

FREE GUIDE

Navigating School Support

A parent's complete guide to 504 Plans, IEPs, and mental health accommodations. Know your child's rights, what to request, and how to get the school to say yes.

8 pages | [Printable](#) | [Shareable](#)

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Your child deserves to succeed at school. This guide helps you make that happen.

Your Child Has Rights. Here Is How to Use Them.

If your child has been diagnosed with ADHD, anxiety, depression, OCD, a learning disability, or any condition that affects their ability to learn, they are likely entitled to formal accommodations at school. These are not favors. They are legal protections.

Many parents do not know these options exist, or they find the process so confusing that they give up. This guide walks you through everything step by step.

504 Plan vs. IEP: What Is the Difference?

There are two main types of school support plans:

504 Plan (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act)

- Provides accommodations: changes to HOW your child learns (extra time, preferred seating, breaks)
 - Does NOT change WHAT your child learns — same curriculum, same classroom
 - Requires a qualifying disability that affects a "major life activity" (learning counts)
 - Easier and faster to get than an IEP
 - Available at all public schools and many private schools that receive federal funding
 - Best for: children who can keep up academically with the right support

IEP (Individualized Education Program, under IDEA)

- Provides specialized instruction: may include modified curriculum, pull-out services, one-on-one support
 - Includes related services: speech therapy, occupational therapy, counseling, behavioral support
 - Requires formal evaluation by the school district (you can request this in writing)
 - More comprehensive and legally binding than a 504
 - Includes annual goals, progress monitoring, and transition planning for older students
 - Best for: children who need more intensive support to access education

Which Conditions Qualify?

Both 504 Plans and IEPs can cover psychiatric and neurological conditions. Common qualifying diagnoses include:

- ADHD (all types)
 - Generalized Anxiety Disorder
 - Social Anxiety Disorder
 - Major Depressive Disorder / Persistent Depressive Disorder
 - Bipolar Disorder
 - Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)
 - Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
 - Autism Spectrum Disorder
 - Specific Learning Disabilities (dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia)
 - Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD)
 - Tourette Syndrome
 - Any other condition that substantially limits learning

Key Point:

The diagnosis alone does not guarantee eligibility. What matters is whether the condition substantially affects your child's ability to learn. A letter from your child's psychiatrist documenting how the diagnosis impacts academic functioning is one of the most powerful tools in this process.

Step-by-Step: How to Request Support

Step 1: Put It in Writing

Send an email or letter to your child's school principal or special education coordinator. Here is a template:

Dear [Principal / Special Education Coordinator],

I am writing to formally request an evaluation for a [504 Plan / IEP] for my child, [Child's Name], who is in [Grade] at [School Name].

[Child's Name] has been diagnosed with [Diagnosis] by [Dr. Name], a board-certified psychiatrist. This condition is significantly affecting [his/her/their] ability to [describe: focus in class, complete assignments, manage anxiety, attend school regularly, etc.].

I am attaching documentation from [his/her/their] psychiatrist. Please let me know the next steps and timeline for this evaluation. I look forward to working together to support [Child's Name].

Sincerely, [Your Name]

Step 2: Get a Letter from Your Psychiatrist

Ask your child's psychiatrist (Dr. Shapiro or another provider) for a letter that includes:

- The specific diagnosis
 - How the condition affects your child's academic performance and school behavior
 - Specific accommodations recommended
 - That the condition is expected to last 6+ months (for 504 eligibility)

Step 3: Attend the Meeting

The school will schedule a meeting (often called a 504 meeting or IEP team meeting). Here is how to prepare:

- Bring your psychiatrist's letter and any relevant reports
 - Bring your own list of specific accommodations you want (see list on next page)
 - You can bring a support person (spouse, advocate, friend)
 - Take notes or ask if you can record the meeting
 - Ask questions about anything you do not understand
 - Remember: you are an equal member of this team, not a guest

Step 4: Review the Plan

- Read the written plan carefully before signing
 - Make sure it includes everything discussed in the meeting
 - You can request changes or additions
 - Ask for a copy of the signed plan
 - Set a reminder to review it at the start of each school year

If the School Says No:

You have the right to appeal. Request the denial in writing. Ask what additional information they need. You can request an independent educational evaluation at the school district's expense. Contact your state's Parent Training and Information Center (PTI) for free advocacy support — find yours at parentcenterhub.org.

Accommodations by Diagnosis

Here are specific accommodations that have been shown to help for common diagnoses. Request the ones that match your child's needs:

ADHD Accommodations

- Extended time on tests (typically 1.5x)
 - Preferential seating near the teacher and away from distractions
 - Permission to take movement breaks
 - Chunking large assignments into smaller pieces with separate due dates
 - Written instructions in addition to verbal
 - Use of fidget tools (quietly)
 - Daily planner or communication folder checked by teacher
 - Reduced homework load if homework takes more than 1.5x the expected time
 - Permission to use noise-canceling headphones during independent work

Anxiety Accommodations

- Permission to leave the classroom when overwhelmed (pre-arranged safe space)
- Advance notice of changes in routine or substitute teachers
- Option to present to teacher privately instead of in front of the class
 - Extended time on tests (anxiety slows processing)
 - Permission to call a parent if anxiety becomes acute
 - Gradual re-entry plan for school avoidance
 - Reduced social pressure in group activities
 - Testing in a separate, quiet room

Depression Accommodations

- Flexible due dates during depressive episodes
 - Permission to see the school counselor as needed
 - Reduced homework load during acute periods
 - Attendance flexibility with a plan for making up work
 - Check-ins with a designated staff member (daily or weekly)
 - Modified PE requirements if energy is severely impacted
 - Access to a quiet space during lunch if social interaction feels overwhelming

OCD Accommodations

- Extended time on tests and assignments (rituals can slow completion)
 - Permission to leave the classroom for compulsions if needed
 - Access to the school counselor during acute episodes
 - No penalty for tardiness related to OCD rituals
 - Modified assignments if handwriting compulsions affect output (typing allowed)
 - Staff awareness training about OCD (it is not about being neat or organized)

Your Rights as a Parent

- You have the right to request an evaluation at any time
 - The school must respond within a reasonable timeframe (usually 30-60 d
 - You must give written consent before the school can evaluate your child
 - You can disagree with the school's evaluation and request an independent
 - Plans must be reviewed annually (at minimum)
 - Accommodations follow your child to any public school they attend
 - You can file a complaint with the Office for Civil Rights if y

Resources and Support

- Parent Center Hub: parentcenterhub.org — Find your state's free parent advocacy center
- Understood.org: understood.org — Comprehensive guides on 504s, IEPs, and school support
 - Wrightslaw: wrightslaw.com — The definitive resource on special education law
 - NAMI: nami.org — Mental health support and education for families
 - Your child's psychiatrist — can provide letters, attend meetings, and advise on accommodations

Documentation Checklist

- & Psychiatric evaluation report or diagnosis letter
- & List of specific accommodations requested
- & Report cards and teacher comments
 - & Any previous testing (neuropsychological, educational)
 - & Examples of how the condition affects school performance
 - & Communication log with the school
 - & Copy of signed 504 Plan or IEP (once in place)

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This guide is for informational purposes only and does not constitute medical advice. Always consult with a qualified healthcare provider for diagnosis and treatment.