

Both [Individualized Education Programs](#) (IEPs) and [504 plans](#) can offer formal help for K–12 students with learning and attention issues. They’re similar in some ways but quite different in others. This chart compares them side-by-side to help you understand the differences.

	IEP	504 Plan
Basic Description	A blueprint or plan for a child’s special education experience at school.	A blueprint or plan for how a child will have access to learning at school.
What It Does	Provides individualized special education and related services to meet the unique needs of the child.	Provides services and changes to the learning environment to meet the needs of the child as adequately as other students.
	These services are provided at no cost to parents.	As with IEPs, a 504 plan is provided at no cost to parents.
What Law Applies	The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) This is a federal special education law for children with disabilities.	Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 This is a federal civil rights law to stop discrimination against people with disabilities.
	To get an IEP, there are two requirements:	To get a 504 plan, there are two requirements:
Who Is Eligible	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A child has one or more of the 13 specific disabilities listed in IDEA. Learning and attention issues may qualify. 2. The disability must affect the child’s educational performance and/or ability to learn and benefit from the general education curriculum. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A child has any disability, which can include many learning or attention issues. 2. The disability must interfere with the child’s ability to learn in a general education classroom. Section 504 has a broader definition of a disability than IDEA. That’s why a child who doesn’t qualify for an IEP might still be able to get a 504 plan.
Independent Educational Evaluation	Parents can ask the school district to pay for an independent educational evaluation (IEE) by an outside expert. The district doesn’t have to agree. Parents can always pay for an outside evaluation themselves, but the district may not give it much weight.	Doesn’t allow parents to ask for an IEE. As with an IEP evaluation, parents can always pay for an outside evaluation themselves.
Who Creates	There are strict legal requirements	The rules about who’s on the 504 team

the
Program/Plan

IEP

about who participates. An IEP is created by an [IEP team](#) that must include:

- The child's parent
- At least one of the child's general education teachers
- At least one special education teacher
- School psychologist or other specialist who can interpret evaluation results
- A district representative with authority over special education services

With a few exceptions, the entire team must be present for [IEP meetings](#).

The IEP sets learning goals for a child and describes the services the school will give her. It's a written document.

Here are some of the most important things the IEP must include:

- The child's [present levels of academic and functional performance](#)—how she is currently doing in school
- [Annual education goals](#) for the child and how the school will track her progress
- The services the child will get—this may include special education, related, supplementary and extended school year services
- The timing of services—when they start, how often they occur and how long they last
- Any [accommodations](#)—changes to the child's learning environment
- Any [modifications](#)—changes

What's in the
Program/Plan

504 Plan

are less specific than they are for an IEP.

A 504 plan is created by a team of people who are familiar with the child and who understand the evaluation data and special services options. This might include:

- The child's parent
- General and special education teachers
- The school principal

There is no standard 504 plan. Unlike an IEP, a 504 plan doesn't *have* to be a written document.

A 504 plan generally includes the following:

- Specific accommodations, supports or services for the child
- Names of who will provide each service
- Name of the person responsible for ensuring the plan is implemented

IEP

504 Plan

to what the child is expected to learn or know

- How the child will participate in standardized tests
- How the child will be included in general education classes and school activities

Parent Notice When the school wants to change a child’s services or placement, it has to tell parents in writing *before* the change. This is called [prior written notice](#). Notice is also required for any IEP meetings and evaluations.

The school must notify parents about evaluation or a “significant change” in placement. Notice doesn’t have to be in writing, but most schools do so anyway.

Parents also have [“stay put” rights](#) to keep services in place while there’s a dispute.

Parent Consent A parent must consent in writing for the school to evaluate a child. Parents must also consent in writing before the school can provide services in an IEP.

A parent’s consent is required for the school district to evaluate a child.

How Often It's Reviewed and Revised The IEP team must review the IEP at least once a year.

The rules vary by state. Generally, a 504 plan is reviewed each year and a reevaluation is done every three years or when needed.

The student must be reevaluated every three years to determine whether services are still needed.

