if warranted** — In writing — RTI can't delay it
- ✓ **Stay involved** — Understand the plan and check on progress

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- ✓ **Is RTI/MTSS special education?** — No — it's general-education support, though it can lead to an evaluation.
- ✓ **What are the tiers?** — Tier 1 (all students), Tier 2 (targeted), Tier 3 (intensive).
- ✓ **Can RTI delay a special-ed evaluation?** — No — you can request an evaluation in writing at any time.
- ✓ **What's the difference between RTI and MTSS?** — MTSS is broader, covering behavior and social-emotional supports too.
- ✓ **How do schools decide tiers?** — Using progress-monitoring data.

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Evaluations & Testing

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The Evaluation Process

WHAT IT IS

Before a child can receive an IEP, the school must complete a comprehensive evaluation to decide whether they have a disability and need special education. The process is free , requires your consent , and uses multiple sources of information — never a single test — to build a full picture of your child.

THE PROCESS, STEP BY STEP

- ✓ **Referral** — You or the school requests an evaluation (you can request one in writing at any time)
- ✓ **Consent** — The school must get your written consent before evaluating
- ✓ **Comprehensive evaluation** — A team assesses all areas of suspected need
- ✓ **Eligibility meeting** — The team reviews results and decides whether your child qualifies under IDEA
- ✓ **Next steps** — If eligible, the team writes an IEP; if not, they explain why and discuss other supports (like a 504 Plan)

EVALUATION & TESTING

A good evaluation is multidisciplinary and looks at more than academics — it can include cognitive (thinking) ability, academic skills, language, behavior, social-emotional functioning, motor skills, hearing/vision, and observations . Different specialists (school psychologist, speech-language pathologist, teachers, and others)...



AT A GLANCE

Purpose	Decide eligibility & needs
Starts with	A referral (parent or school)
Requires	Your written consent
Uses	Multiple measures (no single t...
Federal timeline	Usually 60 days after consent
Result	Eligibility + (if eligible) an...

YOUR RIGHTS & PROTECTIONS

You have the right to consent (or refuse), to be part of the eligibility decision , to receive a copy of the evaluation report , and — if you disagree with the school's evaluation — to request an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE) , often at public expense. Re-evaluations happen at least every three years (or sooner if warranted).

WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

- ✓ **Put your request in writing** — It starts the clock and creates a record
- ✓ **Share what you see at home** — Your input is part of the evaluation
- ✓ **Ask what will be assessed** — And by whom
- ✓ **Get the report in advance** — Review it before the eligibility meeting
- ✓ **Know your options if you disagree** — Including an independent evaluation

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Psychoeducational Testing

WHAT IT IS

A psychoeducational evaluation is a set of tests a psychologist uses to understand how a child thinks and learns — their cognitive strengths and challenges and their academic skills. It's often part of a special-education evaluation (or done privately) to help identify learning disabilities, ADHD, giftedness, and more. It's a tool for...

HOW IT WORKS

A full evaluation usually combines a cognitive (IQ) test , an academic-achievement test , and often measures of processing (like memory or phonological skills) and behavior/attention — plus interviews and observations. The psychologist looks at the whole pattern , not any single number, to understand a child's learning profile.

WHO QUALIFIES

Children are evaluated when there's a concern about learning, attention, or development — a suspected learning disability, ADHD, giftedness, or to inform an IEP. Adults may be evaluated too (for accommodations in college or work).

EVALUATION & TESTING

- ✓ **Cognitive / IQ tests** — The WISC-V (ages 6–16) is the most common; the WPPSI is for younger children and the WAIS for adults. They measure reasoning across areas like...
- ✓ **Academic-achievement tests** — The Woodcock-Johnson IV , WIAT-4 , and KTEA measure reading, writing, and math skills — often compared with cognitive results.
- ✓ **Processing measures** — Tools like the CTOPP (phonological processing, key for dyslexia) assess specific skills.
- ✓ **Behavior & attention rating scales** — Questionnaires like the BASC or Conners (often used in ADHD evaluations) gather input from parents and teachers.



AT A GLANCE

Purpose	Understand thinking & learning
Cognitive/IQ	WISC-V · WPPSI · WAIS
Achievement	Woodcock-Johnson · WIAT · KTEA
Also	Processing & behavior measures
Given by	A psychologist (school or prlv...
Not	A label or a pass/fail

WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

- ✓ **Keep it low-pressure** — These aren't tests to cram for — a rested, relaxed child gives the truest picture
- ✓ **Ask for a clear explanation** — A good report explains what the scores mean in plain language
- ✓ **Use it to plan, not label** — Results guide supports and instruction
- ✓ **Share the report with the school** — It can inform an evaluation or IEP
- ✓ **Ask about next steps** — What the results suggest for helping your child

TERMS TO KNOW

- ✓ **Standard score** — A score compared to same-age peers (100 is average)
- ✓ **Percentile** — How a child compares to peers (50th = middle)
- ✓ **Processing** — How the brain takes in and works with information
- ✓ **Discrepancy** — A gap between ability and achievement (one way learning disabilities are identified)
- ✓ **Twice-exceptional (2e)** — Both gifted and having a learning difference

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Early Intervention

WHAT IT IS

Early intervention provides services to infants and toddlers (birth to age 3) who have developmental delays or disabilities — and support to their families. It's covered under IDEA Part C, is family-centered, and research shows that the earlier support starts, the bigger the impact. Services are guided by an IFSP.

