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IEP Accommodations: What Works for Us

ADDitude readers share the IEP tips and tricks that help their ADHD children stay focused, happy, and successful at school.

by Kay Marner

My daughter, Natalie, a third grader, has had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) since preschool, but I still feel like the new kid in class when it comes to advocating for her effectively.

It's not for lack of trying. I read books, I search for information online, I ask questions. But my advocacy remains clumsy, at best. There's so much to know — legal rights, educational strategies, my child's unique strengths and needs — it can feel overwhelming.

In August, I introduced *ADDitude's* Back-to-School IEP Challenge in my ADHD Parenting Blog, *My Picture Perfect Family*. Parents were invited to respond with real-world accommodations that worked for their kids. The idea was to create the most comprehensive list of accommodations used successfully by real kids in existence.

And, the more ideas, the better. After all, what works for one child won't necessarily work for others, as one reader confirmed: "I'm a special education staff developer and I train others on IEPs, so my son has a pretty nice one. When you said 'real life' accommodations, you were right on. These must be based on the child's needs, not what they give to most of the kids. Every kid has unique needs!"

Don't Let Summer Drain Your Child's Brain!

By the end of the challenge (September 30, 2009), more than 30 parents had contributed their hard-won wisdom. Rather than let this treasure of parent-to-parent sharing disappear into the cyber-archives, it is summarized here. Please, continue to comment, and we'll add your accommodations-of-choice to the data.

By working together, parents, we can attend our next IEP meetings feeling more like star students, and less like class clowns.

Pre-K and Kindergarten IEP

Behavior Accommodation

"My son's special ed teacher adopted a new plan this year inspired by my son's love for LEGOS. For every day that he does not get a time out, he gets a LEGO piece. After 10 pieces have been earned, he gets to take them home. He brought his first baggie of LEGOS home last week and was so PROUD! We also have a notebook that we use on a daily basis to communicate his progress and issues. The LEGO idea has really been great!"

- posted by *Frustrated Mom of 5 yr old ADHD*

Excess Energy Accommodation

"Knowing that my adopted son, Aleks, nearly 6, had some issues, I got an early start with Early Intervention and formal evaluations. Besides ADHD, Aleks has a non-verbal learning disorder, plus anxieties, and some sensory issues.

"Among other services, Aleks will be receiving OT. For movement, they have provided a balancing ball to sit on versus a chair, and will permit him to stand up to eat snack or write on an easel, if that suits him better than a flat desk.

"Aleks is VERY ACTIVE. The child needs to move around. The IEP also includes scheduled 'motor breaks' during the day, either in a sensory room equipped with a swing, trampoline, and the like, and/or the teacher is supposed to include more motor breaks in the class for all students. He will be taken out of class as little as possible, to avoid too much disruption, but enough so that he is not so distracted and can focus better on a one-on-one basis. He has visual-spatial issues, so copying from a board will be impossible. For such tasks, an aid is supposed to be available to guide him and reiterate the lessons of the day. (Auditory processing is challenging.) "Handwriting without Tears" is the method to be used to help improve letter-writing skills."

Next: Grade School IEP

IEP Tips for Grade Schoolers with ADHD

Grade School IEP

Distractibility Accommodations

"When my son was in second grade, his teacher created fidget diversions and used velcro to attach them under my son's desk. They included a piece of cloth with something sewn inside that made a crackly noise, and a squishy ball. He also had something that hung over the backrest of his chair that was just 'bumpy' enough to focus him. These items are all included in his IEP for this year, in third grade. Also, he had a large folding board that he could put on his desk (a three-part presentation board) when he felt distracted by the activity in class."

- posted by *ChrisRD*

"I have two kids with IEPs, and a third grader who does not. (Yet!) Here are our favorite accommodations:

1. Both have extra sets of textbooks for home. (Can't say 'I forgot my social studies book!')
2. Both sit up front.
3. My fifth grader still needs fidgets (rubber ball, squeeze things etc.).
4. My fifth grader gets to run "errands" for the teacher.
5. My seventh grader has math and language arts in the morning.
6. They both know they have advocates because the teachers, counselors, and mom/dad are all in sync and on their side!

