

504 Plan vs. IEP: What's the Difference and Why It Matters

A practical guide for parents navigating school support plans

First Things First: What Neuropsychological Testing Tells You

A neuropsychological evaluation is often the starting point for understanding your child's unique brain — how they learn, process, focus, regulate emotions, and interact with the world.

It can help identify:

- Learning disabilities (like dyslexia, dyscalculia, or dysgraphia)
- Attention issues (like ADHD or executive functioning deficits)
- Social/emotional concerns (like anxiety, autism, or trauma-related patterns)

More importantly, it **translates the “what” into the “now what”** — outlining concrete recommendations for **how your child learns best** and **what they need at school**. This testing can **trigger the process of requesting a 504 Plan or IEP**, giving schools the data they need to build meaningful support.

What 504 and IEP Plans Have in Common

Both a **504 Plan** and an **IEP (Individualized Education Program)** are legal tools designed to help students with disabilities or learning differences access education and make progress.

They both:

- ✓ Provide formal supports
- ✓ Are developed by a team (including you!)
- ✓ Can include accommodations, services, and monitoring
- ✓ Must be followed by the school

But they **are not the same**, and knowing which one fits your child's needs is key to advocating effectively.

504 Plan: Leveling the Playing Field

Law: Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (civil rights law)

Goal: Access — removing barriers so the child can participate in general education

Who Qualifies:

- A physical or mental impairment (diagnosed condition or documented challenge)
- That substantially limits one or more **major life activities** (like learning, concentrating, regulating emotions)
- **No need for specialized instruction** — just support to access learning

What It Offers:

- **Accommodations** (not instruction changes)
- Sometimes minor **related services**
- **Push-in support** from counselors, behavior specialists, or aides
- Support plans updated annually

Examples of 504 Accommodations:

- Extended time on tests and assignments
- Preferential seating
- Movement or sensory breaks
- Use of headphones or noise-canceling tools
- Reduced homework load
- Visual schedules or checklists
- Behavior support plans
- Ability to leave class to access a quiet space
- Modified PE expectations due to physical or emotional needs
- Extra transition time between classes

Great Fit For:

- ADHD
- Anxiety
- Sensory processing challenges
- Medical conditions (e.g., epilepsy, Type 1 diabetes, migraines)
- Mild executive functioning issues

IEP: Tailored Instruction and Services

Law: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Goal: Progress — providing specialized instruction so the child can learn and thrive at their own level

Who Qualifies:

- Has one of **13 federally recognized disabilities** (e.g., autism, SLD, emotional disturbance, ADHD under OHI)
- AND needs **specialized instruction** to make academic or functional progress

What It Offers:

- **Special education services** (in or out of general ed setting)
- **Accommodations AND modifications**
- **Push-in or pull-out services** from specialists
- **Annual goals** based on current performance
- Related services (e.g., OT, speech, social work, counseling)
- Transition planning (starting by age 16)
- Legally enforceable team reviews every year, re-evaluation every 3 years

Where Push-In Services Happen:

- **In the general education classroom**
- Provided by a special education teacher, aide, speech therapist, behavior specialist, or other service provider
- Goal: support the child *without removing them from peers*

Examples of IEP Supports:

- All 504 accommodations listed above
- Modified curriculum (e.g., simpler reading materials)
- Small group or 1:1 instruction for reading/writing/math
- Social skills groups
- Speech-language therapy
- Occupational therapy
- Behavior intervention plans (BIP)
- Visual supports or assistive technology
- Paraprofessional (1:1 aide)
- Alternative assessments
- Support with transitions (between activities, classrooms, schools)

Great Fit For:

- Autism
- Dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia
- ADHD with significant impact
- Intellectual disabilities
- Language or speech delays
- Emotional or behavioral disorders
- Processing speed or memory issues that affect learning

🤔 Still Not Sure? Here's a Side-by-Side Comparison

Feature	504 Plan	IEP
Law	Section 504 (Rehab Act)	IDEA (Special Education Law)
Focus	Equal access	Individualized instruction + services
Qualification Requirement	Any disability that limits life activities	One of 13 categories and need for SPED
Requires Evaluation	Not always (but helpful)	✅ Yes — comprehensive and formal
Includes Accommodations	✅ Yes	✅ Yes
Includes Modifications	❌ No	✅ Yes
Includes Specialized Instruction	❌ No	✅ Yes

Includes Measurable Goals	✗	✓ Yes
Related Services	Sometimes	✓ Yes — as needed
Push-In Services	✓ Occasionally (e.g., behavioral coaching)	✓ Frequently (OT, social work, co-teaching)
Legal Power & Enforcement	Yes, but fewer specifics than IEP	Strong legal protections + compliance rules
Review Timeline	Annually	Annual IEP + 3-year re-eval



Tips for Parents

- **Don't guess — ask.** You have the right to request an evaluation for either plan at any time.
- **504 Plans protect access; IEPs support learning growth.**
- If your child is falling behind academically or socially despite “trying their best,” they may need more than accommodations — they may need an IEP.
- Don't be afraid to **bring your neuropsych testing** to your meeting. It's a powerful tool that explains *why* your child struggles and *how* to help.