HOW IT WORKS

- ✓ **Referral & evaluation** — Anyone (a parent, doctor, or provider) can refer a child; an evaluation checks development across areas
- ✓ **IFSP (Individualized Family Service Plan)** — A family-centered plan of services and goals — focused on the child and supporting the family
- ✓ **Services** — May include speech, occupational, or physical therapy, developmental services, and family support — often in natural settings like home
- ✓ **Cost** — Many services are free; some may use a sliding scale or insurance depending on the state

THE PROCESS, STEP BY STEP

At age 3, children transition from early intervention (Part C) to preschool special education (Part B) if they remain eligible — moving from an IFSP to an IEP. The team plans this transition ahead of time so support continues smoothly.

WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

- ✓ **Act early** — If you have any concern about development, ask — you don't need a diagnosis to refer
- ✓ **Contact your state's program** — Every state has an early-intervention program
- ✓ **Be part of the IFSP** — It's built around your family's priorities
- ✓ **Plan the age-3 transition** — So services continue into preschool



AT A GLANCE

For	Infants & toddlers, birth to 3
Under	IDEA Part C
Plan	IFSP (family-centered)
Focus	Developmental & family support...
Cost	Often free or sliding-scale
At age 3	Transition to preschool (Part...

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- ✓ **Who is early intervention for?** — Infants and toddlers (birth to 3) with developmental delays or disabilities.
- ✓ **What's an IFSP?** — An Individualized Family Service Plan — a family-centered plan of services.
- ✓ **Does it cost money?** — Many services are free; some states use a sliding scale or insurance.
- ✓ **How do I start?** — Contact your state's early-intervention program — anyone can refer.
- ✓ **What happens at age 3?** — Children transition to preschool special education (an IEP) if still eligible.

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Learning Differences

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👂 Auditory Processing Disorder	35	🌟 Gifted & Twice-Exceptional	49
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Dyslexia

WHAT IT IS

Dyslexia is a common, brain-based language learning difference that mainly affects reading — specifically the ability to connect letters to sounds (decoding), spell, and read fluently. It is not related to intelligence or effort ; many people with dyslexia are bright, creative thinkers. With the right instruction, students with dyslexia...

SIGNS & CHARACTERISTICS

- ✓ **Trouble sounding out words** — Difficulty connecting letters to sounds (phonics)
- ✓ **Slow, effortful reading** — Reading is laborious and tiring
- ✓ **Spelling struggles** — Even for familiar words
- ✓ **Difficulty with rhyming or word sounds** — Especially in younger children
- ✓ **Avoiding reading** — And frustration or fatigue with it
- ✓ **A gap between ability and reading** — Strong in discussion but struggling on the page

EVALUATION & TESTING

Dyslexia is identified through a comprehensive evaluation (school-based or private) that looks at reading, spelling, and phonological processing (using tools like the CTOPP), alongside cognitive and language measures. Many states also require early dyslexia screening in the primary grades to catch difficulties early.

AT A GLANCE

What	A language-based reading difference
Affects	Decoding, spelling, fluency
Common	One of the most common learning differences
Not related to	Intelligence
Best support	Structured literacy instruction
Identified by	A comprehensive evaluation

SUPPORTS & ACCOMMODATIONS

- ✓ **Structured Literacy** — Explicit, systematic phonics-based instruction (Orton-Gillingham-based approaches) is the most evidence-based support
- ✓ **Accommodations** — Extra time, audiobooks, text-to-speech, and reduced copying
- ✓ **Assistive technology** — Speech-to-text, text-to-speech, and reading apps
- ✓ **Early intervention** — The earlier the support, the better the outcomes
- ✓ **A specialized school** — Some families choose a school that specializes in dyslexia

WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

- ✓ **Start with what you notice** — Keep notes on specific examples over time
- ✓ **Talk to the school and your doctor** — Share your observations and ask about an evaluation
- ✓ **Request an evaluation in writing** — It starts the process and creates a record
- ✓ **Learn your rights** — An IEP or 504 Plan may provide support
- ✓ **Focus on strengths too** — Every child has strengths to build on

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Dyscalculia

WHAT IT IS

Dyscalculia is a learning difference that affects math — understanding numbers, quantities, and mathematical reasoning. Sometimes called "math dyslexia," it's not about intelligence or effort. With explicit, well-designed instruction and the right tools, students with dyscalculia can build strong math skills.

SIGNS & CHARACTERISTICS

- ✓ **Weak number sense** — Trouble grasping quantities and how numbers relate
- ✓ **Difficulty with math facts** — Struggling to memorize and recall basic facts
- ✓ **Trouble with sequences & place value** — Confusing steps or digit positions
- ✓ **Difficulty with time, money, or estimation** — Everyday number tasks are hard
- ✓ **Math anxiety** — Frustration and avoidance around math

EVALUATION & TESTING

Dyscalculia is identified through a comprehensive evaluation that assesses math skills and number sense alongside cognitive and processing measures (comparing math achievement to overall ability). A school or private evaluation can determine eligibility for support.

