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QUICK REFERENCE

IEP vs 504

A comparison for parents and caregivers navigating support for their child

Two kinds of school plans, and the names don't make the difference obvious. Here's how they compare.

	IEP	504 Plan
WHAT LAW GOVERNS IT?	IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act)	Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act
WHO QUALIFIES?	Student must have 1 of 13 specific disability categories AND need specially designed instruction	Student has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity
WHAT'S INCLUDED?	Specially designed instruction, related services like speech, OT, PT and counseling, plus modifications and accommodations	Accommodations, modifications and consultation. No specially designed instruction.
WHO CREATES IT?	A team that includes the parents or legal guardians, teachers, specialists, and the school	Usually the school. Family involvement varies by district.
TRANSITION PLANNING?	Required by age 16 under federal law. Many states start earlier (Virginia at 14, Illinois at 14½), so check your state's rules.	Not required

How to tell them apart

If your child needs the teaching itself changed to fit how they learn, that usually points to an IEP. If they're learning the same material as everyone else but need different conditions, that usually points to a 504. When it feels close, ask whether the skill gap is closing. If it isn't, raise it with the school.

> **A 504 is not less than an IEP.**
>
> 504 plans are a different legal framework for students who need support but don't require specially designed instruction.

What I'd ask, if it were my child

Four questions worth asking out loud at the meeting.

1. **Can you walk me through how my child did or didn't meet the criteria?**
   Ask to see the data the decision was based on.

2. **What does my child need that regular instruction isn't giving them?**
   This shows whether the school sees a need for specially designed instruction.

3. **If we start with a 504 plan, what happens if my child needs more later?**
   Ask how progress will be tracked and when the team would look again.

4. **Can I have that decision and the reasoning in writing?**
   A written decision gives you something concrete to review, share, and respond to.

GOOD TO KNOW

A child can technically be covered by both. An IEP usually covers what a 504 plan would, so a separate 504 is rarely needed, though it depends on the situation. If your child doesn't qualify for an IEP, you can still ask the school to consider a 504. Either way, ask for the decision in writing.

A quick word from me

A lot of parents apologize in our first few minutes, for not understanding the paperwork or not catching something sooner. You never need to. This process is confusing, and it wasn't designed with families in mind. The more you understand how it works, the more confidently you can speak up for your child at the table. You don't need it all worked out before you ask for help.

Left with more questions? That's usually a sign it's worth a conversation. I help families read the paperwork, decide what to ask for, and sometimes sit at the table with them. Start with a free 15-minute call. No pressure, no commitment.

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General information about special education, not legal advice. I'm not an attorney and I don't represent families at due process. If your situation is heading toward a hearing, talk with a special education attorney.

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