

November 2019 post: Guiding Patients through Alphanumeric Soup

Alissa Briggs, PhD, NCSP

UK Healthcare Department of Pediatrics, Division of Adolescent Medicine

The world of education is notorious for its acronyms. When supporting patients whose medical or mental health conditions impact their education, navigating the alphanumeric soup can be daunting. How do you know if your patient needs a 504 or IEP? What are they anyway? And how do you go about getting one?

There are three questions you need to ask.

1. *Does my patient have a disability?* If the answer is “yes,” they don’t necessarily need a 504 or IEP. They may function just fine at school. If they are getting A’s and B’s, are interacting with peers and teachers appropriately, and are not at risk of harming themselves by eating something they shouldn’t (for children with allergies or a metabolic disorder) or have a life threatening event (for children with seizures), they do not need a 504.
2. *Does my patient’s disability impact their functioning at school?* If the answer is “yes,” they may need a 504 plan. See below.
3. *Does my patient’s disability impact their functioning at school to the degree that specialized instruction or services are required?* If the answer is “yes,” they may need an IEP. See below.

504. A 504 plan comes from section [504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973](#).

A 504 plan outlines accommodations and modifications that a patient needs in order to be able to access education to the same extent as non-disabled peers. Accommodations change how things are done (e.g., extended time) and modifications change what is done (e.g., excusal from a class). Common accommodations include extended time on testing, testing in a separate room, permission to arrive to class early or late, and assignments separated into smaller parts. Common modifications include a modified diet for patients with metabolic disorders, access to an epi pen, support with checking blood sugar and administering insulin, shortened assignments, and excusal from a class, and visual aids.

In order for your patient to obtain a 504 plan, you will need to fill out a form or write a letter with the diagnosis, an explanation of how their experience with the disability negatively impacts their ability to benefit from the curriculum at school, and recommended accommodations and modifications.

IEP. “IEP” stands for “Individualized Education Plan” and it is the road map for a child with a disability who is eligible for special education. An IEP outlines a child’s present level of functioning in multiple domains, specific measurable goals for domains where the child’s abilities are not commensurate with same age peers, and a plan for meeting those goals with special education and related services, accommodations, and modifications. In addition, an IEP defines how often parents will be updated on a child’s

progress and the degree to which the child will receive education and services outside the general education environment. For adolescents over the age of 14, an IEP also includes a plan to support an adolescent in meeting post-graduation goals (whether that be entering the workforce, college, or another form of post-secondary support).

Special education is clearly defined and regulated at the federal and state level. Given that it is considered a property right, it is protected by the constitution. Thus, there are [procedural safeguards](#) that must be followed. Familiarize yourself with these, as they are detailed and sometimes difficult for families to digest. Knowing these safeguards will help you advocate for your patients.

If you feel that your patient may need an IEP, **DO NOT write your recommendation on a prescription pad.** This is viewed negatively by the school and the school is under no obligation to respond to this. The school is obligated to respond to a parent's written request for an evaluation within 10 days. Support your patient's parents in writing a letter to their school administrator or school psychologist that indicates they are concerned their child has a disability that is negatively impacting their ability to learn and that they would like for their child to be evaluated for special education eligibility.

Keep in mind that an eligibility category for special education is Other Health Impairment. This category includes medical diagnoses, including Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder. You may need to provide documentation of the relevant medical diagnosis.

Other Helpful Resources

- [Wrightslaw](#)
- [Kentucky Department of Education:](#)
- [Office of Special Education Programs:](#)
- [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\) for children with special educational needed](#)