

Getting Ready For School: Accommodations & Modifications

The following article is reprinted with permission from the newsletter of Matrix Parent Network and Resource Center. We hope it will help those of you who are parents better understand your child's rights and needs as you navigate through the public-school system.

What are accommodations and modifications?

Accommodations and modifications are types of adaptations made to the learning environment and curriculum, as well as teaching methods and testing procedures. These adaptations are needed by students with learning differences or learning differences or ADD/ADHD to enable them to progress with the general curriculum and participate actively in the classroom and in school-wide activities.

What is the difference between accommodations and modifications?

Accommodations change the way students access instruction and demonstrate proficiency, but do not fundamentally change the course content standards or expectations. Examples of accommodations would be: seating near the teacher, extended time for taking tests, shortened assignments. Modifications do alter what students are expected to learn, but still allow them to interact meaningfully and productively with other students in classroom and school learning experiences. Examples of modifications would be: use of a calculator on a math test, alternative books or materials on the same theme or topic, test questions re worded using simpler language.

This sounds like a lot of work for educators.

Why are they willing to take all this on?

The provision of these 'adaptations to program' is a duty mandated by law. Receiving these adaptations is a civil right of disabled students. Congress enacted legislation as follows: the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1991, and the IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). These laws specify that educating individuals with special needs in the general education environment, enabling them

to access the same educational benefits enjoyed by non-disabled peers, is the first priority of educators. If they do not, they are out of compliance with both federal and state laws.

Would my child's grades be impacted by the use of accommodations or modifications?

Accommodations would not fundamentally alter a child's grades. Modifications would. When a student with an IEP receives modifications, this decision would be carefully discussed at his or her IEP meeting. It is crucial that a parent supply "informed consent" to this decision since, among other issues, it could ultimately affect promotion/retention and high school graduation.

When would it be appropriate to accept modified curriculum for my child?

This is a tough one. An IEP team, including most importantly the parents, would try to gauge the child's ability and consider carefully whether, with specialized instruction techniques and tools, a child can gain sufficient mastery of his or her grade content standards. It is recommended that the decision to modify curriculum be made using extreme caution, and only after other instructional accommodations have been fully explored and found to be insufficient.

What about accommodations? How would I know what to ask for?

To the best of my knowledge, there is no master list of accommodation. This is because accommodations can only be determined by an IEP team based on what the team considers appropriate for the student. However the IEP form in use by your Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA includes an impressive menu of possibilities. If you intend to address the

subject of accommodations/modifications at your child's next IEP meeting, you can request a blank copy of this form either from your child's special ed. teacher or directly from your local SELPA.

Accommodations have been included on my child's IEP, but I'm not sure if he/she is receiving them to any effective extent. How can I monitor this?

Touch bases with your child's general-ed. teacher(s) at the beginning of the school year. Make sure they have a copy of the appropriate page of your child's IEP. Having a face-to-face meeting to review this before the school year starts would be ideal. Then, the obvious, check in with your child. Are they seated where they need to sit? Have they been allowed extra time for tests, etc.? Continue to touch base with your child's teachers(s). Do this as unobtrusively as possible every other week. Voice mail and email may be the most appropriate.

How do I know when the accommodations are doing what they are supposed to?

When your child is making progress with their curriculum.

My child has accommodations written into his/her IEP, but the general education teacher doesn't seem on board with implementing them. What can I do?

There are several possibilities: (a) The teacher has not had sufficient training to know how to implement accommodations and modifications in the classroom. (b) The teacher knows how to provide accommodations or modifications but doesn't want to. (c) The teacher is willing and able, but the school has a faculty culture negatively biased towards supporting "differently-abled" students. Perhaps the principal doesn't encourage teachers to focus time and energy on adapting programs.

Once you have sized up the situation, schedule an IEP meeting. Try to address the situation from the standpoint that you are in an equal, respectful partnership with your IEP

team. If you continue to encounter difficulty, call your local parent-to-parent group for assistance.

What if my child resists accommodations that are being offered by his/ her teacher in accordance with the IEP?

Try to involve your child to the maximum extent possible in their educational decision. A student might cooperate more fully if they have had input into their IEP. Perhaps they feel stigmatized socially. If this is the case, a conference with your child's teacher could work wonders. It might be possible to offer the accommodations more subtly.

What about assistive technology? Is that an accommodation to be considered for my child?

Absolutely. In fact, it is an obligation for each IEP team to consider the question. With the many new developments in educational software and computers, using technology to augment learning disabilities is a very promising new area. At your child's next IEP meeting, let your team know you want to evaluate this option by having an assistive technology referral written into your child's IEP.