- posted by *Karen W. Bass*

Organization Accommodation

"My son's school uses lockers starting in fourth grade. It only took a few months for his locker to be a jumbled mess where nothing could be found (leaving him chronically unprepared for class and homework). I was able to have the school assign him an additional locker -- one for school materials, one for "take home" items (jacket, backpack, lunch box, and any materials he would need to take home..."depositing" them in this locker after class). It took some time

and a lot of modeling, but has ultimately been an invaluable tool in helping him with his disorganization."
- posted by Mochabelle

Excess Energy Accommodation

"My second grade son does not have an IEP but has a 504 Plan. The basic accommodations are:

1. A taped area around his desk where he can move freely and be counted as "in his seat."
2. Proprioceptive input/heavy work activities to combat sensory issues.
3. Special paper and pencil grips to help with his poor handwriting.

I would say the most important is the accommodation that lets him move freely when he just can't be still. He would be punished constantly without it."

- posted by adhdmomma

Test Accommodations

"My son is starting fourth grade, and has received services since he was an infant. He has ADHD, sensory processing disorder, PANDAS (a tic disorder), OCD and anxiety. He's taking Vyvanse and Tenex and he's doing great. His accommodations include using an Alphasmart for all extended writing tasks in the classroom and on standardized tests, and he has a ton of testing accommodations.

"I drafted my requests based on our state education department's testing accommodations manual and proposed them at my son's IEP review. They are: double time on tests longer than 20 minutes, with a 5 minute break per 20 minutes of testing; use of a visual timer set for 20-minute intervals; separate location for standardized tests; answers recorded in test booklets instead of answer sheets; use of on-task focusing prompts; use of word processors for extended writing tasks on tests; test directions and questions read aloud...and there are a few more. Best of all, he feels comfortable when he takes these tests, and he is doing very well, meeting grade level standards! His accommodations help him succeed in an inclusion class and we're hoping he will be able to mainstream to a general ed. class in the next few weeks -- with accommodations!"

- posted by gummie22

"My daughter and her class started preparing for the FCAT in first grade, though it did not count until third grade. (The FCAT is a Florida test that rates schools on how well they prepare students in reading and math.) I had my daughter's IEP include accommodations for a separate testing room with a proctor (and a few other students), along with extra time so she wasn't hurried. She scored one of the highest scores in third grade!"

- posted by chb123

"My son, who is entering fourth grade, has sensory integration dysfunction, ADHD symptoms, and high anxiety. He receives extended testing time with the option to take tests outside the normal classroom setting, and some tests are read to him. Tracking from the board is difficult, so his teachers must provide his board-work in written form. He has had an IEP since preschool, and this year we are adding the option for him to learn typing, since his motor delays make writing difficult.

- posted by vanstac

"My third grade daughter was diagnosed with ADHD last year. Spelling is a huge struggle for her, and she always feels rushed during spelling tests. For her IEP, she takes her spelling test in a separate classroom with an FM system, so she is not rushed and can focus."

- posted by JLHoover

"My second grade son has ADHD with distractibility. He is not normally hyper, so his case sometimes confuses teachers. He also has dyslexia. In his IEP, they have provided him with special assistance. If they are having a math test, they will cut the paper in half and allow him to do only half and get them correct, rather than being overwhelmed at the whole page and just writing down any number and getting them all wrong. They are also reading his tests and papers to him so he will be able to keep up with learning to read."

- posted by overitnow5

Homework Accommodation

"Homework is a stressful time for our family. My fourth grade son takes medication during the school day. We are working with his doctor to add an afternoon dose to help during homework time, when my son is tired and distracted. He often knows the answers, but can't focus to write them down. I write his answers down for him. I had this added to his IEP. After all, we're trying to see if he knows the material, not if he knows how to write."

