

Parent-Friendly IEP Terms Glossary

Plain-Language Guide for Families

Purpose

IEP and special education meetings can feel like alphabet soup. This glossary translates common terms and acronyms into clear, plain language, with quick “what this looks like” examples and questions you can ask to stay informed and confident.

Core Rights & Laws

Term	Plain Language	What This Looks Like	Questions to Ask
IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act)	Federal law that guarantees special education services.	Schools identify, evaluate, and serve eligible students.	“How does IDEA guide my child’s services?”
FAPE (Free Appropriate Public Education)	Your child’s right to an education with needed supports, at no cost.	Services and goals tailored to your child’s needs.	“How does this IEP ensure FAPE for my child?”
LRE (Least Restrictive Environment)	Students learn with peers without disabilities as much as possible.	Support provided in general education when appropriate.	“What supports will keep my child in general ed?”
Section 504	Civil rights law that prevents disability discrimination.	Accommodations without special ed services (a 504 Plan).	“Is an IEP or 504 better for my child’s needs?”
ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act)	Protects disability rights in public spaces, including schools.	Accessibility (ramps, captioning, etc.).	“How is the school ensuring accessibility?”

The IEP Itself

Term	Plain Language	What This Looks Like	Questions to Ask
IEP (Individualized Education Program)	Written plan with goals, services, and supports.	Annual document with updates during the year as needed.	“How do these goals connect to my child’s needs?”
PLAAFP (Present Levels...)	Current strengths and needs based on data.	Reading level, behavior data, teacher/parent input.	“What data shows the present levels?”
Annual Goals & Benchmarks	Skills your child will learn this year.	“Read 100 wpm” or “Use a break card 4/5 times.”	“How will progress be measured and shared?”
Accommodations	Access supports that don’t change what’s taught.	Audio books, extended time, preferential seating.	“What will this accommodation look like in class?”
Modifications	Changes to what is taught/tested.	Fewer problems, alternate standards.	“Will this affect diploma/grade expectations?”
Specially Designed Instruction (SDI)	Tailored teaching to meet unique needs.	Small-group reading instruction, direct social skills lessons.	“When, where, and by whom is SDI delivered?”
Related Services	Extra services needed to benefit from education.	Speech, OT, PT, counseling, transportation.	“How often and where are these provided?”
Service Minutes	Time allocated for each service.	“Speech: 30 minutes, 2x/week.”	“How will missed minutes be made up?”
Progress Reporting	Regular updates on goal growth.	Quarterly IEP progress notes with data.	“When will I get progress reports?”

Evaluation & Eligibility

Term	Plain Language	What This Looks Like	Questions to Ask
Referral	Request to check if a student needs special education.	Parent or teacher initiates.	“What is the timeline after referral?”
Evaluation	Tests/observations to understand needs.	Cognitive, academic, speech, OT, behavior.	“Which tools will be used and why?”
Eligibility	Decision if the child qualifies under IDEA.	One of 13 categories (SLD, ASD, ED, etc.).	“Which category and what data support it?”
IEE (Independent Educational Evaluation)	Outside evaluation if you disagree with school results.	District may pay in many cases.	“How do I request an IEE?”
Reevaluation	Required check-in at least every 3 years.	Update data to confirm needs/services.	“What new information will we gather?”

Behavior & Discipline

Term	Plain Language	What This Looks Like	Questions to Ask
FBA (Functional Behavior Assessment)	Finds the why behind behavior.	Data on triggers and what maintains behavior.	“What function did the FBA identify?”
BIP (Behavior Intervention Plan)	Teaching plan to replace challenging behavior.	Prevention, replacement skills, reinforcement.	“How will staff teach and track the new skill?”

MDR (Manifestation Determination Review)	Required meeting before major discipline changes.	Team decides if behavior was disability-related or IEP not implemented.	“Were accommodations implemented before the incident?”
PBIS / MTSS	School-wide tiered supports for all students.	Universal expectations, targeted groups, intensive supports.	“What Tier 1 supports are in my child’s classrooms?”

Meetings & Procedures

Term	Plain Language	What This Looks Like	Questions to Ask
PWN (Prior Written Notice)	Written summary of proposed/refused actions.	Letter after decisions explaining the “what” and “why.”	“Please walk me through the PWN details.”
Consent	Your written permission for evaluations/services.	You sign before things begin or change.	“What am I consenting to exactly?”
Mediation / Due Process	Ways to resolve disagreements.	Neutral mediator or legal hearing.	“What options exist if we can’t agree?”
Stay-Put	Services stay the same during disputes.	No changes while you challenge a decision.	“Does stay-put apply here?”
ESY (Extended School Year)	Services beyond the typical school year if needed.	Summer instruction to prevent significant regression.	“What data shows ESY is/isn’t needed?”

Placement & Access

Term	Plain Language	What This Looks Like	Questions to Ask
General Education with Supports	Learning in the regular classroom most of the day.	Co-teaching, aide, accommodations.	“Which supports keep my child in gen ed?”

Resource/Small Group	Part-day specialized instruction.	Pull-out reading/writing/math.	“How does this connect back to gen ed?”
Separate Classroom/Program	Smaller specialized setting most of the day.	Therapeutic or life-skills programs.	“What data shows this level of need?”
Home/Hospital	Instruction outside school for medical reasons.	Tutoring per physician’s orders.	“How will we plan for return to school?”

Quick Visual: Accommodations vs. Modifications vs. Interventions

Category	Purpose	Examples
Accommodations	Access the same content.	Extended time, audiobooks, breaks.
Modifications	Change the content/expectation.	Simplified text, fewer items, alternate standards.
Interventions	Teach the skill that’s missing.	Targeted decoding lessons, social skills instruction.

“In the Meeting” Script Starters for Parents

- “Can you show me the **data** behind that decision?”
- “What will this support look like **in the classroom** day-to-day?”
- “How will **progress** be measured and how often will I see it?”
- “What are the **least restrictive** options that might work with added supports?”

Action Starter



- Print this glossary and bring it to your next meeting.
- Highlight 3–5 terms you want clarified.
- After the meeting, note how each term **showed up** in your child’s plan (services, goals, accommodations).