Accommodations for Children with learning differences or learning differences or ADD/ADHD

Children and youth with learning differences or learning differences or ADD/ADHD often have serious problems in school. Inattention, impulsiveness, hyperactivity, disorganization, and other difficulties can lead to unfinished assignments, careless errors, and behavior which is disruptive to one's self and others. Through the implementation of relatively simple and straightforward accommodations to the classroom environment or teaching style, teachers can adapt to the strengths and weaknesses of student with learning differences or ADD/ADHD. Small changes in how a teacher approaches the student with learning differences or ADD/ADHD or in what the teacher expects can turn a losing year into a winning one for the child.

Examples of accommodations which teachers can make to adapt to the needs of students with learning or ADD/ADHD are grouped below according to areas of difficulty.

Inattention

- Seat student in quiet area
- Seat student near good role model
- Seat student near "study buddy"
- Increase distance between desks
- Allow extra time to complete assigned work
- Shorten assignments or work periods to coincide with span of attention: use timer
- Break long assignments into smaller parts so student can see and end to the work.
- Assist student in setting short-term goals
- Give assignments one at a time to avoid work overload
- Reduce amount of homework
- Instruct student in self-monitoring using cueing
- Pair written instructions with oral instructions
- Provide peer assistance in note taking
- Give clear, concise instructions
- Seek to involve student in lesson presentation
- Cue student to stay on task, i.e. private signal
- Supervise closely during transition times
- Use "prudent" reprimands for misbehavior (i.e., avoid lecturing or criticism)
- Attend to positive behavior with compliments, etc.
- Acknowledge positive behavior of nearby student
- Seat student near good role model or near teacher
- Set up behavior contract
- Instruct student in self-monitoring of behavior, i.e. hand raising, calling out
- Call on only when hand is raised in appropriate manner
- Praise student when hand is raised to answer question

Motor Activity

- Allow student to stand at times while working
- Provide opportunity for "seat breaks" i.e., run errands, etc.
- Provide short break between assignments
- Supervise closely during transition times
- Remind student to check over work pr
- Give extra time to complete tasks

Impulsiveness

- Ignore minor, inappropriate behavior
- Increase immediacy of rewards and consequences
- Use time-out procedure for misbehavior

Mood

- Provide reassurance and encouragement
- Frequently compliment positive behavior and work product
- Review instructions when giving new assignments to make sure student comprehends directions

- Look for opportunities for student to display leadership role in class
- Conference frequently with parents
- Send positive notes home
- Make time to talk alone with student
- Encourage social interactions with classmates if student is withdrawn or shy
- Reinforce frequently when signs of frustration are noticed
- Look for signs of stress build up and provide encouragement to alleviate pressure and avoid temper outbursts
- Provide brief training in anger control – use calming strategies

Academic Skills

- If reading is weak, provide additional reading time; use “previewing” strategies; select text with less on the page; shorten amount of required reading; avoid oral reading
- If oral expression is weak- substitute display for oral report; encourage student to tell about new ideas or experiences; pick topics easy for student to talk about
- If written language is weak- accept non-written forms for reports (i.e., displays, oral projects); accept use of word processor; tape recorder, do not assign large quantity of written work; test with multiple choice of fill-in questions
- If math is weak- allow use of calculator; use graph paper to space numbers; provide additional math time; provide immediate correctness feedback and instruction via modeling of the correct computational procedure

Organization Planning

- Ask for parental help in encouraging organization
- Provide organization rules
- Encourage student to have notebook with dividers and folders for work
- Provide student with homework assignment book

- Supervise writing down of homework assignments
- Send daily/weekly progress reports home
- Regularly check desk, notebook, backpack for neatness
- Allow students to have extra set of books at home
- Give assignments one at a time
- Assist student in setting short-term goals
- Do not penalize for poor handwriting if visual-motor deficits are present
- Encourage learning of keyboarding skills
- Allow student to tape record assignments for homework

Compliance

- Praise compliant behavior
- Provide immediate feedback
- Ignore minor misbehavior
- Use teacher attention to reinforce positive behavior
- Acknowledge positive behavior of nearby student
- Supervise student closely during transition times
- Seat student near teacher
- Set up behavior contract
- Implement classroom behavior management system
- Instruct student in self-monitoring of behavior

Socialization

- Praise appropriate behavior
- Monitor social interactions
- Set up social behavior goals with student and implement a reward program
- Prompt appropriate social behavior with verbally or with private signal
- Encourage cooperative learning tasks with other students
- Provide small group social skills training
- Praise student frequently
- Assign special responsibilities to student in presence of peer group so others observe student in positive light

School Programs & IEP's for children with learning differences or ADD/ADHD

Children with attention deficit disorder may qualify for special education as other health impaired (OHI), learning disabled (LD), or emotionally disturbed(ED). Their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) should include goals both for academics and behavior. Generally, children with learning differences or ADD/ADHD require help with organizational tasks, completing assignments, and filling in the gaps in their knowledge which occur because they have not been able to pay attention.