TERMS TO KNOW

- ✓ **Number sense** — An intuitive feel for quantities and how numbers work
- ✓ **Manipulatives** — Hands-on objects used to learn math concepts
- ✓ **Multisensory instruction** — Teaching that engages sight, sound, and touch



AT A GLANCE

What	A math learning difference
Affects	Number sense, calculation, mat...
Sometimes called	"Math dyslexia"
Not related to	Intelligence
Best support	Explicit, multisensory math In...
Identified by	A comprehensive evaluation

SUPPORTS & ACCOMMODATIONS

- ✓ **Explicit, multisensory math** — Concrete-to-abstract instruction using manipulatives and visuals
- ✓ **Accommodations** — Extra time, a calculator, and reference sheets/formula charts
- ✓ **Assistive technology** — Math apps and tools
- ✓ **Break tasks into steps** — And check understanding along the way
- ✓ **Reduce math anxiety** — With a supportive, low-pressure approach

WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

- ✓ **Start with what you notice** — Keep notes on specific examples over time
- ✓ **Talk to the school and your doctor** — Share your observations and ask about an evaluation
- ✓ **Request an evaluation in writing** — It starts the process and creates a record
- ✓ **Learn your rights** — An IEP or 504 Plan may provide support
- ✓ **Focus on strengths too** — Every child has strengths to build on

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Dysgraphia

WHAT IT IS

Dysgraphia is a learning difference that affects writing — including handwriting, spelling, and getting ideas onto the page . It's not about intelligence or effort . A child with dysgraphia may have great ideas but find the physical and organizational act of writing exhausting. Technology and accommodations make a big difference.

SIGNS & CHARACTERISTICS

- ✓ **Messy or laborious handwriting** — Writing is slow, tiring, and hard to read
- ✓ **Trouble with spelling & mechanics** — Even when spoken language is strong
- ✓ **Difficulty organizing ideas on paper** — A gap between rich ideas and written output
- ✓ **Awkward pencil grip or hand fatigue** — Physical strain when writing
- ✓ **Avoiding writing tasks** — And frustration with them

EVALUATION & TESTING

Dysgraphia is identified through a comprehensive evaluation that looks at written expression, spelling, and fine-motor/processing skills (an occupational therapist may be involved). A school or private evaluation can determine eligibility for support.



AT A GLANCE

What	A writing learning difference
Affects	Handwriting, spelling, written...
Not related to	Intelligence
Often paired with	Fine-motor or language difficu...
Best support	Accommodations + technology
Identified by	A comprehensive evaluation

SUPPORTS & ACCOMMODATIONS

- ✓ **Assistive technology** — Speech-to-text, typing/keyboarding, and word prediction — often the biggest help
- ✓ **Accommodations** — Extra time, reduced copying, a scribe, and note-taking supports
- ✓ **Explicit handwriting/writing instruction** — Structured strategies and, where helpful, occupational therapy
- ✓ **Separate ideas from mechanics** — Let the child brainstorm before worrying about spelling/handwriting
- ✓ **Graphic organizers** — To plan and structure writing

WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

- ✓ **Start with what you notice** — Keep notes on specific examples over time
- ✓ **Talk to the school and your doctor** — Share your observations and ask about an evaluation
- ✓ **Request an evaluation in writing** — It starts the process and creates a record
- ✓ **Learn your rights** — An IEP or 504 Plan may provide support
- ✓ **Focus on strengths too** — Every child has strengths to build on

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ADHD

WHAT IT IS

ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder) is a common neurodevelopmental difference that affects attention, impulse control, and activity level . It's not about laziness or bad behavior — it's a difference in how the brain regulates focus and self-control. With the right support, students with ADHD thrive, and many bring energy...

SIGNS & CHARACTERISTICS

- ✓ **Inattentive signs** — Trouble sustaining focus, careless errors, disorganization, forgetfulness, losing things
- ✓ **Hyperactive-impulsive signs** — Fidgeting, difficulty staying seated, blurting out, interrupting, acting before thinking
- ✓ **Combined** — Many people show both patterns
- ✓ **Varies by setting** — Symptoms show up across home, school, and activities
- ✓ **Note** — Everyone is inattentive sometimes — ADHD is a persistent, impairing pattern

EVALUATION & TESTING

ADHD is diagnosed by a doctor or psychologist using history, interviews, and behavior rating scales (like the Conners or BASC) completed by parents and teachers — not a single test. A school evaluation can determine eligibility for support (often under "Other Health Impairment" for an IEP, or a 504 Plan).



AT A GLANCE

What	A neurodevelopmental differenc...
Affects	Attention, impulse control, ac...
Types	Inattentive · Hyperactive-Impu...
Diagnosed by	A doctor or psychologist
Support	Accommodations, strategies, so...
At school	IEP or 504 Plan

SUPPORTS & ACCOMMODATIONS

- ✓ **Classroom accommodations** — Extended time, movement breaks, chunked tasks, preferential seating, checklists
- ✓ **Organization & routine strategies** — Planners, reminders, consistent structure
- ✓ **Behavioral supports** — Positive reinforcement and clear expectations
- ✓ **Medication (a family/medical decision)** — Some families, with their doctor, find medication helpful
- ✓ **504 Plan or IEP** — To formalize accommodations or services at school

WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

- ✓ **Start with what you notice** — Keep notes on specific examples over time
- ✓ **Talk to the school and your doctor** — Share your observations and ask about an evaluation
- ✓ **Request an evaluation in writing** — It starts the process and creates a record
- ✓ **Learn your rights** — An IEP or 504 Plan may provide support
- ✓ **Focus on strengths too** — Every child has strengths to build on

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Autism

WHAT IT IS

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental difference in how a person communicates, interacts socially, and experiences the world (including sensory input). It's a spectrum — every autistic person is different, with their own mix of strengths, challenges, and needs. Many autistic people have distinctive strengths like deep focus...

