

# A GUIDE FOR PARENTS & CAREGIVERS SUPPORTING A NEURODIVERSE TEEN



# Meet the Author

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I'm so glad you've picked up this guide. Supporting a neurodiverse teen is both rewarding and challenging.

And it's a journey you don't have to take alone.

For the past 14 years, I've walked alongside teens, young adults, and parents in schools, homes, and in my private practice in Geneva, Illinois.

My work as a school social worker gave me a deep understanding of educational systems—504 plans, IEPs, and all the steps in between.

Today, I bring that knowledge together with my passion for neurodiversity-affirming care to help families like yours feel seen, supported, and equipped.

My philosophy is simple: we grow through what we go through. This guide was created to give you clarity, tools, and encouragement as you navigate school supports, emotional ups and downs, and the many transitions of raising a neurodivergent teen.

Whether you're flipping through these pages for practical advice, reassurance, or a reminder that you are doing your best, I hope you find something here that lightens the load.

You and your teen deserve a safe space, compassionate support, and a strong foundation to thrive. I'm honored to share this resource with you.



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# From Overwhelmed to Equipped

Parenting a neurodiverse teen can feel both isolating and overwhelming.

Between navigating school systems, sorting through acronyms, and trying to meet your child's emotional needs, all while balancing the rest of life, it's easy to feel stretched too thin.

If you're reading this, know you're not alone, and you don't have to figure it all out by yourself. This guide was created to help you find your footing.

Inside, you'll discover:



- What a neurodiverse diagnosis really means—and how to embrace it as a difference, not a deficit.
- How to navigate the IEP and 504 process step-by-step so you feel more confident in meetings.
- The difference between school-based supports and community resources—and how to access both.
- Practical tools like journal prompts and checklists to help you stay organized and grounded.
- Gentle reminders to care for yourself along the way, because your well-being matters too.

What this guide is not:

- It's not a one-size-fits-all manual (every teen and every family is different).
- It's not a replacement for professional therapy, medical care, or legal advice.
- It's not about "fixing" your teen, because they are not broken.
- It's not a guarantee that the process will be easy (it rarely is), but it will help you feel less alone and more equipped.

With the right tools, support, and perspective, you can walk this path together with more clarity and compassion.

# Understanding the Diagnosis

Receiving a neurodiverse diagnosis for your teen can be both a relief and an adjustment.

On one hand, it offers clarity, finally, a name for what you've both been noticing. On the other hand, it can feel overwhelming to step into a new world of evaluations, acronyms, and appointments.

Neurodiversity refers to natural variations in how people think, learn, and process the world around them. It includes conditions such as ADHD, autism, dyslexia, sensory processing disorder, Tourette's, and more.

These are not deficits, they're differences.

Understanding that your teen isn't "broken" but rather experiencing the world through a unique lens is the first step in providing meaningful support.

This guide is meant to help you get oriented, take the next right step, and understand that while the learning curve can be steep, you're not alone—and you're doing better than you think.



## Understanding the diagnosis

I understand my teen's diagnosis and how it affects their daily life.

YES

☐

NO

☐

I've taken time to read or research the condition (books, podcasts).

☐☐

I've spoken to my teen about the diagnosis in age-appropriate terms.

☐☐

I have a list of questions for my teen's medical or educational team.

☐☐

# Journal Prompts – Diagnosis

What was my first reaction to my teen's diagnosis?

How do I feel now, and what has shifted since then?

What strengths does my teen bring to the world that I want to celebrate more?

What fears or worries am I holding that I haven't yet said out loud?

How can I reframe this diagnosis as an opportunity for connection?



## Navigating the IEP Process

The Individualized Education Program (IEP) is a legally binding document designed to support your teen's learning needs. Whether your child is struggling academically, socially, or emotionally, the IEP outlines the tailored services and supports they are entitled to in school.

Here's how to navigate the process:

- 1 If the school hasn't initiated an evaluation, you have the legal right to request one in writing. Be specific about the challenges your child is facing. This written request starts the formal process and sets timelines in motion.
- 2 Schools use various tools –academic tests, observations, interviews, behavior checklists – to assess your teen. The school team will provide you with an Identification of Needs Assessment (INA), which outlines the areas for further evaluation and identifies which members of the team will assess.

