

Navigating the School: How to Approach Mental Health Discussions

When your child is struggling with a mental health issue, trying to work with the school can feel overwhelming. There is already one maze to work through, that being your child's mental health. When the addition of talking with the school staff is put on top of that, it can downright feel not only exhausting, but unmanageable.

With this guide, there will be a breakdown of what the roles of the core staff of the school are and subsequently giving a path of direction when speaking to the staff.

- *Principal*: responsible for hiring, policy creation, supervision of staff and students, program development, budgeting, academic school year planning and communication with parents and faculty when necessary
- *Assistant Principal*: works with administrators to run the school; communicate with all realms including students, teachers, parents and board members; responsibilities include: insuring safety of students and staff, addressing student discipline and helping with accessing resources to address behaviors, administrative tasks (evaluation and supervision of teachers), fulfilling the state and federal laws to ensure safety and equity at the school in addition to aiding the principal in their tasks
- *School Nurse*: Focus on chronic health conditions or management of acute health conditions; responsibilities include providing direct care to students, such as delivering of medication, providing case management (assessment, planning, implementation and monitoring of individual health plans) and advocacy for students and families to provide additional resources if needed for medical care ¹
- *School Counselor*: Focus on helping students with academic goals, social, personal and career development; aid students in developing skills such as organization, time management and effective study habits; post-graduation goals, collaboration with teachers, administration and parents to aid in student's academic success
- *Social Worker*: licensed mental health professionals who provide mental health support and services to the students; provide crisis intervention to students if needed; collaboration with outside resources and agencies to provide support for families
- *Teacher*: Focus is on teaching the academic courses to the students; will collaborate with administration, counselors and social workers if needs arise for their students

Additionally, your child may need extra support in school to aid in academic requirements. Below are the terms that may be used or integrated into your child's education plan.

- *IEP (Individualized Education Program/Plan)*: a "legal document that details the personalized learning needs and goals for a child with a disability as defined by law when the child attends a K-12 grade educational institution that receives public funding, in addition to the disability must cause significant interference with your child's ability to

¹ Center for Disease Control, & National Center For Chronic Disease Prevention And Health Promotion. (2017). *Managing Chronic Health Conditions in Schools: The Role of the School Nurse*.

learn the standard curriculum.” (Olsen, 2020).² To note, for an IEP, your child must have a diagnosis that is listed under the requirements from the IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). The request for an IEP is typically made at the school, to where school officials and those who interact with your child daily will identify and refer them for an assessment. In addition, parents can also request for their child to be evaluated if they feel their child needs an IEP. Parents are involved in the process once their child qualifies, in which they will meet with educators to develop a plan.

- **504 Plan:** “...consists of the provision of regular or special education and related aids and services designed to meet the student's individual educational needs as adequately as the needs of nondisabled students are met.”³ Essentially, this plan allows for accommodations to be made and to remove obstacles in the typical classroom setting to ensure your child is as successful as they could be. Those who would benefit from the 504 plan are those who are able to learn at the typical level but need accommodations to do so. “Eligibility for a 504 plan is not defined by specific medical conditions. Instead, it is intentionally left as a broad statement of possible physical and mental impairments so that each school can determine eligibility on the basis of an individual case (Mauro, 2020).”⁴ The process to obtain and implement a 504 plan is like that of an IEP to where testing and evaluation must be completed and is collaborative with school officials and the school and/or parents can request this.

What is the difference between an IEP and 504 plan?

IEP's not only require a specific diagnosis within the IDEA's requirements, but is also a legal document in addition to the diagnosis and problems causing significant impairment in the classroom and/or at home. Essentially, the child's ability to function is severely impaired. The IEP also has specific goals for the student to meet in addition to those accommodations that are needed. On the other hand, a 504 plan is intended to be much broader for those struggling with a disability causing them impairments in the classroom. Although assessments and evaluations are done, it is on a broader spectrum. The 504 plan would include only accommodations that are needed for the child, such as needing to sit in a specific plan in the classroom or needing reduction in homework. Not every child that struggles with a mental health diagnosis will need an IEP or 504 plan. However, these are options that parents can discuss with the school if needed.

Who do I talk to at the school if my child is struggling?

This task can be a daunting one in not knowing where to start. Below are steps to take to ensure your child is supported. Remember, it is the school's job to accommodate, include and support your child. The only job as a parent is to enlist their help.⁵

² Linnell-Olsen, L. (2020, November 19). How an Individualized Education Plan Can Help Your Child in School. Verywell Family. <https://www.verywellfamily.com/when-to-ask-for-an-iep-2601418#how-do-kids-get-an-iep>

³ Office For Civil Rights. (2020, January 10). Protecting Students With Disabilities. U.S. Department of Education. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/504faq.html>

⁴ Mauro, T. (2021, February 15). Could Your Child Benefit From a 504 Plan? Verywell Family. <https://www.verywellfamily.com/what-is-a-504-plan-3104706>

⁵ Offner, Ph.D., D. (2018, May 14). Ensuring Your Child is Supported at School | NAMI: National Alliance on Mental Illness. NAMI. <https://nami.org/Blogs/NAMI-Blog/May-2018/Ensuring-Your-Child-is-Supported-at-School>

Step 1: Start with the school's health and wellness specialist/center. This will typically be the social worker or psychologist at the school. If the school does not have a social worker or psychologist, the guidance/school counselor could be another point of contact.

Step 2: Request a meeting with the social worker, psychologist or school counselor. Remember, schools are required by law to have accommodations based on specific needs, which are the 504 plans and IEP's.

From here, most of the time, once you discuss the need with the staff above, your child will then get the support they need. If your child is seeing an outpatient therapist or psychiatrist, they can also collaborate with the school social worker or psychologist to ensure your child is getting what they need.