Supports, Modifications, and Accommodations for Students — National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities

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For many students with disabilities—and for many without—the key to success in the classroom lies in having appropriate adaptations, accommodations, and modifications made to the instruction and other classroom activities.

Some adaptations are as simple as moving a distractible student to the front of the class or away from the pencil sharpener or the window. Other modifications may involve changing the way that material is presented or the way that students respond to show their learning.

Adaptations, accommodations, and modifications need to be individualized for students, based upon their needs and their personal learning styles and interests. It is not always obvious what adaptations, accommodations, or modifications would be beneficial for a particular student, or how changes to the curriculum, its presentation, the classroom setting, or student evaluation might be made. This page is intended to help teachers and others find information that can guide them in making appropriate changes in the classroom based on what their students need.

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Part 1:
A Quick Look at Terminology

You might wonder if the terms ***supports***, ***modifications***, and **adaptations** all mean the same thing. The simple answer is: No, not completely, but yes, for the most part. (Don't you love a clear answer?) People tend to use the terms interchangeably, to be sure, and we will do so here, for ease of reading, but distinctions can be made between the terms.

Sometimes people get confused about what it means to have a *modification* and what it means to have an *accommodation*. Usually a ***modification*** means *a change in what is being taught to or expected from the student*. Making an assignment easier so the student is not doing the same level of work as other students is an example of a modification.

An ***accommodation*** *is a change that helps a student overcome or work around the disability*. Allowing a student who has trouble writing to give his answers orally is an example of an accommodation. This student is still expected to know the same material and answer the same questions as fully as the other students, but he doesn't have to write his answers to show that he knows the information.

What is most important to know about modifications and accommodations is that both are meant to help a child to learn.

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Part 2:
Different Types of Supports

Special Education

By definition, special education is "specially designed instruction" (§300.39). And IDEA defines *that* term as

follows:

> *(3) **Specially designed instruction** means adapting, as appropriate to the needs of an eligible child under this part, the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction—*
>
> *(i) To address the unique needs of the child that result from the child's disability; and*
>
> *(ii) To ensure access of the child to the general curriculum, so that the child can meet the educational standards within the jurisdiction of the public agency that apply to all children. [§300.39(b)(3)]*

Thus, special education involves adapting the "content, methodology, or delivery of instruction." In fact, the special education field can take pride in the knowledge base and expertise it's developed in the past 30-plus years of individualizing instruction to meet the needs of students with disabilities. It's a pleasure to share some of that knowledge with you now.

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Adapting Instruction

Sometimes a student may need to have changes made in class work or routines because of his or her disability. Modifications can be made to:

- ***what*** a child is taught, and/or
- ***how*** a child works at school.

For example:

> *Jack is an 8th grade student who has learning disabilities in reading and writing. He is in a regular 8th grade class that is team-taught by a general education teacher and a special education teacher. Modifications and accommodations provided for Jack's daily school routine (and when he takes state or district-wide tests) include the following:*
>
> - *Jack will have shorter reading and writing assignments.*
> - *Jack's textbooks will be based upon the 8th grade curriculum but at his independent reading level (4th grade).*
> - *Jack will have test questions read/explained to him, when he asks.*
> - *Jack will give his answers to essay-type questions by speaking, rather than writing them down.*

Modifications or accommodations are most often made in the following areas:

> ***Scheduling.*** *For example,*
>
> - *giving the student extra time to complete assignments or tests*
> - *breaking up testing over several days*
>
> ***Setting****. For example,*
>
> - *working in a small group*
> - *working one-on-one with the teacher*
>
> ***Materials****. For example,*
>
> - *providing audiotaped lectures or books*

> - *giving copies of teacher's lecture notes*
> - *using large print books, Braille, or books on CD (digital text)*
>
> ***Instruction**. For example,*
>
> - *reducing the difficulty of assignments*
> - *reducing the reading level*
> - *using a student/peer tutor*
>
> ***Student Response**. For example,*
>
> - *allowing answers to be given orally or dictated*
> - *using a word processor for written work*
> - *using sign language, a communication device, Braille, or native language if it is not English.*

Because adapting the content, methodology, and/or delivery of instruction is an essential element in special education and an extremely valuable support for students, it's equally essential to know as much as possible about how instruction can be adapted to address the needs of an individual student with a disability. The special education teacher who serves on the IEP team can contribute his or her expertise in this area, which is the essence of special education.

NICHCY offers much information on this area as well. For starters, we'd point you to the following resources:

- Effective Practices in the Classroom and School, which will connect you with materials and websites rich with guidance on educational adaptations and specially designed materials for students with disabilities, and
- Assessment and Accommodations, an *Evidence for Education* brief that isn't limited to just discussing how to make accommodations in testing but also delves into classroom accommodations.