These areas are referred to as “domains.”

At a virtual or in-person Domains Meeting, the parent/caregiver and members of the school team will review the INA and the areas that will be reviewed to determine eligibility for special education services. The INA specifically explores areas presenting an educational impact. The team will not review a domain if they do not see an educational impact.

Upon reviewing the INA, you, the parent/caregiver, should ask follow-up questions and inquire about additional assessments or an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE), if you feel the proposed assessments do not address all of your areas of concern.

You can then consent or not consent to the case study evaluation.

**3 Attend and engage in IEP meetings.** You are your teen's most consistent advocate. Attend all meetings, take notes, and ask questions. You're not expected to be an expert. But you can be informed, persistent, and focused on what helps your child thrive.

**4 Review the Evaluation thoroughly.** Before the Initial Eligibility meeting for special education services, you should receive a draft of the Documentation of Evaluation Results 72 hours in advance.

This draft is a comprehensive report on all domain areas presented in the INA. It is based on various assessments and observations, and includes input from you, the parent or caregiver, and school staff. Read it carefully. Does it reflect your teen's strengths and needs?

- One thing to note: if this is an initial IEP, you will not receive the proposed IEP 72 hours before the meeting. You will receive the evaluation document, which details the testing completed and assessment results. The proposed IEP will be shared with you at the meeting. Providing the
- proposed IEP before the team (this includes the parent) has met to review evaluation results and agree that an IEP needs to be initiated would be pre-determination, and that's not legal.
- Once you have an IEP, THEN you will receive the IEP plan every year, prior to the meeting. This meeting is called an Annual Review. The Annual Review is the proposed IEP for the next calendar year.



- 5 Remember, the IEP isn't set in stone. Check in regularly with teachers and support staff, and if goals aren't being met or your teen's needs change, you can request a meeting to make adjustments.

### Navigating the IEP Process

	YES	NO
I've submitted a written request for an evaluation or have received one from the school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I understand which areas my teen is being evaluated in.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I've reviewed the draft IEP or 504 Plan at least 72 hours before the meeting.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I've written down questions, concerns, or suggestions for the team.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I know who to contact for follow-up at the school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Notes:

# Journal Prompts – Navigating the IEP Process

What parts of the IEP process are confusing or overwhelming to me?

What support do I need in order to advocate confidently?

What specific accommodations would help my teen feel more successful at school?

How does my teen describe their experience at school—and what are they asking for?

# School-Based Resources

Knowing what your teen qualifies for can be confusing—especially when it comes to IEPs vs. 504 Plans. Here's a breakdown:



## 504 Plan

- Applies when there's a documented medical diagnosis.
- Offers accommodations like extended test time, seating arrangements, or permission to take breaks.
- Does not include modifications to curriculum or specialized instruction.



## IEP

- Applies when there's a documented educational impact—this doesn't require a medical diagnosis.
- Includes both accommodations and modifications to instruction, as well as related services like social work, speech language services, occupational and physical therapy, hearing and vision services.
- Contains measurable goals and outlines specific services, which include minutes per week or month for those services.

## School-Based Resources

	YES	NO
I've connected with the Student Services Coordinator or school psychologist.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I understand the difference between an IEP and a 504 Plan.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I know what services (speech therapy, OT) are available at school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I've documented all communication and follow-ups with the school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I've asked the school team about executive functioning or social-emotional support.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Notes:

# Journal Prompts – School-Based Resources

What has worked well for my teen in a school setting so far?

Where does my teen seem to struggle most during the school day?

Who on the school team has been most helpful, and how can I build that relationship?

How does my teen feel about asking for help?

# Steps in the Evaluation Process:

Step 1

## Initiating the Evaluation Process

Parent submits a written request for evaluation or the school team initiates.

## From Concerns to Next Steps: The 10-Day Window

The school team reviews areas of concern: academic performance, attendance, behavior history, past interventions. The academic team has 10 calendar days to respond to the request for an IEP or 504 evaluation.