- posted by *Brando88*

Other At-Home Solution

"I am just getting started. My son will be in first grade and I am waiting for a meeting date with his teacher and school psychologist to set up accommodations. I will also be requesting an IEP evaluation. I am hoping the teacher will agree to a daily behavior sheet -- it's best for me to know what's going on, on a daily basis. My tip for living well: I have made laminated morning and bedtime routine charts that can be checked off with a dry erase marker. The morning routine is on the kitchen fridge and the bedtime routine is in the hall between the bathroom and my son's bedroom."

- posted by *jenmouse*

Next: Middle School IEP

Middle School IEP

Organization Accommodations

"My 8th grader has a set of books at home. He writes his assignments in his assignment book, which his teacher initials each day as being correct. I am contacted after two missing assignments and he receives a lunch detention to make up missed work. Gum is allowed during tests. He sits near the teacher, and receives physical and verbal prompts for refocusing. He uses one folder for all homework assignments. And he writes on graph paper to assist with poor handwriting."

- posted by *Sher*

"My sons were so tired of forgetting to bring the right books home that they were carrying all their books around, resulting in 40-plus pound backpacks. The accommodation is that their textbooks now stay in the classroom and there are extra copies at home. That lightens the load in their backpacks and saves them the fear of forgetting."

- posted by *GinaK*

"My daughter is entering sixth grade and is just receiving her first IEP. In addition to ADHD, she has dyscalculia and a perception disorder. She has a very difficult time with place values, and struggles to write numbers in an order that is easy to read. To help her with this, she will use her lined notebook paper landscape."

- posted by *ski*

Working with Teachers

"When my ADD and ADHD twins get medication changes or stressful events, I contact their teachers and tell them to do a daily check-in sheet. The teachers check a box if all is well. If not, they write comments and let me know where we need to work. We do daily check-ins before report card time so there are no surprises. The IEP is the place to obligate teachers to fill out the form. Also, all long-term projects have to be broken into manageable tasks with weekly deadlines, rather than being a two-month project that overwhelms them. They get extra time for all tests if they need it."

- posted by *GinaK*

"My sons are involved in meetings with their teachers. It surprised their teachers at first, but now they are used to it. We always start the meeting by telling my sons, 'This is the team that wants to see you do well at school. They want to know what will help you. Can you tell them what you think will help you do your best and why you think it will help?' The kids tell them how windows distract them, or which students distract them, or how a hand on their shoulder with gentle pressure reminds them to focus again without embarrassing them. The kids know the teachers are on their 'team' and the teachers understand why the accommodations are important. Also, I take my *ADDitude* magazines to

the staff lounge for them when I'm done. I have also been known to make copies (shame, shame) and send them to the teachers with notes on them."

- posted by GinaK

Scheduling Accommodation

"My son entered middle school this year, and I was thrilled at how the guidance office was willing to work with our family. They scheduled the classes he needs to concentrate on (and often struggles with) early in the morning when he is able to really focus, and the more active classes toward the end of the day. This last class is gym -- which is great because he comes home and is ready to focus on homework."

- posted by dianeshale

Homework Accommodations

"My 8th grade son is very overwhelmed with the homework load. In the past, he did only the even or odd numbered problems, which helped, at times. This year, we are trying a time limit. For example, he works on math for a half-hour and what gets done gets done. The time limit helps because he can see the end, whereas before all he could think about was how long it would take to complete all his work."

- posted by Kelly

"My son has had an IEP since fifth grade. He is now entering eighth grade and one effective part of the IEP is reduced classwork and homework, as needed. This way it does not become a crutch. For example, if math homework has similar problems, then he can do every other one. Sometimes, he forgets he has this accommodation, and ends up doing them all. That has happened over time as his attention improved. But there are some nights where he struggles and he uses that accommodation. Another important part is dictating long writing assignments, as writing is a painful process for him."

- posted by KatieS

Next: High School IEP

High School IEP

Organization Accommodation

"My 10th grader, who has an IEP for the first time, after years of only a 504 plan, now gets daily help at school for keeping himself organized."

