My Kid’s Teacher Doesn’t Understand Their Neurodivergence… Now What?

A Sanity-Saving, Advocate-Empowering, Reality-Accepting Guide for Real Parents Navigating Real Classrooms

Welcome to the Club of Tight Smiles and Deep Frustration

You have shared the diagnosis, sent the report, and explained the struggle. Then another email arrives: “They just need to try harder.” You are beginning to suspect your inbox has become a second job.

At home, you may be seeing exhaustion, tears, homework shutdowns, or school avoidance. At school, the teacher may see something different. Neither account should be dismissed. They are pieces of the same child’s experience.

> **Now what, when your child needs help and every conversation seems to circle back to “behavior”?**

This guide helps you turn concern into an actionable request: describe the problem, identify the barrier, agree on support, and follow up. Collaboration is useful. Accountability matters, too.

Keep the goal clear

You do not need the teacher to agree with every interpretation. You need your child’s needs evaluated, required supports implemented, and concerns taken seriously.

U.S. public K–12 school guidance, with Michigan resources. Private schools and other settings have different rules. General parent education, not individualized legal advice.

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Different Settings. Useful Information.

A mismatch may involve training gaps, unclear support plans, workload, bias, or differences in what adults observe. Do not guess which explanation applies. Ask what is happening and what support is available.

“We don’t see that here”

That can be useful information without disproving your experience. Ask about task demands, transitions, peer interactions, adult support, and the effort needed to get through the day. Some children hide distress; others struggle with demands at home. After-school distress alone does not establish masking.

> **“I’m glad that part is going smoothly at school. We’re seeing significant distress afterward. Can we compare patterns and look at what might help?”**

“Their grades are fine”

Consider attendance, participation, work completion, independence, and distress, not only report cards. Good grades do not automatically rule out disability-related needs or a school’s obligation to evaluate. [1]

“They refuse to do the work”

Ask for a description: what task, which step, what directions, what happened before, and what help changed the response? Refusal can have several explanations. A label alone does not tell you whether a student needs instruction, a task adjustment, communication support, or a different response.

> **“What did the task require, and which part seemed to break down? What happened when support was offered?”**

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Describe the Barrier. Name the Support.

Bring observations, not a diagnosis lecture

Summarize strengths, the current difficulty, and the support you want considered. Share relevant report sections rather than expecting a teacher to interpret every page. Ask what the teacher notices and include your child’s perspective.

Observed difficulty	Support to discuss
Loses track of multi-step directions	Written or visual steps, one step at a time, and a check for understanding
Struggles to shift activities	Advance warning, visual schedule, and a clear first step
Distressed by classroom noise	An appropriate quieter setting or hearing protection for selected tasks
Cannot start or complete writing	Assessment of writing needs; planning supports, dictation, or explicit instruction as appropriate
Confused by peer interactions	Direct explanation, supported practice, and a trusted adult for help

> **“When directions are only spoken, they often lose the sequence. Could we discuss a written checklist and see whether it improves independent completion?”**

These are discussion examples, not universal prescriptions. Supports should fit the student, task, safety requirements, and evaluation findings. Ask for appropriate assessment when the need is unclear.

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A Support Plan Must Reach the Classroom

If your child has an IEP or 504 plan

Identify the exact provision involved. An IEP must be accessible to staff responsible for implementing it, and those staff must be informed of their responsibilities and the required supports. [2] A school must provide the services and supports needed under Section 504; a teacher’s preference does not make an agreed plan optional. [3]

> **“The plan specifies a low-distraction setting for tests. Please confirm how that was provided and how it will be arranged for the next test.”**

Request a team meeting if the plan is unclear, implementation is inconsistent, or your child’s needs have changed. Ask who owns each action and when the team will review results.

If your child does not have a plan

You may request evaluation in writing when you suspect disability-related educational needs. Describe the concerns and ask about IDEA and Section 504, as appropriate. A private diagnosis can inform the process but does not automatically establish eligibility. [1, 3]

Keep a brief factual record

• Date, task or situation, what was reported or observed, and the impact on your child.

• Which support was expected, what was provided, and what response you received.

• Relevant work samples, attendance information, and your child’s own words, identified as their report.

After a meeting, send a concise summary of actions, owners, and follow-up dates. Invite corrections. Documentation should make the problem easier to resolve, not become another full-time job.

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Advocate Firmly. Protect the Connection.

You rage-draft an email

Write the version you want to send. Then write the one that states the concern, the evidence, and the requested action. Your strongest argument should not get buried under six paragraphs of understandable fury.

> **“I’m concerned about repeated public correction during reading. My child reports feeling humiliated and is now avoiding the task. Please meet with me to review what is happening and agree on a response.”**

You start questioning yourself

You can be open to new information without dismissing your child. A teacher can have a different view and still need to address a concern. Ask for specifics, not permission to care.

Your child comes home unraveling

Offer food, quiet, movement, or company according to their needs. Save detailed questions for a calmer moment. Ask, “Do you want me to listen, help solve it, or give you a little space?”

> **“Finding something hard does not make you lazy or bad. Tell me what happened, and we’ll work out the next step.”**

Keep your child out of adult email battles. You can explain that you are working with school without asking them to collect evidence, prove their distress, or decide which adult is wrong.

School avoidance needs a plan

Repeated absence, panic, or significant distress deserves prompt attention from school and the child’s health care team. Investigate learning demands, bullying, health concerns, and other contributors rather than simply insisting on attendance or allowing avoidance to expand. [4]

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You Can Be Civil and Clear.

If concerns persist, contact the case manager or 504 coordinator and appropriate administrator. Request a written response, a meeting, and a concrete implementation or evaluation plan. You do not have to repeat informal conversations indefinitely.

> **“I raised this concern on [dates], and it remains unresolved. Please confirm the next steps, the person responsible, and the timeline for addressing it.”**

For safety concerns, bullying, threats, humiliating treatment, or denied required supports, raise the issue promptly. You do not need to wait through a trial period while your child is being harmed.

Know the available routes

Ask for procedural safeguards. IDEA concerns may involve mediation, state complaints, or due process, depending on the issue. Section 504 concerns may involve district grievance procedures, an impartial hearing, or an Office for Civil Rights complaint. These routes have different rules and deadlines. [3, 5, 6]

In Michigan, the Department of Education provides special education dispute-resolution information. Michigan Alliance for Families offers parent information and support; Special Education Mediation Services can assist with appropriate dispute-resolution options. [5]

Your job is not to prove that every hard day is someone’s fault. It is to make sure the adults investigate, respond, and follow through. Your child needs support that works beyond the meeting room.

Sources & parent resources

[1] ED/OCR: Disability Discrimination FAQs.
[2] IDEA: 34 CFR 300.323(d).
[3] ED/OCR: Section 504 FAPE FAQs.
[4] AAP: School Avoidance.
[5] Michigan MDE Dispute Resolution; Michigan Alliance for Families; Special Education Mediation Services.
[6] ED/OCR: File a Civil Rights Complaint.
General parent education. Consult qualified professionals about your child and specific legal concerns.

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