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Related Services

One look at IDEA's definition of related services at §300.34 and it's clear that these services are supportive in nature, although not in the same way that adapting the curriculum is. Related services support children's special education and are provided when necessary to help students benefit from special education. Thus, related services must be included in the treasure chest of accommodations and supports we're exploring. That definition begins:

> ***§300.34 Related services.***
>
> *(a) **General**. Related services means transportation and such developmental, corrective, and other supportive services as are required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education, and includes…*
>
> *Here's the list of related services in the law.*
>
> - *speech-language pathology and audiology services*
> - *interpreting services*
> - *psychological services*
> - *physical and occupational therapy*
> - *recreation, including therapeutic recreation*
> - *early identification and assessment of disabilities in children*
> - *counseling services, including rehabilitation counseling*

> - *orientation and mobility services*
> - *medical services for diagnostic or evaluation purposes*
> - *school health services and school nurse services*
> - *social work services in schools*

This is not an exhaustive list of possible related services. There are others (not named here or in the law) that states and schools routinely make available under the umbrella of related services. The IEP team decides which related services a child needs and specificies them in the child's IEP. Read all about it in our Related Services page.

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Supplementary Aids and Services

One of the most powerful types of supports available to children with disabilities are the other kinds of supports or services (other than special education and related services) that a child needs to be educated with nondisabled children to the maximum extent appropriate. Some examples of these additional services and supports, called **supplementary aids and service***s* in IDEA, are:

- adapted equipment—such as a special seat or a cut-out cup for drinking;
- assistive technology—such as a word processor, special software, or a communication system;
- training for staff, student, and/or parents;
- peer tutors;
- a one-on-one aide;
- adapted materials—such as books on tape, large print, or highlighted notes; and
- collaboration/consultation among staff, parents, and/or other professionals.

The IEP team, which includes the parents, is the group that decides which supplementary aids and services a child needs to support his or her access to and participation in the school environment. The IEP team must really work together to make sure that a child gets the supplementary aids and services that he or she needs to be successful. Team members talk about the child's needs, the curriculum, and school routine, and openly explore all options to make sure the right supports for the specific child are included.

Much more can be said about these important supports and services. Visit our special article on Supplementary Aids and Services to find out more.

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Program Modifications or Supports for School Staff

If the IEP team decides that a child needs a particular modification or accommodation, this information must be included in the IEP. Supports are also available for those who work with the child, to help them help that child be successful. Supports for school staff must also be written into the IEP. Some of these supports might include:

- attending a conference or training related to the child's needs,
- getting help from another staff member or administrative person,
- having an aide in the classroom, or
- getting special equipment or teaching materials.

The issue of modifications and supports for school staff, so that they can then support the child across the range of school settings and tasks, is also addressed in our article on Program Modifications for School Personnel.

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Accommodations in Large Assessments

IDEA requires that students with disabilities take part in ***state or district-wide assessments***. These are tests that are periodically given to all students to measure achievement. It is one way that schools determine how well and how much students are learning. IDEA now states that students with disabilities should have as much involvement in the general curriculum as possible. This means that, if a child is receiving instruction in the general curriculum, he or she could take the same standardized test that the school district or state gives to nondisabled children. Accordingly, a child's IEP must include all modifications or accommodations that the child needs so that he or she can participate in state or district-wide assessments.

The IEP team can decide that a particular test is not appropriate for a child. In this case, the IEP must include:

- an explanation of why that test is not suitable for the child, and
- how the child will be assessed instead (often called alternate assessment).

Ask your state and/or local school district for a copy of their guidelines on the types of accommodations, modifications, and alternate assessments available to students. Also consult these resources:

- *Assessment and Accommodations*, an *Evidence for Education* brief that amply discusses how to make accommodations in testing
- Accommodations in Assessment, a thorough discussion of the options available and how to specify in the IEP what accommodations will be provided to the child and why.

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Conclusion

Even a child with many needs is to be involved with nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate. Just because a child has severe disabilities or needs modifications to the general curriculum does not mean that he or she may be removed from the general education class. If a child is removed from the general education class for any part of the school day, the IEP team must include in the IEP an explanation for the child's nonparticipation.

Because accommodations can be so vital to helping children with disabilities access the general curriculum, participate in school (including extracurricular and nonacademic activities), and be educated alongside their peers without disabilities, IDEA reinforces their use again and again, in its requirements, in its definitions, and in its principles. The wealth of experience that the special education field has gained over the years since IDEA was first passed by Congress is the very resource you'll want to tap for more information on what accommodations are appropriate for students, given their disability, and how to make those adaptations to support their learning.

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