

What Parent's Need To Know

Some children experience difficulties in school, ranging from problems with concentration, learning, language and perception, to problems with behavior, and/or making and keeping friends. These difficulties may be due to one or more of the following: physical disorders, psychiatric disorders, emotional problems, behavioral problems, and learning disorders or disabilities. These children with special needs are usually entitled to receive special services or accommodations through the public schools. Federal law mandates that every child will receive a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. It also entitles children with special needs to receive extra services.

To support their ability to learn in school, three Federal laws apply to children with special needs:

1. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (1975)
2. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973
3. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (1990).

Between states, there are different criteria for eligibility, services available, procedures for implementing the Federal laws and procedural safeguards. It is important for parents to be aware of the laws and regulations in their particular area.

IDEA is a federal law (1975, amended by the Office of Special Education Programs in 1997) that governs all special education services for children in the United States. Under IDEA, in order for a child to be eligible for special education, they must be in one of the following categories: serious emotional disturbance, learning disabilities, mental retardation, traumatic brain injury, autism, vision and hearing impairments, physical disabilities and/or other health impairments.

Section 504 is a civil rights statute (1973) that requires schools not discriminate against children with disabilities and provide them with reasonable accommodations. It covers all programs or activities, whether public or private, that receive federal financial assistance. Reasonable accommodations include un-timed tests, sitting in front of the class, modified homework, and the provision of necessary services. Typically, children covered under Section 504 either have less severe disabilities than those covered under IDEA, or have disabilities that do not fit within the eligibility categories of IDEA. Under section 504, any person who has an impairment that substantially limits a major life activity is considered disabled. Learning and social development are included under the list of major life activities.

ADA (1990) requires all educational institutions, other than those operated by religious organizations, to meet the needs of children with psychiatric problems. The ADA prohibits the denial of educational services, programs or activities to students with disabilities and prohibits discrimination against all such students. As a parent, you may request an evaluation of your child to determine his or her needs for special education and/or related services.



These are the steps you need to take: initially, meet with your child's teacher to share your concerns and request an evaluation by the school's child study team. All requests for evaluations and services should be made in writing and dated. Always keep a copy for your records. Keep careful records, including observations reported by your child's teachers and any communications (notes, reports, letters, etc.) between home and school. Parents can also request independent professional evaluations. The results of the evaluation determine your child's eligibility to receive a range of services under the applicable law. Following the evaluation, an Individualized Education Program (IEP) is developed. Parents are entitled to participate in the development of the IEP. Examples of categories of services in IEPs include: Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, Speech and Language Therapy and/or the provision of a classroom aide. Parents do not determine whether their child is eligible under the law. However, the findings of school's evaluation team are not final. You have the right to appeal their conclusions and determination and the school is required to provide you with information about how to make an appeal.

What A Parent Can Do . . .

Children with special needs are guaranteed rights to services in school under federal and state laws. Parents should always advocate for their child. The process, however, can be confusing and intimidating for parents. Here are some tips: Parents must be proactive and take necessary steps to make sure their child receives appropriate services. Parents should request copies of their school district's Section 504 plan. This is especially important when a school district refuses services. If the school district does not respond to your request, you can contact a U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights Regional Office for assistance. If the school district refuses services under the IDEA or Section 504 or both, you may choose to challenge this decision through a due process hearing. It may also be necessary to retain your own attorney if you decide to appeal a school's decision. Other resources for parents include the State Department of Education and Bazelon Center for Health Law.