SIGNS & CHARACTERISTICS

- ✓ **Social communication differences** — In back-and-forth conversation, eye contact, or reading social cues
- ✓ **Focused interests** — Deep, passionate interests in specific topics
- ✓ **Routines & predictability** — A preference for sameness and clear structure
- ✓ **Sensory differences** — Heightened or reduced sensitivity to sound, light, texture, or movement
- ✓ **Communication range** — From highly verbal to using few or no spoken words (and AAC)
- ✓ **Note** — Autism looks different in every person, and can present differently across genders

EVALUATION & TESTING

Autism is identified through a developmental evaluation by qualified professionals (a developmental pediatrician, psychologist, or team) using history, observation, and standardized tools. Early identification opens the door to early support. At school, autism is one of IDEA's categories , so eligible students receive an IEP.

AT A GLANCE

What	A developmental difference (a...
Affects	Communication, social interact...
Spectrum	Wide range of strengths & need...
Identified by	A developmental evaluation
Support	Individualized services & acco...
At school	IEP (autism is an IDEA categor...

SUPPORTS & ACCOMMODATIONS

- ✓ **Individualized services** — Speech-language therapy, occupational therapy, and social supports as needed
- ✓ **Structured, predictable environments** — Visual schedules and clear routines help
- ✓ **Sensory supports** — Accommodations for sensory needs
- ✓ **Communication supports** — Including AAC (augmentative and alternative communication) where helpful
- ✓ **Strengths-based approach** — Build on interests and honor the individual
- ✓ **A specialized school** — Some families choose a school that specializes in autism

WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

- ✓ **Start with what you notice** — Keep notes on specific examples over time
- ✓ **Talk to the school and your doctor** — Share your observations and ask about an evaluation
- ✓ **Request an evaluation in writing** — It starts the process and creates a record
- ✓ **Learn your rights** — An IEP or 504 Plan may provide support
- ✓ **Focus on strengths too** — Every child has strengths to build on

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Auditory Processing Disorder

WHAT IT IS

Auditory Processing Disorder (APD) — also called central auditory processing disorder — is a difficulty with how the brain processes what the ears hear . A child with APD usually has normal hearing , but struggles to make sense of sounds and spoken language, especially in noisy settings. It's a processing difference, not a hearing loss...

SIGNS & CHARACTERISTICS

- ✓ **Trouble in noise** — Difficulty following speech when there's background noise
- ✓ **Frequent "huh?"** — Often asks for repetition or misunderstands directions
- ✓ **Multi-step directions** — Loses track of spoken instructions with several steps
- ✓ **Delayed responses** — Needs extra time to process what was said
- ✓ **Reading/spelling** — Sometimes co-occurs with difficulties in phonics and reading

EVALUATION & TESTING

APD (clinically, central auditory processing disorder / CAPD) is formally diagnosed by an audiologist using specialized listening tests (usually for children around age 7+, when the tests are reliable) — following guidance from bodies like ASHA and the American Academy of Audiology. Because the signs overlap with ADHD, language...



AT A GLANCE

What it is	Difficulty processing sounds/s...
Not	A hearing loss (hearing is nor...
Also called	Central Auditory Processing DI...
Diagnosed by	An audiologist
Helped by	Accommodations & strategies

SUPPORTS & ACCOMMODATIONS

- ✓ **Reduce background noise** — Preferential seating, quiet work areas
- ✓ **Support the listening** — Face the child, get attention first, speak clearly
- ✓ **Back up speech with visuals** — Written instructions, gestures, captions
- ✓ **Chunk directions** — One step at a time; ask the child to repeat back
- ✓ **Assistive technology** — Sometimes an FM/remote-microphone system helps the teacher's voice reach the child
- ✓ **Build skills** — Speech-language therapy and explicit reading instruction where needed

WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

What families can do: get a hearing test first (to rule out hearing loss), then ask about an audiology evaluation ; share what you notice across settings; and request a school evaluation for accommodations (often via a 504 plan or IEP). At home, reduce noise during conversations and pair spoken requests with written or visual cues.

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Nonverbal Learning Disability

WHAT IT IS

Nonverbal Learning Disability (NVLD) describes a profile where a child has strong verbal skills (often talks early and reads well) but struggles with nonverbal areas — visual-spatial reasoning, motor coordination, and reading social cues. Because the verbal strengths are so visible, NVLD is often missed or misunderstood . (It's a...

