

Quick Guide to Section 504 Planning

Section 504 planning can provide provisions to help a child who intermittently exhibits manifestations of a disability, such as an Emotional and Behavioral disorder, while in an academic environment. Children who are academically strong rarely qualify for recognition under IDEA for Special Education Services, so the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) laws provide alternate support under Section 504.

Some of the unique benefits of a Section 504 plan include the following:

- 1) Creates a mechanism that serves as a *safety valve* for the child who may intermittently melt down or in some way lack the capacity to cope in the academic setting.
- 2) Once the disability has been described and clarified, the school must recognize when poor behavior is a manifestation of the disability, and not impose punitive measures.
- 3) When a child's misbehavior is deemed outside the scope of the disability, then the school is more likely to choose punitive measures that will not further harm the child with respect to the disability.
- 4) Teachers and other school personnel can be forewarned and prepared to respond appropriately to a sudden melt down or other behavioral manifestation of the disability.
- 5) Special safety plans and calming routines can be established, including the space and supervising personnel to whom the child can be referred during critical periods.
- 6) Specialized behavioral and self-regulatory provisions, including supplies and activities, can be pre-planned and appropriate materials can be provided to all teacher and stakeholders in the child's learning and Section 504 plan.

The Section 504 plan does not necessarily require that a child's mental health diagnosis and history be fully disclosed to school personnel, which in some cases may be detrimental to the child. Instead, the referring professional can describe and qualify the child's disability under common recognized categories that exist under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act law. Following are some examples of these categories:

- 1) Emotional Disturbance, also known as Emotional and Behavioral Disorder (EBD)
- 2) Other Health Impairment (OHI)
- 3) Developmental Delay
- 4) Multiple Disabilities

The school will need to know enough information to support making a good decision about whether and how to support a request for a Section 504 plan.

Following are some examples of provisions under a Section 504 plan that can help a child cope and self-regulate through an emotional or behavioral crisis that is a manifestation of a disability:

- Child sits in back of classroom and is able to stand or pace near desk during seated work
- Teacher can give child a sensory aid (like a squishy ball) to help the child self-regulate in class
- Teacher can give child earphones (with or without sound) to help child to self-soothe and self-calm
- The child has a safety word or phrase to notify that teacher of an episode that requires support; the teaching staff are prepared to respond appropriately to presentation of the safety cue
- The school may identify several personnel and spaces to respond to a child's acute need for support. Examples may be the Principal in the main office; the Nurse in the health office; the Coach in the gymnasium
- The child's parents, mental health professionals, or behavioral support team may provide each educational professional with a kit to help the child work through an emotional or behavioral crisis. Examples include pad and markers, play dough, a small Lego set, headphones with music or environmental sounds
- The child can sit in a dark quiet room to allow the brain to calm. This strategy may be appropriate for a child with a sensory or seizure disorder who may become aggravated by flashing lights, movement, and loud noises

Parents are encouraged to discuss concerns about a child's ability to maintain appropriate behavior in school because of a disability with their child's pediatrician, mental health professional, or special education team. Once a need has been established by the child's professional team, the parents can bring documentation to the Office of Exceptional Student Education or Special Education for the school.

Sometimes parents must set up a collaborative meeting so the child's professionals can meet with the school personnel to help create an effective and meaningful Section 504 Plan. The school must agree that the recommendations of the professionals are reasonable and that the child does in fact have a disability. Parents must remain calm, focused, and committed to the process of helping the school personnel learn about their child's disability and how it could affect the child's behavior in school.