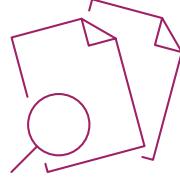


MINIGUIDE 5

# Seeking the Right Support: Understanding IEPs and 504 Plans



*The Oregon Department of Education created this series of miniguides for Indigenous families with children in special education.*

*Miniguide 5 shares one family's experience with choosing the right plan for their child. It may be similar to what you have encountered or will go through. At the end of the guide, we include some common questions and answers on this topic.*

*This series supports a comprehensive guide that has details and legal information to help you navigate the education system and get the right support for your child. For more detail, see **The Journey to a Free Appropriate Public Education for Students with Disabilities: A Guide for Indigenous Families**.*

## Talia's Choice. A Plan for Eli

Talia sat nervously in the small conference room at her son's school, waiting for the meeting to start. Her son, Eli, had been struggling in school due to his ADHD. Talia was determined to find the best way to support him.

Ms. Johnson, Eli's teacher, and Mr. Smith, the school's special education coordinator, entered the room and greeted Talia warmly. They could see the concern in her eyes and wanted to help her navigate this important decision.

"Thank you both for meeting with me," Talia began, her voice tinged with worry. "Eli has been having a tough time in school, and I'm trying to figure out how to support him. I've heard about IEPs and 504 plans, but I'm not sure which one is right for him."

Ms. Johnson nodded understandingly. "Of course. Let's start with the differences between an IEP and a 504 plan. IEP stands for individualized education program. IEPs are for students who qualify for special education services. They list specific goals for the student and describe the specialized instruction, services, and

support the student will receive at school. A 504 plan provides accommodations so the student can access the general education curriculum. Unlike an IEP, a 504 plan doesn't include specialized instruction."

Mr. Smith chimed in, "Exactly. For an IEP, Eli would first need to be evaluated to determine if he qualifies for special education services. This evaluation would look at his academic performance, behavior, and other factors. If he qualifies, we will work with you to develop a detailed plan with goals and support strategies."

Talia listened intently, absorbing the information. "That sounds like a lot. What about the 504 plan?"

Ms. Johnson said, "504 plans are less intensive but still provide important accommodations. For example, Eli might get extra time on tests, a quiet space to work, or help with organization. 504 plans are designed to level the playing field without changing the curriculum."

Mr. Smith added, "Given Eli's ADHD, a 504 plan could provide the accommodations he needs to succeed in a regular classroom setting. However, if his ADHD significantly impacts his learning, an IEP might be more appropriate because it offers more specialized support."

Talia thought about Eli's struggles with staying focused and completing assignments on time. He often got easily overwhelmed, but he also liked to spend time with his friends in his regular classroom. She still was not sure whether the IEP or 504 plan was a better choice.

## Summary

There are key differences between IEPs and 504 plans.

### IEPs

- Provide specialized instruction
- Require a detailed evaluation
- Include learning goals
- Developed by a team that includes parents/caregivers
- Have stronger legal protections and enforcement options
- Are reviewed annually

### 504 plans

- Offer accommodations only
- Use a simpler review
- Do not include learning goals
- May be developed without parents/caregivers
- Are reviewed periodically

# Q&A. IEPs and 504 Plans

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## Q. What are the essential differences between an IEP and a 504 plan?

A. There are six key areas of difference:<sup>1</sup>

- 1. Eligibility.** An IEP is for students who qualify for special education services and need specialized instruction, while a 504 plan is for students who need extra support to do their best in a general education classroom. To be eligible for an IEP, a student must have a disability that affects how they learn in school and need special teaching to help them succeed. A 504 plan is for students who have a disability that makes certain everyday activities harder, like paying attention or walking, but they do not need special teaching. Instead, they may need changes in the classroom, like more time on tests or special tools, to help them learn.
- 2. Evaluation.** For an IEP, students must go through a detailed evaluation by a team of experts. For a 504 plan, the school evaluates the student's medical history, school performance, and other relevant information. A 504 plan evaluation is less detailed than an IEP evaluation.
- 3. Goals.** An IEP includes clear learning and life skills goals to help the student make progress. A 504 plan does not include goals; it just lists the accommodations the student needs at school.
- 4. Development.** Parents/caregivers are part of the IEP team and help develop the IEP. A 504 plan can be made or changed without parent/caregiver input.
- 5. Implementation.** An IEP is a legal document that the school must follow. A 504 plan is also a legal document, but there are fewer options for parents/caregivers to contest if the school does not follow it.
- 6. Review.** An IEP is reviewed and updated every year. A 504 plan is reviewed periodically, usually every three years or when the student's needs change.

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## Q. Does one provide more services than the other?

A. Yes. An IEP offers more services than a 504 plan. With an IEP, your child gets special education. IEPs legally require the school to provide the teaching your child needs to make academic progress. The school must create a unique plan for your child that explains exactly what services and supports they will provide to help with any challenges your child's disability causes in school.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Lightner, L. (2025, April 2). *iep vs 504: What's the same? and which is better to have?* A Day in our Shoes. <https://adayinourshoes.com/difference-504-iep/>

A 504 plan is based on civil rights law, so it focuses on preventing discrimination and ensuring your child can access everything that other children can access at school. It does not provide special teaching but does offer accommodations, like special seating or extra time for tests and assignments. These accommodations help reduce barriers that might affect your child's learning because of their disability.

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**Q. How do I know which supports may be right for my child?**

**A.** It can be hard to know what type of support your child may need. The best first step is to meet with your school, share your concerns, and review how your child is doing in class. You have the right to request an evaluation, and the school team will use information and data to help determine what supports your child qualifies for. These questions may help guide your conversation with the school:

- 1.** Do you think your child needs special teaching to learn skills (like reading, math, focusing, or managing behavior) to do better in school?
  - **If yes**, you should ask for a special education referral and start a special education evaluation.
  - **If no or not sure**, go to question 2.
- 2.** Do you think your child can learn in the general classroom with typical instruction, but may need accommodations to remove barriers caused by their disability, such as extra time, preferred seating, or large print materials?
  - **If yes**, you can ask about a 504 plan evaluation might be the right choice.

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**Q. How is a decision made if a 504 plan or IEP is best for my child?**

**A.** You do not have to decide on your own which plan is best for your child's needs. Families have the right to request an evaluation, and the school team uses information and data from that evaluation to determine whether a student qualifies for special education services (an IEP) or supports under a 504 Plan. Only one evaluation process can happen at a time, so you may be asked whether you would like to start with a 504 evaluation or a special education evaluation. Parents have the right to request a comprehensive special education evaluation first. This type of evaluation looks at many areas of learning and development and helps the team better understand your child's needs.

If the special education evaluation shows that your child does not qualify for an IEP, the team may still determine that your child qualifies for a 504 Plan. In many cases, information from the special education evaluation can be used to create a 504 Plan, so another evaluation may not be needed.

If your child qualifies for an IEP and makes strong progress over time, the team may decide that special education services are no longer needed. At that point, your child may move to a 504 Plan to continue receiving needed accommodations. If your child starts with a 504 Plan but continues to struggle, you may request a special education evaluation to see if an IEP is needed.

**Throughout this process, families are important members of the team. Decisions are based on evaluation results and your child's individual needs, with the goal of making sure your child receives the right supports to succeed.**