☆ Academics

The assessment of the child for special education provides information about the skills and concepts that the child is missing. These missing skills can then become goal areas for the IEP. For example, if a child has not learned the concept of borrowing in subtraction, the IEP can include a goal and objectives focusing on subtraction.

☆ Classroom Modifications

A student with learning differences or ADD/ADHD may also require some modifications of regular classroom assignments and routines. For example, the child may benefit from having directions repeated or from having a chart of daily assignments taped on the desk. Some children with learning differences or ADD/ADHD do well with shortened assignments and more frequent praise for completing smaller chunks of their work. Many children with learning differences or ADD/ADHD benefit from opportunities throughout the school day to get up and move and to be physically involved in a learning task.

With children who have learning differences or ADD/ADHD, it is important that the IEP focus on a few skills that are essential for the child to learn. Other skills of lesser importance should be ignored for the time being, so that the child can concentrate on accomplishing a manageable number of tasks. For example, if a child is working on developing written language skills, then handwriting, and perhaps even spelling, may be of lesser importance. The child should feel a sense of accomplishment in generating complete sentences, even though the handwriting and spelling may be less than perfect. The focus in academics should be on achieving as much success as possible and on providing frequent praise and attention for small steps in the right direction.

☆ Behavior

Behavior is another significant issue for the IEP. The ultimate goal for children with learning differences or ADD/ADHD is for them to learn to recognize their inappropriate behaviors and control them as much as possible. Again, the IEP should address working on a limited number of behaviors or habits, the ones that most need changing in order for the child to be successful in school. The goals should be set at reasonable levels and the new behaviors should be expected to develop over time, not on the first day the IEP is implemented.

It is critical that children with learning differences or ADD/ADHD have alternatives available to them so that they can express their emotions in acceptable ways when they are feeling frustrated, angry, or overexcited. Even children as young as first grade should be taught to recognize when their feelings are getting out of control and to remove themselves from the group in order to calm down.

Sometimes it is helpful for the teacher to signal the child with a hand gesture or a quiet word which indicates to the child it is time to "take a break." Acceptable time outs might include leaving the classroom and walking up and down in the hall for a few minutes, taking a seat at a learning center in the back of the room, putting on earphones and listening to music, or even removal to the nurse's or principal's office. The important thing is that these time-out sessions not be viewed as a punishment, but as an acceptable time for the child to gain control and feel better again. Children who use time-out effectively should be lavishly

praised because this behavior is difficult to learn and demonstrates a level of maturity and self control which is not easy for most children with learning differences or ADD/ADHD.

★ Preventative Measures

Many children with learning differences or ADD/ADHD run afoul of the discipline policies in regular education. Often these policies prescribe specific ‘punishments’ for talking back to teachers, chewing gum, and forgetting materials, fighting and so forth. Children with learning differences or ADD/ADHD are much more prone than other children to be disorganized or forgetful, or to behave impulsively. Consequently, they frequently engage in behaviors which violate school rules.

For the student with learning differences or ADD/ADHD, the behavior or discipline plan should be based on positive reinforcement, and for most students, should ignore negative behaviors which are not seriously disruptive (e.g. forgetting a pencil). To give the student the best chance of behaving appropriately, the following guidelines are usually helpful:

- * Student should be seated away from distractions
- * Student should be given frequent opportunities to get up and move
- * Learning environment should be structured for success

The IEP should identify situations which are likely to cause frustration and make suggestions for eliminating these problems.

★ Rules Waived

If there are school rules and or policies which are not appropriate for the student with learning differences or ADD/ADHD, the plan may say that “this student is not subject to the school rule which requires automatic in school suspension for failing to bring materials to class three times.”

★ Consequences

The IEP should also include acceptable consequences for noncompliant behavior. The focus of these steps should be on their educational purpose. In other words, the important question is: What will the child learn from these consequences for behavior?

Agreement should be made in the IEP about when, if ever, parents will be called about discipline problems. Generally, it is wise for consequences for misbehavior which happens at school to be delivered at school. Parents should not be expected to “punish” the child additionally at home because the child will not associate the consequence with behavior at school.

Generally, the consequence of in-school or out-of-school suspension should be reserved only for extreme behaviors. The school and parents should agree on and specify in the IEP those behaviors that may result in out-of-school suspensions. A child should not be repeatedly suspended for the same behavior, unless those behaviors create an immediate and substantial danger to others, self, or school property.

In addition, in-school suspension, which is often used as an alternative, is suspect as a consequence because it can deprive a child of an appropriate education if it is used repeatedly.

For students with learning differences or ADD/ADHD, the IEP planning process can be a powerful method for deciding ahead of time how behavior will be handled. If parents and school staff agree upon procedures which all find acceptable, they can work much more effectively as a team and can keep the focus on meeting the child’s educational needs. When problems arise, the IEP provides a framework for resolving issues, particularly those pertaining to discipline.