IDEA gives parents [several specific ways to resolve disputes](#) (usually in this order):

Section 504 gives parents [several options for resolving disagreements](#) with the school:

How to Resolve Disputes

- Mediation
- Due process complaint
- Resolution session
- Civil lawsuit
- State complaint
- Lawsuit

- Mediation
- Alternative dispute resolution
- Impartial hearing
- Complaint to the Office for Civil Rights (OCR)
- Lawsuit

Funding/Costs Students receive these services at no charge.

Students receive these services at no charge.

States receive additional funding for

States do not receive extra funding for

IEP

eligible students.

504 Plan

eligible students. But the federal government can take funding away from programs (including schools) that don't comply.

IDEA funds can't be used to serve students with 504 plans.

- The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a federal law that requires schools to serve the educational needs of eligible students with disabilities.
- Schools must evaluate students suspected of having disabilities, including learning disabilities.
- Not every child with learning and attention issues qualifies for special education services under IDEA.

If you think your child needs special education services, you have to follow a legal process to make it happen. This process can be confusing. It can involve several laws. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the most important one to understand.

As the nation's special education law, IDEA provides rights and protections to children with disabilities and to their parents. Learning your rights under IDEA can make it easier for your child to get the help he needs (and is legally entitled to) at school.

The Purpose of IDEA

IDEA has been amended several times since Congress first passed it in 1975. ([At that time](#) it was called the Education for All Handicapped Children Act.) The essential purpose of IDEA hasn't changed, though. Its primary goals are:

- **To protect the rights of children with disabilities.** IDEA ensures students with disabilities have access to a [free and appropriate public education](#) (FAPE), just like all other children. Schools are required to provide special education in the [least restrictive environment](#). That means schools must teach students with disabilities in general education classroom whenever possible.
- **To give parents a voice in their child's education.** Under IDEA, you have a say in the educational decisions the school makes about your child. At every point of the process, the law gives you specific rights and protections. These are called procedural safeguards.

IDEA covers kids from infancy through high school graduation or age 21 (whichever comes first).

Services Under IDEA: Who's Eligible

Not every child with learning and attention issues is eligible for special education services under IDEA. First, a child must be found to have one of the 13 kinds of disabilities that IDEA covers. They are:

- Autism
- Deaf-blindness
- Deafness
- Emotional disturbance
- Hearing impairment
- Intellectual disability
- Multiple disabilities
- Orthopedic impairment
- Other health impairment (including [ADHD](#))
- Specific learning disability (including [dyslexia](#), [dyscalculia](#) and [dysgraphia](#), among others)
- Speech or language impairment
- Traumatic brain injury
- Visual impairment, including blindness

As of 2012, about 5.8 million school-age children in the United States receive special education services as a result of IDEA. More than 40 percent—roughly 2.3 million—are students identified with a specific learning disability.

Kids with disabilities don't automatically qualify for special education services, though. In order to be eligible, a student must:

- Have a disability *and, as a result of that disability...*
- Need special education in order to make progress in school

If, for instance, a student has ADHD but is doing well in school, he might not be covered by IDEA.

“At every point of the process, the law gives you specific rights and protections.”

Kids who aren't eligible for support under IDEA might still be eligible for support under another law called Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. A [504 plan](#) can provide accommodations to help kids in school.

The First Step to Access Services Under IDEA: An Evaluation

The school should conduct [a thorough evaluation](#) if it suspects a child has a disability. The evaluation not only determines if a student has a disability. It also sheds light on what services and support that student might need. Find out [how the evaluation process works](#).

The Next Step: Getting an IEP

If an evaluation shows that a student is eligible for special education, parents work with a school team to develop an [Individualized Education Program](#) (IEP). An IEP is a legal document that spells out a child's educational goals, disabilities and the services and support that the school will provide.

The Role of Parents

You're your child most important advocate. IDEA gives you an equal say in decisions about your child's education. A number of [procedural safeguards](#) protect your rights.

Try not to get discouraged if the process seems complex. Little by little, you can learn more about [your child's rights](#). Consider talking to other parents in [our community](#). Their experience can help guide you. You can also talk to one of our [experts live](#).

Key Takeaways

- If your child qualifies for special education services, you'll work with a school team to develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP).
- An IEP is like a formal contract that outlines how the school will support your child.
- The law gives you an equal say in decisions about your child's education.