Step 2

Step 3

## Domains Meeting: Kicking Off the Evaluation Process

If the school team agrees to move forward with an initial evaluation for eligibility for special education, they will initiate a Domains Meeting. This meeting may be held in person or virtually, depending on the school district's process.

Parents will receive a Notice of Conference.

At the meeting, the team reviews which domains show educational impact.



## Step 4

### Looking at the Whole Child

Assessments are conducted across relevant domains, including academic, functional, social-emotional, communication, physical health, motor skills, and cognitive ability.

## Eligibility Meeting: Reviewing Results

A meeting is scheduled to review findings and determine eligibility under categories such as:

- Autism
- Other Health Impairment (OHI)
- Emotional Disability (ED)
- Specific Learning Disability (LD)
- Intellectual Disability



## Step 5

### If Eligible:

- Goals and services are developed (e.g., support in executive functioning for an autistic teen who's academically strong but struggles with organization).
- The student's voice is included when possible, and they can share their strengths and goals.
- Services may include co-teaching, assistive technology, speech/occupational therapy, or social skills groups.

### If Not Eligible for an IEP:

- The team may consider a 504 Plan if the student has a diagnosis that affects their functioning but not to the extent of needing curriculum modification.

Annual meetings are held to review the plan, and reevaluations occur every three years (or sooner, if requested).

# Private & Community Resources

Support doesn't end at the school doors. Many families find tremendous benefit from external resources that help both teens and caregivers.



## Therapists and Counselors

Look for providers who specialize in working with neurodiverse youth. Modalities like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), or Executive Functioning Coaching can be especially helpful.



## Support Groups

There is something powerful about sitting with other families who get it. Whether online or in person, parent and teen groups can offer comfort, tools, and solidarity.



## Psychiatrists for Medication Management

For some teens, medication plays a critical role. Find a provider who listens, explains options clearly, and takes a collaborative approach.



## Occupational Therapy

OT can support sensory integration, fine motor skills, emotional regulation, and more. Even teens benefit from this kind of work, it's not just for younger kids.



## Neurodiversity-Friendly Programs

From coding clubs and D&D groups to art workshops and equine therapy, there are growing options designed for neurodivergent teens. These programs often focus on building confidence, social skills, and independence.



## Additional Resources:

As you are navigating the IEP process, particularly at the start, you may consider visiting the Illinois State Board of Education website. There are several resources available to parents and guardians on this website, including information on eligibility categories, trainings and workshops for parents, behavior interventions, and glossaries of key terms.

You can find a link to this website at <https://www.isbe.net/Pages/Special-Education-Parents-of-Students-with-Disabilities.aspx>

# Community Programs & Inclusive Extracurriculars

Community and connection are key during the teen years. From inclusive gaming and art nights to college prep programs, local libraries and Aurora University offer welcoming spaces where teens can explore, create, and grow.



Offering Dungeons and Dragons Club, Inclusive Gaming Night, and Crafting events.

[> LEARN MORE](#)



Prepares neurodiverse students for college with gradual exposure, enrichment, and community support.

[> LEARN MORE](#)



Offering Inclusion Game Night, homework resources and more.

[> LEARN MORE](#)



Crafting, gaming, and art nights hosted monthly at the library and in partnership with the STC Park District.

[> LEARN MORE](#)

## Private & Community Resources

	YES	NO
I've researched therapists who specialize in neurodiversity or teens.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I've looked into local support groups (in-person or online).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I've explored community programs or extracurriculars that feel inclusive.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I know what insurance covers and what out-of-pocket costs to expect.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I've considered a consultation with a psychiatrist, OT, or executive functioning coach.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Notes:

# Journal Prompts – Private & Community Resources

What support systems do I currently have—and where do I need more?

What activities light my teen up? How can I nurture those interests?

What outside-of-school support has made the biggest difference for my family?

How do I balance pushing my teen to try new things with respecting their comfort zone?



