

PARENT ADVOCACY SERIES

Understanding the Difference Between Accommodations and Modifications

Two words that sound similar but mean very different things for your child's learning plan.

When you are working with your child's school team, you will often hear the words "accommodations" and "modifications." Understanding this distinction is one of the most important parts of advocating for your child, as it directly impacts their learning experience and goals. **Knowing the difference will empower you to have more effective conversations** with the IEP team.

Accommodation

Goal: level the playing field.

A change in *how* your child learns or shows what they know. It removes barriers and provides access to the same curriculum as peers — learning expectations stay the same.

- Changes how material is presented, or how a task is completed
- Does **not** change what the child is expected to learn
- Allows participation in the general education curriculum
- Appropriate for students on an IEP or a 504 Plan

Like a ramp for someone using a wheelchair: the destination is the same, but the ramp offers a different way to get there.

Modification

Goal: make the learning goal attainable.

A change in *what* your child is taught or expected to learn. It adjusts the curriculum content or performance expectations when grade-level expectations aren't appropriate.

- Changes what the child is expected to learn or master
- Adjusts the curriculum or the learning standard itself
- Often means not learning all the same material as peers
- Only available to students with an **IEP**

Like climbing a shorter flight of stairs: the task is still to climb, but the destination is different from what others reach.

Examples of Common Accommodations

Presentation — how information is given	Response — how a child can reply
Audiobooks or text-to-speech software; large-print textbooks; a copy of the teacher's notes	Using a laptop to type instead of writing; giving answers orally; using a calculator for math
Setting — where a child works	Timing/Scheduling — when a child works
Preferential seating (e.g. near the teacher); working in a small group or quiet space; reduced distractions in testing	Extended time on tests and assignments; frequent breaks; breaking large assignments into smaller parts

Examples of Common Modifications

- Answering questions with a lower level of complexity on an assignment
- Being assigned shorter or easier reading passages than the rest of the class
- Being given a spelling list with fewer or simpler words
- Grading a student on a different standard than their peers
- Reducing the number of options on a multiple-choice test (e.g. four choices to two)

Why the Difference Matters

Impact on diploma: in many states, a student whose curriculum is significantly modified may be on a path toward a certificate of completion rather than a standard diploma — ask the IEP team about this if your child is receiving modifications.

Appropriate support: providing an accommodation when a modification is needed (or vice versa) can prevent meaningful progress — the key is matching support to need.

Clarity in goals: knowing the difference helps ensure IEP goals are ambitious but achievable, and supports are correctly aligned to help your child meet them.

You are an expert on your child. **Trust your knowledge and ask clarifying questions** as you build a plan that truly supports their unique journey.