SIGNS & CHARACTERISTICS

- ✓ **Verbal strengths** — Early talker, big vocabulary, strong rote memory and reading decoding
- ✓ **Visual-spatial struggles** — Difficulty with puzzles, maps, geometry, charts, and organizing space
- ✓ **Math & concepts** — Trouble with math reasoning, word problems, and abstract concepts
- ✓ **Motor challenges** — Clumsiness, messy handwriting, trouble with coordination
- ✓ **Social cues** — Misses body language, tone, and unwritten social rules despite strong language

EVALUATION & TESTING

NVLD is identified through a psychoeducational or neuropsychological evaluation that reveals the characteristic gap between verbal and nonverbal abilities. Because it overlaps with autism, ADHD, and math disabilities, a thorough evaluation by a psychologist helps clarify the profile and the right supports.



AT A GLANCE

What it is	Strong verbal, weak visual-spa...
Often missed	Because verbal skills are stro...
Affects	Math, motor, & social skills
Not	An official DSM diagnosis (yet...
Helped by	Targeted supports

SUPPORTS & ACCOMMODATIONS

- ✓ **Use words to teach** — Explain visual/spatial tasks in step-by-step verbal language
- ✓ **Explicit social coaching** — Teach social cues and rules directly, since they aren't picked up automatically
- ✓ **Reduce spatial/motor load** — Graph paper, typing instead of handwriting, organized templates
- ✓ **Math support** — Break down word problems; verbalize the steps
- ✓ **Structure & routine** — Clear organization helps with the spatial/planning challenges

WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

What families can do: if your bright, verbal child struggles surprisingly with math, handwriting, or social situations, ask about a comprehensive evaluation . Advocate for supports that use your child's verbal strengths, and consider explicit social-skills coaching. Celebrate the strengths while patiently scaffolding the harder areas.

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Sensory Processing

WHAT IT IS

Some children respond to everyday sensory input — sounds, lights, textures, movement — in atypical ways. They may be over-responsive (easily overwhelmed by noise, tags, or bright light) or under-responsive (seeking intense movement or input). These sensory processing differences are real and can affect learning and comfort, though...

SIGNS & CHARACTERISTICS

- ✓ **Over-responsive** — Covers ears at noise, dislikes certain textures/clothing tags, avoids messy play, overwhelmed in busy rooms
- ✓ **Under-responsive** — Seeks movement, spins, crashes, chews, or seems not to notice input
- ✓ **Big reactions** — Meltdowns or shutdowns when overwhelmed
- ✓ **Trouble focusing** — When the environment is too stimulating
- ✓ **Motor/coordination** — Sometimes difficulty with balance or fine-motor tasks

EVALUATION & TESTING

An occupational therapist (OT) is the professional who typically assesses sensory needs, often as part of a broader evaluation (since sensory differences frequently accompany autism or ADHD). At school, an evaluation can determine whether OT or accommodations are appropriate.

AT A GLANCE

What it is	Atypical response to sensory i...
Can be	Over- or under-responsive
Often co-occurs	With autism & ADHD
Support from	Occupational therapy (OT)
Note	Not a standalone DSM diagnosis

SUPPORTS & ACCOMMODATIONS

- ✓ **Adjust the environment** — Reduce noise/light; offer a quiet space or noise-reducing headphones
- ✓ **Sensory tools** — Fidgets, weighted items, flexible seating, movement breaks
- ✓ **Predictability** — Warn before transitions and loud events
- ✓ **Occupational therapy** — Builds strategies and, where helpful, a "sensory diet" of activities
- ✓ **Respect the signals** — Meltdowns are often overwhelm, not defiance — a calm, low-stimulation response helps

WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

What families can do: notice your child's specific triggers and calming strategies, share them with the school, and ask about an OT evaluation if sensory needs affect learning or daily life. At home, build in predictable routines, offer calming spaces, and prepare your child for overwhelming situations in advance.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- ✓ **Is "sensory processing disorder" an official diagnosis?** — It's widely recognized clinically but isn't a standalone diagnosis in the main manuals; it often co-occurs with autism/ADHD.
- ✓ **Who helps?** — An occupational therapist (OT).
- ✓ **Are meltdowns misbehavior?** — Usually not — they're often a response to feeling overwhelmed.
- ✓ **Can school accommodate this?** — Yes — through environment changes, tools, and sometimes OT.

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Oppositional Defiant Disorder

WHAT IT IS

Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) describes a persistent pattern of defiant, argumentative, or angry behavior beyond typical childhood pushback. It's important to start with compassion: challenging behavior is usually a signal — of frustration, anxiety, a learning struggle, difficulty with self-regulation, or an unmet need — not...

SIGNS & CHARACTERISTICS

- ✓ **Frequent conflict** — Often argues with adults, refuses requests, or defies rules
- ✓ **Anger & irritability** — Loses temper easily, easily annoyed, resentful
- ✓ **Blame** — Blames others for mistakes or misbehavior
- ✓ **Deliberate provocation** — Seems to annoy others on purpose
- ✓ **Context matters** — Behavior that shows up mainly in one setting often points to a trigger there

EVALUATION & TESTING

Clinically, the DSM-5 describes ODD as a persistent pattern of angry/irritable mood, argumentative/defiant behavior, or vindictiveness (at least four symptoms, lasting six months or more, beyond what's typical for the child's age). It affects roughly 3% of children, often appears before age 8, and — left unsupported — can precede more...



