

Empower Ed

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RESOURCE SHEET

UNDERSTANDING MEDICAL VS. EDUCATIONAL DISABILITY

You recently found out that your student has a medical diagnosis, and you worry about the impact it might have on them at school. You decide to contact the school to share this news and determine what support is available, including possible special education. They explain that an educational disability differs from a medical diagnosis and that the criteria for qualification are different. This entire process can be confusing, frustrating, and emotional. It's challenging to understand, and you want what's best for your child moving forward. The following helps clarify these differences and offers additional considerations.

Exclusive vs. Inclusive: A good way to explain the difference between a medical diagnosis and a special education disability is that a medical diagnosis is exclusive, meaning it attempts to identify the diagnosis that best describes the symptoms. In contrast, an educational disability is inclusive, as it only applies when it has an adverse educational impact. Therefore, although your child has a diagnosis, it may not reach the level of severity that qualifies as an educational disability.

Child Find Responsibility: School districts have a legal responsibility to identify, locate, and evaluate any student they suspect may have an educational disability. Now that your student has a formal diagnosis, the school must consider this information, determine whether they suspect an educational disability as well, and refer for a special education evaluation if they do. Even if a school suspects a disability, it does not necessarily mean the child will meet the criteria or demonstrate a need for special education services.

Levels of Support: A common misconception is that a student must receive special education to get the help they need. All students have different levels of need, and some may require additional support. Many of these supports can be provided through general education and by teachers. It is when students do not respond to more intensive support provided through general education that educators might start to consider whether a student may potentially have a special education disability.

Educational Criteria: Certain educational criteria align with an outside diagnosis. For example, if a student is diagnosed with autism, the team might consider educational autism. However, the educational criteria are linked to educational needs and the functional or academic impact they have on the student's education. In addition, students who qualify for special education require individualized instruction to make progress in their skills.

Section 504 Plan: If a student has an outside medical diagnosis that impacts a major life activity, they may be eligible for accommodations and modifications through a Section 504 Plan.

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