

## Family Guide: Understanding Special Education

Every child learns differently, and some children need extra support to thrive in school. All children - regardless of background, income, or immigration status - have the right to receive the services they need to have a high-quality educational experience. Schools receive funding from the federal government to provide special education and related services. That money comes from the taxes we all contribute to, including families who pay taxes through work and daily life, whether or not they are citizens. These supports are your child's right, not a favor.

This guide is for families who want to understand how special education works, what their rights are, and how to ensure their child receives the support they need to succeed. Whether your child has already been diagnosed with a learning difference or you're just beginning to notice they need additional support in some areas, this guide can help you take the next steps with confidence.

### What Is Special Education?

Special education is a system of services and supports for students with disabilities that affect their learning. It ensures children receive an education that meets their individual needs at no cost to the family. Under federal law, every child has the right to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment.

### Key Terms You Should Know

**IEP** (Individualized Education Program): A written plan created for students who qualify for special education. It includes goals, services, accommodations, and how the school will track progress.

**504 Plan:** A plan for students with disabilities or medical conditions who may not need special education services but still require accommodations to access learning. For example, a student with ADHD may need extra time on tests, or a student with Type 1 diabetes may need time to manage their blood sugar levels during the school day.

**Accommodations:** Changes in how a student learns or shows what they know, without changing what is being taught. Examples include extra time on tests, breaks during class, or using audio books. Accommodations help students access learning on equal terms.

**Interventions:** Specific teaching strategies or tools used to help a student improve in an area where they are struggling. Interventions are targeted and often short-term, such as extra reading practice or small-group instruction. They are designed to help students catch up.

**Gifted Program:** A program for students who show high levels of ability and need enrichment beyond the standard curriculum. Gifted students can also have learning disabilities (sometimes called "twice exceptional").

**Learning Disabilities:** Differences in how a child's brain processes information. This can affect reading (like dyslexia), writing, math, or organization. These students are just as capable as others but need different supports.

**Formal Evaluation:** A set of tests and observations that help determine if a student has a disability. You have the right to request a formal evaluation at any time, and the school must respond within specific time limits.

**FAPE** (Free and Appropriate Public Education): The legal right of every child with a disability to receive an education that is tailored to their needs, at no cost to families.

**Least Restrictive Environment (LRE):** The setting where a student with a disability can learn alongside peers without disabilities as much as possible. Schools must provide supports so students can participate in regular classrooms and activities unless a different setting is truly necessary for their success.

**Manifestation Determination Review (MDR):** A meeting held when a student with an IEP or 504 Plan has been suspended for more than 10 days. The school team, along with the family, reviews whether the behavior is related to the student's disability. If it is, the school must adjust the support plan rather than continue with disciplinary actions that remove the student from learning.

**Child Find:** A legal requirement for schools to identify, locate, and evaluate children who may need special education services—starting at age 3.

**Autism:** A developmental disability that affects communication, behavior, and social interaction. Each child with autism is unique and may need different types of support.

**ADHD** (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder): A condition that affects focus, attention, and self-control. Children with ADHD are eligible for accommodations under a 504 Plan or sometimes an IEP if it affects learning.

## **Special Considerations for English Learners and/or Latino Students**

### **When Language and Learning Are Confused**

If your child is learning English, it's important to know that language barriers and learning disabilities can sometimes look similar. Pay close attention if your child is classified as an “English Language Learner” , even if your household is completely bilingual. Schools might:

- Miss a learning disability, assuming your child just needs more time to learn English
- Misdiagnose a disability, believing a language challenge is actually a learning problem

As a parent, you have the right to ask for a formal evaluation in your preferred language. You can request that your child be assessed in both English and your home language. Trust your instincts- if something doesn't feel right, keep asking questions.

### **Early Autism Diagnosis in Latino Children**

Latino children are often diagnosed with autism later than their peers, which can delay access to services and support during the critical early years of development. This delay can be due to language barriers, lack of access to culturally responsive healthcare, or school staff assuming a child will "grow out of it."

If you notice signs of autism—such as delays in language, difficulty with social interactions, or repetitive behaviors—trust your observations and seek a professional evaluation early. Early intervention makes a difference.

Being in community with other parents of autistic children is powerful. Connecting with other families helps reduce isolation, build knowledge, and access resources that may not be widely shared by schools or providers.

### **ADHD in Latina Girls: A Hidden Issue**

Many girls, especially Latina girls, are often underdiagnosed with ADHD. Because they may not be disruptive, their struggles with focus, organization, or emotional regulation can be overlooked. This means they don't get the support they need to thrive.

Knowing your child has ADHD or another learning difference is not something to be ashamed of - it's information they need to understand how they learn best. The earlier they know, the better prepared they'll be to succeed in school, in relationships, and in their future careers.

### **Discipline and Students with Disabilities**

Students with disabilities are more likely to be suspended or expelled than their peers, especially students of color. But federal law gives students with IEPs or 504 Plans specific protections when it comes to school discipline.

If your child is being disciplined:

- Ask whether the behavior is related to their disability
- Request a Manifestation Determination Review (MDR) if they are suspended for more than 10 days
- Know that schools cannot remove services even if your child is suspended

If your child is disciplined repeatedly, this may be a sign that their IEP or supports need to be revised. Frequent discipline issues can also be an indicator of an undiagnosed learning disability.

## How to Advocate for Your Child

If you suspect your child has a learning disability, medical condition, or is being treated unfairly because of a diagnosis:

### 1. Observe and Document

- Write down what you're noticing. When does your child struggle? What concerns do teachers share?
- Keep copies of report cards, discipline reports, test results, or communications with the school.

### 2. Request a Formal Evaluation

- Put your request in writing to the school principal or special education coordinator.
- You can say: *"I am requesting a full and individual evaluation to determine whether my child is eligible for special education or a 504 Plan."*
- The school must respond within a set timeline, usually 30 days.

### 3. Participate in the Process

- Attend all meetings. Ask questions. You have the right to bring a support person.
- If your child is found eligible, work with the team to develop an IEP or 504 Plan that meets their needs.

### 4. Follow Up and Monitor

- Check in regularly. Is your child making progress? Are the supports helping?
- If something isn't working, you can request a meeting to make changes.

### 5. Know When to Escalate

- If you feel your concerns are being ignored, you have the right to file a formal complaint, request mediation, or seek help from a special education advocate.
- Refer to our ELL Advocacy Guide for advocacy steps.

You are the expert on your child. Your voice matters. Don't give up.

## Staying Connected

Support networks can be just as important as school plans. We encourage families to stay connected with trusted sources and local community groups:

In Kansas City:

- [El Autismo y Yo](#) and [Azul Esperanza](#) offer culturally affirming support and connection for Spanish speaking and bilingual families raising children with autism and other disabilities.
- [MPACT](#) is a statewide organization that has acted as a Parent Training and Information Center since 1988 in the state of Missouri.

Nationally:

- [The Child Mind Institute](#) provides high-quality information in English and Spanish on mental health, ADHD, learning differences, and more.
- [Understood.org](#) is a trusted online resource for families navigating learning and thinking differences. It offers clear, comprehensive information, videos, and tools to help parents support their children at school and beyond.
- The [National Center for Learning Disabilities \(NCLD\)](#) offers resources for parents, educators, and college students who want to understand their rights and advocate for better policies.

## You Are Not Alone

Understanding special education can feel overwhelming, but you don't have to figure it out alone. You have the right to ask questions, request meetings, and make sure your child is being supported. At RevED, we're here to help families navigate this journey - step by step.