- posted by SusieQ

Test Accommodation

"My 11th grade daughter has done a great job of weaning herself from many accommodations to a few. Her favorite, and the teachers' too, is that of taking tests in the classroom. She starts the test with the other kids and if she is struggling or does not feel she has enough time, she writes her guided study hall teacher's name at the top of the test. Then, she turns the test in, just like all the other kids. When she gets to guided study hall, the test is waiting for her to finish or to ask for clarification from her IEP teacher. None of the kids in the class are aware of this accommodation, and that is important when you are a teen. It also encourages my daughter to try taking tests in classrooms with distractions, and she has less anxiety, knowing she has this option if needed."

- posted by Cheerydale

Other Accommodations

"My 14 year old son has brain damage from a brain tumor, along with ADHD, a math disorder, ODD, depression, and cognitive disabilities. He has an extra set of books at home, limited math assignments, a goal of completing 75

percent of his homework, and a calm down spot when he needs it. Most tests are read to him, and he gets to do errands for teachers. He also has a separate behavior plan. I have asked for OT to be done this year and the school is going to work that in. He is medicated with Lamictal, Prozac and Ritalin LA. My 11 year old has ADHD and is controlled with the Daytrana patch and does not need an IEP."

- posted by *WendyS*

"My tenth grade son has had an IEP for years. His transition to high school last year was not the best, but the school hired a new special education assistant principal who seems very creative and understanding of what parents are going through (she has an ADHD child). In addition to a case manager, she is providing a male staff member of the school who is a retired engineer (which is what my son aspires to be) to have lunch with him and keep on top of him with his organization and assignments. This mentor will also communicate with my husband and I, as well. I feel like my son may finally realize how important his "job" is right now and what it will take to be successful. He will finally hear it from a mentor, not just his parents!"

- posted by *crikard*

Next: Other IEP Accommodations

Other IEP Accommodations

"I am a teacher and I suggest auditory cuing to sustain attention by asking, 'How will you remember this?' This is used during class or one-on-one discussions of important concepts. For example, when teaching geometry shapes, ask 'How will you remember this is called a pentagon?' This question requires student attention (thus can be repeated), allows processing time for memory, allows creativity of mnemonics, and gives arousal to the executive function. It can be written into the IEP as: 'Student will be asked twice during class how he will remember facts or rules.'"

- posted by *Roy*

"For tests or graded classwork/homework: My son is given an opportunity, at another time or the next day, to complete answers left blank, or with 'I don't know,' '0,' or '?' on the answer line. (He is clearly having trouble focusing, is frustrated, zoned out, or shut down when he answers like that.) When given the opportunity to complete/change the answer, if he does not change anything, the grade stands."

- posted by *rookie*

"My son was getting a huge amount of homework, and we were struggling to get it all done. I then found out it was schoolwork they were sending home. My son would say, 'Oh, I'll do it at home.' It was written into his IEP that he could earn extra recess by completing his work at school. And whatever was assigned as schoolwork had to remain at school. Suddenly, homework was not the main focus of our evenings. He was getting so much more done at school too."

- posted by *lisag80123*

"The main thing that helped us with our daughter's IEP meeting was taking some charge of the proceedings by presenting an agenda of our own. I wrote a summary of our daughter's strengths as we see them, and asked the team for their input, as well. I then listed things we wanted to see worked on, and asked for input from the team, too. I sent it to the team members ahead of time, so they could have time to look it over and come back with feedback. The meeting went great. We actually spent more time on our agenda than theirs! It also brought out some revelations and ideas that probably would never have come up, had we stuck to the 'usual' plan."

- posted by *mothership*

"My son gets frustrated at seeing a page full of math problems, and mentally checks out or melts down. It's helped when a teacher put a 'red line' (or blue, green, whatever color they choose) on the paper after the first three problems, had him set a goal to just do those three, checked them, had him take a deep breath and stretch, then put a line under 3 more, and proceeded in smaller increments through the assignment.

"We also had one teacher offer to record the class lecture portion so he could listen to it after class while doing homework. That way he didn't have such difficulty and anxiety trying to keep up with taking notes. When he is trying to write as fast as possible, he misses a lot and doesn't really think about what is being said. These have both helped

to lower his anxiety and let him enjoy learning!"