AT A GLANCE

What it is	A pattern of defiant, angry be...
Beneath it	Often frustration, anxiety, or...
Not	A sign of a "bad kid"
Diagnosed by	A mental-health professional
Helped by	Support, not just discipline

SUPPORTS & ACCOMMODATIONS

- ✓ **Address the root** — Treat underlying anxiety, ADHD, or learning struggles
- ✓ **Teach skills** — Build self-regulation, problem-solving, and coping strategies
- ✓ **Consistent, calm structure** — Clear, predictable expectations delivered without escalation
- ✓ **Positive relationships** — Connection and catching kids "doing well" work better than harsh discipline
- ✓ **Parent & teacher coaching** — Evidence-based programs (like parent-management training) help adults respond effectively
- ✓ **A behavior plan** — An FBA/BIP at school targets specific triggers with proactive supports

WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

What families can do: seek an evaluation to understand what's beneath the behavior; look into evidence-based parent-support programs ; and partner with the school on a behavior plan. Prioritize connection and consistency over escalating consequences — and take care of yourself, too, since supporting a child through this is demanding.

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Anxiety at School

WHAT IT IS

Anxiety is one of the most common challenges children and teens face, and it often shows up around school — as worry, physical complaints, or avoidance. Some anxiety is a normal part of growing up; when it starts to interfere with learning, friendships, or attendance, it's worth attention and support. The good news: school-related...

SIGNS & CHARACTERISTICS

- ✓ **Physical complaints** — Stomachaches, headaches, or nausea, especially on school mornings
- ✓ **Avoidance** — Reluctance or refusal to go to school, or wanting to leave/go to the nurse
- ✓ **Reassurance-seeking** — Frequent worried questions or need for reassurance
- ✓ **Trouble with separation** — Distress separating from a parent (more common in younger children)
- ✓ **Perfectionism or shutdown** — Big reactions to mistakes, tests, or being called on

EVALUATION & TESTING

If anxiety is affecting daily life, a pediatrician or mental-health professional can assess what's going on and recommend support. At school, the counselor or school psychologist can help, and if anxiety significantly affects learning, your child may qualify for accommodations (through a 504 plan or IEP). Sometimes a learning struggle or...



AT A GLANCE

What it is	Anxiety that interferes with s...
Common	One of the most common child c...
Can lead to	School avoidance/refusal
Very treatable	With the right support
Team	Family, school & professionals

SUPPORTS & ACCOMMODATIONS

- ✓ **Validate, then encourage** — Acknowledge the feeling and gently support facing (not avoiding) the worry
- ✓ **Small steps back in** — For school avoidance, a gradual, supported return usually beats a long absence
- ✓ **A safe person & place** — A check-in adult and a calm spot to regroup at school
- ✓ **Coping tools** — Breathing, grounding, and a plan for hard moments
- ✓ **Accommodations** — Extra time, breaks, or reduced pressure on triggers like presentations
- ✓ **Professional help** — Approaches like cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) are highly effective for child anxiety

WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

What families can do: take worries seriously without over-accommodating avoidance (which can grow the anxiety); partner early with the school counselor; and reach out to your pediatrician or a therapist if anxiety is persistent or intense. Keep routines predictable, celebrate brave steps, and remember that gradual, supported exposure —...

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Intellectual Disability

WHAT IT IS

Intellectual disability involves differences in intellectual functioning (learning, reasoning, problem-solving) and adaptive functioning (everyday practical and social skills), beginning in the developmental period. Every child is an individual with strengths, and with the right individualized support, children with intellectual...

SIGNS & CHARACTERISTICS

- ✓ **Slower pace of learning** — Concepts and skills may take longer to develop
- ✓ **Adaptive skills** — Support may be needed for daily-living and social skills
- ✓ **A range of needs** — From needing some support to needing extensive support
- ✓ **Developmental history** — Differences appear during childhood
- ✓ **Note** — A qualified evaluation — not observation alone — identifies intellectual disability

EVALUATION & TESTING

Intellectual disability is identified through a comprehensive evaluation combining measures of intellectual functioning (a cognitive test) and adaptive behavior (real-world skills), plus developmental history. It's one of IDEA's categories, so eligible students receive an IEP with individualized goals and services.



AT A GLANCE

What	A difference in intellectual &...
Involves	Learning, reasoning & everyday...
Identified by	A comprehensive evaluation
Support	Individualized instruction & s...
At school	An IDEA category (IEP)
Focus	Independence & Inclusion

SUPPORTS & ACCOMMODATIONS

- ✓ **Individualized instruction** — Goals matched to the child's needs and strengths
- ✓ **Related services** — Speech, occupational, or physical therapy as needed
- ✓ **Life-skills & independence** — Instruction in practical and social skills
- ✓ **Inclusion** — Learning alongside peers to the extent appropriate
- ✓ **Transition planning** — Preparing for adult life, work, and independence

WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

- ✓ **Start with what you notice** — Keep notes on specific examples over time
- ✓ **Talk to the school and your doctor** — Share your observations and ask about an evaluation
- ✓ **Request an evaluation in writing** — It starts the process and creates a record
- ✓ **Learn your rights** — An IEP or 504 Plan may provide support
- ✓ **Focus on strengths too** — Every child has strengths to build on

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Language & Communication

WHAT IT IS

Speech, language, and communication disorders affect how a child understands or uses language, produces speech sounds, or communicates socially. They're common, treatable, and unrelated to intelligence. A speech-language pathologist (SLP) evaluates and provides therapy — often as a related service on an IEP.

