



DISABILITY KNOWLEDGE SERIES: Special Education

You need to advocate for your child!

Many parents assume that the school district will let them know if their child needs help at school. Don't make this mistake! The school district may not notice that your child has unmet needs. As a parent, you must advocate for what your child needs. You know your child best! If you think something is wrong at school, or that your child needs help he's not getting, make sure you ask the school to take action. Your child might need a new evaluation, or the IEP team may need to consider new information.

Discuss any concerns with your child's teacher or IEP team. Consider asking the school to conduct an evaluation of your child. If your concerns aren't addressed, talk to the school principal or district special education director. If your child is not receiving the services she needs in order to be successful at school, consider consulting an experienced attorney about your child's rights.

As a parent, you are a key part of your disabled child's educational program. Your permission is needed for your child to be evaluated or to receive special education services. You must be invited to every IEP meeting, and must agree to the educational program the school is proposing.

The First Step is to be well-informed!

It's important that you understand your child's rights. If your child has trouble learning or behaving at school and has one or more qualifying disabilities, your child is entitled to:

1. An educational program that helps him or her make meaningful progress in school.
2. A written IEP that describes the educational program and related services she or she will receive.
3. Transportation, social skills classes, job coaching, physical therapy, counseling, or anything else he or she needs to benefit from an education.
4. Education that takes place in the general education classroom as much as possible, and any supports needed to facilitate this.
5. The participation of his or her parents in the team that plans the individual educational program.

The Basics of Special Education

Children with disabilities can receive special education services or accommodations, either under a 504 plan or an Individual Education Plan (IEP). The services your child receives are based on his or her unique needs and could include:

- preferential seating
- guided use of an assignment notebook
- digital or audio textbooks
- extra time for testing or testing in a quiet room
- speech and language therapy
- payment for private therapy or treatment
- an aide to assist the child in a regular classroom
- a behavior plan to manage the child's behavior
- education in a specialized classroom

Tips for working with school districts

- **Take your time:** Read all papers before you sign them. If you don't understand the document, ask questions, or take them home with you. You don't need to sign anything when it is first presented to you.
- **Keep records:** Make all special-education related requests in writing. Make sure the request is dated and that you keep a copy.
- **Be informed:** Ask for a copy of your school district's policies and procedures regarding special education.
- **Don't accept excuses:** If the IEP team agrees that your child needs a support or service, the school must provide it, regardless of financial or personnel problems.
- **Be persistent:** If you don't get a response to a request, ask again. Consider keeping a communication log of your contact with the school.
- **Be engaged:** Build relationships with your child's educators and establish good communication channels. Know what's happening at school.
- **Ask an Expert:** An experienced attorney can help you at many stages of the process, whether by coaching you to advocate for your child at an IEP meeting or representing you at a due process hearing.

Please contact Jason Schellack at the Autism Advocacy & Law Center, LLC for more information and a free initial consultation.