

Transition for Students with Disabilities Advocating for Yourself in Middle School and High School

How to Get What You Need

You should always be able to have the accommodations you need in school for your disability or health care needs. Sometimes it just takes some extra effort to get what you need. Having a disability doesn't mean you can't do as well as the other kids in school. You have the same right as others to succeed! By law, every school has a process - or a set way - for you to talk to teachers and others about what you need. Sometimes this is addressed through a formal plan called an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) or a 504 plan.

Step 1: Evaluate what you need.

Sit down with your parents and decide what accommodations you need based on your disability, like extra time on tests, a note taker, or two sets of books. Only pick accommodations that are necessary for your disability. For example, if you know you don't need a program on your computer that reads books to you, don't ask for it. People with different disabilities need different things. Using fewer accommodations while in school will help you prepare for postsecondary education or training, where fewer accommodations are allowed.

Step 2: Find a helpful resource at school.

This could be a teacher, vice-principal, transition specialist, or counselor who is willing to work with you and make sure you get what you need. Ask other kids who get accommodations at school what works for them, or talk to the principal about what is available. Once you find a helpful resource, have a meeting with that person and see what they can do to help you advocate for yourself.

Step 3: Talk to your teachers.

Try to have a meeting that includes all your teachers, your parents, transition specialist, and other people who help you at school. With the help of your parents and others, you can advocate for yourself. Teachers have overall authority in the classroom, so it's important that they understand your needs. If a meeting is not possible, have your parents write a letter. If you are in high school, go talk to your teachers and let them know that they can contact your parents with any questions. If a teacher is unwilling to work with you, talk to someone in school administration - like the principal or Director of Exceptional Student Education (ESE) - about the problem. Teachers must be fair to all students.

Step 4: Have a follow up meeting.

Several times during the school year you should stop by to see your transition specialist or other resource staff, and let them know how everything is going. Half way through the year you should have a meeting with your parents and resource staff, and try to have one teacher present to talk about what is working for you and what isn't.

Other forms of advocating for yourself and getting what you need:

- Know about your disability so you can explain it to teachers or others, if needed.
- Your health information is confidential; it's your decision about how much you want to share. Teachers and other school personnel are required to respect a student's privacy.
- There's a difference sometimes between advocating for what you *want* and advocating for what you *need* to get schoolwork done. If you're not sure, ask a friend, parent or teacher if they think it is something you need in order to get schoolwork done. You can still advocate for what you want in other areas but it may make more sense to do it at a different time or with different people.
- Ask for extended time on standardized tests, if needed - including the SAT, ACT and AP tests. Know that there is a formal process for getting accommodations on many standardized tests that will require you to make requests weeks to months in advance.
- If you feel that a student doesn't understand your disability, try talking to them and see if you can open their eyes to the wonderful person you are. If that doesn't work, don't be afraid to talk to a teacher or administrator (such as a principal or Director of ESE) about it.
- If you feel you are being mistreated by any adult, go to someone you trust IMMEDIATELY.
- There are other kids who are going through the same things, so try not to be afraid to express yourself.
- Be proud of who you are...always!