SIGNS & CHARACTERISTICS

- ✓ **Speech-sound differences** — Trouble pronouncing sounds, or being understood
- ✓ **Language differences** — Difficulty understanding or using words, grammar, or following directions
- ✓ **Fluency (stuttering)** — Disruptions in the flow of speech
- ✓ **Social (pragmatic) communication** — Difficulty with conversation, turn-taking, or reading social cues
- ✓ **Auditory processing differences** — Trouble making sense of what's heard, even with normal hearing

EVALUATION & TESTING

A speech-language pathologist evaluates speech and language using standardized tools, observation, and history. If the difference affects learning, the child may qualify for speech-language services (as a stand-alone IEP category, "speech or language impairment," or as a related service supporting another IEP).



AT A GLANCE

Includes	Speech, language & communicat...
Speech vs language	How sounds come out vs underst...
Also	Auditory & social-communicatio...
Helped by	Speech-language therapy
Evaluated by	A speech-language pathologist
At school	Often an IEP related service

SUPPORTS & ACCOMMODATIONS

- ✓ **Speech-language therapy** — Targeted work on sounds, language, fluency, or social communication
- ✓ **Classroom supports** — Simplified directions, visuals, extra processing time
- ✓ **Communication tools** — AAC for students who need alternative ways to communicate
- ✓ **Collaboration** — Between the SLP, teachers, and family
- ✓ **A specialized setting** — Some families choose a speech-language or auditory-processing school

WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

- ✓ **Start with what you notice** — Keep notes on specific examples over time
- ✓ **Talk to the school and your doctor** — Share your observations and ask about an evaluation
- ✓ **Request an evaluation in writing** — It starts the process and creates a record
- ✓ **Learn your rights** — An IEP or 504 Plan may provide support
- ✓ **Focus on strengths too** — Every child has strengths to build on

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Gifted & Twice-Exceptional

WHAT IT IS

Gifted students show advanced ability or potential — in academics, creativity, or specific talents. Twice-exceptional (2e) students are gifted and have a learning difference (like dyslexia, ADHD, or autism). 2e learners are often misunderstood : their strengths can mask their challenges, and their challenges can mask their gifts — so...

SIGNS & CHARACTERISTICS

- ✓ **Gifted signs** — Advanced reasoning, deep interests, rapid learning, or exceptional creativity
- ✓ **2e signs** — A striking gap between high ability and unexpected struggles
- ✓ **Uneven profile** — Excelling in some areas while struggling in others
- ✓ **Frustration or boredom** — Underchallenged in strengths, unsupported in challenges
- ✓ **Often overlooked** — 2e students may not be identified as gifted or as needing support

EVALUATION & TESTING

Identification uses ability (cognitive) and achievement testing — often the same psychoeducational tools (WISC, Woodcock-Johnson) used in special-education evaluations. For 2e learners, a thorough evaluation looks at both the gifts and the learning difference , since one can hide the other. Gifted screening (CogAT, NNAT, OLSAT) may also...

AT A GLANCE

Gifted	Advanced ability or potential
Twice-exceptional (2e)	Gifted + a learning difference
Often missed	Strengths can mask challenges...
Identified by	Ability & achievement testing
Support	Challenge + accommodations, to...
At school	G&T programs and/or an IEP/504

SUPPORTS & ACCOMMODATIONS

- ✓ **Challenge and accommodations** — 2e students need advanced, engaging work and support for their difference — at the same time
- ✓ **Strengths-based teaching** — Build on talents and interests
- ✓ **Accommodations** — For the learning difference (extra time, technology, etc.)
- ✓ **Gifted programming** — Enrichment or acceleration where appropriate
- ✓ **Watch social-emotional needs** — Perfectionism and frustration are common

WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

- ✓ **Start with what you notice** — Keep notes on specific examples over time
- ✓ **Talk to the school and your doctor** — Share your observations and ask about an evaluation
- ✓ **Request an evaluation in writing** — It starts the process and creates a record
- ✓ **Learn your rights** — An IEP or 504 Plan may provide support
- ✓ **Focus on strengths too** — Every child has strengths to build on

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Supports & Choosing a School

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Assistive Technology

WHAT IT IS

Assistive technology (AT) is any tool or device that helps a student with a disability access learning and do things more independently. It ranges from low-tech (a pencil grip, a slant board) to high-tech (text-to-speech, speech-to-text, communication devices). Under IDEA, the IEP team must consider AT for every student — and provide it...

HOW IT WORKS

AT is considered by the IEP team and, when needed, written into the IEP (sometimes after an AT evaluation). Devices needed for a child to receive a free appropriate public education are provided by the school, along with the training to use them. AT works best when it's matched to the student and used consistently across settings.

SUPPORTS & ACCOMMODATIONS

- ✓ **Reading supports** — Text-to-speech, audiobooks, and reading apps
- ✓ **Writing supports** — Speech-to-text, word prediction, and typing tools
- ✓ **Communication (AAC)** — Devices and apps for students who need alternative ways to communicate
- ✓ **Math supports** — Talking calculators, graph paper apps, and visual tools
- ✓ **Organization & access** — Reminders, digital planners, and adapted materials
- ✓ **Low-tech tools** — Grips, slant boards, timers, and fidgets



AT A GLANCE

What	Tools that help students access...
Examples	Text-to-speech, speech-to-text...
Range	Low-tech to high-tech
On the IEP	AT must be considered
Purpose	Independence & access
Cost	Provided when needed for FAPE

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- ✓ **What counts as assistive technology?** — Any tool that helps a student access learning — from a pencil grip to a communication device.
- ✓ **Does the school provide it?** — Yes, when it's needed for the child to benefit from their education.
- ✓ **How do we get AT?** — The IEP team considers it; an AT evaluation may help identify the right tools.
- ✓ **Is training included?** — Yes — the student (and often staff/family) get training to use it.
- ✓ **Can AT go home?** — Often yes, when needed for the child to complete schoolwork.

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Transition Planning

WHAT IT IS

Transition planning prepares a student with an IEP for life after high school — postsecondary education, a career, and independent living. It becomes a formal part of the IEP by age 16 (earlier in many states), and it's built around the student's own goals , with growing emphasis on self-advocacy .

HOW IT WORKS

- ✓ **Postsecondary goals** — The plan sets measurable goals for education/training, employment, and (as needed) independent living
- ✓ **Transition services** — Courses, experiences, and connections that move the student toward those goals
- ✓ **Student voice** — The student is invited and increasingly leads their own planning
- ✓ **Agency connections** — Links to vocational rehabilitation and adult-service agencies
- ✓ **Age of majority** — Rights transfer to the student at 18 (unless other arrangements are made) — plan for this

WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

- ✓ **Start early** — Even before 16, think about your child's interests and goals
- ✓ **Build self-advocacy** — Help your child understand and speak to their own needs
- ✓ **Explore options** — College (with disability services), career/technical paths, apprenticeships, and supported employment
- ✓ **Connect to adult services** — Vocational rehabilitation and community agencies
- ✓ **Understand rights at 18** — Educational rights transfer to the student unless arranged otherwise

AT A GLANCE

What	Planning for life after high s...
Starts by	Age 16 (earlier in many states...
Goals	College, career & Independent...
Part of	The IEP
Builds	Self-advocacy skills
Connects to	Vocational rehab & adult servl...

TERMS TO KNOW

- ✓ **Postsecondary goals** — Goals for after high school (education, work, independence)
- ✓ **Self-advocacy** — A student's ability to understand and speak to their own needs
- ✓ **Vocational rehabilitation** — A state agency that supports employment for people with disabilities
- ✓ **Age of majority** — When rights transfer to the student (usually 18)

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- ✓ **When does transition planning start?** — By age 16 in the IEP — earlier in many states.
- ✓ **What does it cover?** — Goals and services for education/training, employment, and independent living.
- ✓ **Does my child take part?** — Yes — students are invited and increasingly lead their own planning.
- ✓ **What happens to rights at 18?** — They generally transfer to the student unless other arrangements are made.
- ✓ **How does college support work?** — Colleges provide accommodations under Section 504/ADA — the student requests them.

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Choosing a School

WHAT IT IS

Choosing where a child with a learning difference will thrive is one of the biggest decisions families make. There's no single right answer — the goal is to match the school to your child's specific needs and strengths . Public schools must provide support through an IEP or 504 Plan; some families also consider schools that specialize in...

HOW IT WORKS

- ✓ **Public school (with an IEP/504)** — Your neighborhood public school must provide a free appropriate public education and support in the least restrictive environment
- ✓ **Public specialized programs** — Some districts have specialized classrooms or programs
- ✓ **Specialized private schools** — Schools designed around a specific difference (dyslexia, autism, ADHD, language-based LD, and more)
- ✓ **Charter, magnet, or online schools** — Other public options that may fit some students
- ✓ **Placement via the IEP** — In some cases, the team determines a specialized placement (sometimes publicly funded)

SUPPORTS & ACCOMMODATIONS

- ✓ **Questions to ask any school** — How do you support students with my child's difference? What's the staff's training and specialization? What's the class size and support ratio? How...
- ✓ **For specialized schools** — What differences do you focus on? What's your instructional approach and evidence base? What are outcomes and next steps for students?



AT A GLANCE

Options	Public, specialized private &...
Public schools	Must provide FAPE via an IEP/504
Specialized schools	Focus on specific differences
Key	Match the school to your child
Ask about	Support, staff, and approach
Use	Our school-type guides

WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

- ✓ **Clarify your child's needs** — What support, environment, and approach help them most
- ✓ **Visit and observe** — See classes, meet staff, and get a feel for the culture
- ✓ **Ask specific questions** — See the checklist below
- ✓ **Consider the whole child** — Academics, social-emotional wellbeing, and belonging all matter
- ✓ **Know your rights** — Public schools must provide support; explore all options before deciding

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- ✓ **Do I have to use a specialized school?** — No — many children thrive in public school with an IEP/504; specialized schools are one option.
- ✓ **Will a specialized school be free?** — Sometimes the IEP team determines a publicly funded placement; otherwise private schools charge tuition (see our financial-aid guides).
- ✓ **What should I ask?** — About support, staff training, class size, individualization, and how they measure progress.
- ✓ **How do I find schools that specialize?** — Browse our school-type guides for dyslexia, autism, ADHD, and more.
- ✓ **What matters most?** — Matching the school to your child's specific needs and strengths.

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