## Practicing Patience Through the Process

Supporting a neurodiverse teen is a marathon, not a sprint. You will make mistakes. So will your teen. The important thing is to keep learning, adjusting, and loving each other through it. Here are a few reminders:

### Trial and Error is Normal

The first therapist might not be the right one. A strategy that worked last month might suddenly stop working. Flexibility is your best tool.

### Create Space for Honest Conversations

Ask your teen how things feel—at school, at home, in their body. Don't assume. Teens may not always be articulate, but giving them safe opportunities to share matters.

### Take Care of Yourself, Too

Burnout is real. Set boundaries with systems, ask for help, and don't put your needs last. You can't pour from an empty cup.

### Celebrate the Small Wins

A calm morning. A completed assignment. A hard conversation handled with grace. These are victories. Recognize them and share the joy with your teen.

# Support Groups for Parents & Caregivers

Caring for a person with special needs can take a significant emotional, physical, and mental toll. Without support, it's easy to slip into burnout and exhaustion. That's why finding resources and community for yourself isn't just helpful, it's necessary. These supports give you a safe place to be seen, heard, and recharged, so you can continue caring for your loved one without losing yourself in the process. Here are some resources to help you connect with others who truly understand this journey and remind you that you don't have to do it alone.



Offering Parenting on the Spectrum, a Parenting Support and Skills Group.



Offering Rising Moms and Rising Dads support groups and events.



Offers online support groups that are open to the general public. You do not need to be a client of Charlie Health.



# Find a Therapist Who Specializes in Neurodiversity and Teens

## Educational Consultations with Jackie Weber

At Weber Therapy and Consulting, we understand that navigating the world of special education can feel overwhelming. Whether you're just beginning the process or facing ongoing challenges, Jackie Weber offers personalized consultation services that combine clinical expertise with a deep understanding of school systems and practices.

Jackie's approach is designed to empower parents and caregivers with the knowledge, tools, and confidence to advocate for meaningful, effective supports that meet your child's unique needs. Together, you'll create a path forward that helps your teen thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.



### What you can expect:

#### ✓ Initial Consultation: Understanding School-Based Supports

A foundational session where Jackie walks you through your rights, school procedures, and the options available for your child. Perfect for families new to special education services.

#### ✓ IEP or 504 Plan Review & Recommendations

A thorough review of your child's current Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or Section 504 Plan, with practical feedback and tailored recommendations for adjustments, accommodations, or additional supports.

#### ✓ Evaluation & Behavior Support Review

Guidance on school evaluations, assessments, and behavior support strategies, helping you interpret reports and advocate for the most effective interventions.

#### ✓ Follow-Up Consultation & Ongoing Support

Continued guidance to navigate meetings, adjust plans, and ensure your child's supports remain aligned with their growth and changing needs.

## Patience Through The Process

	YES	NO
I've identified coping strategies for myself (walks, journaling, therapy).	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I regularly check in with my teen without pressure or expectations.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I celebrate progress with my teen—even the tiny wins.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I'm allowing space for trial and error without self-blame.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I've found at least one person I can talk to openly about this journey.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Notes:

# Journal Prompts – Patience During the Process

What's one small victory from this week I want to remember?

How am I taking care of myself today?

What would I say to a friend who was parenting a neurodiverse teen?

Where can I give myself more compassion or permission to pause?

# Acronyms and Commonly Used Phrases in Special Education

**Annual Goal** – There will be annual goals on the IEP that will be monitored and benchmarked over the course of 12 months. These goals are developed based on the areas of need identified in the eligibility. There should be a goal for each area of need.

**Annual Review** – The Annual Review is the yearly meeting to review the IEP as an educational team. At this meeting, the team will review present levels, goal progress, service minutes, and accommodations. The team will propose new goals for the next year. The Annual Review date is determined by the date your child received their initial IEP.

- The educational team includes the parent(s)/caregiver(s), general education teacher, special education teacher/IEP casemanager, and any related services team members that provide minutes on the student's IEP (may include a social worker, speech language pathologist, school nurse, occupational therapist, physical therapist, hearing and/or vision itinerant). Your teen will also be invited to attend their meeting. At the high school level, your teen's school counselor/guidance counselor will also be in attendance.

**BIP** – A Behavior Intervention Plan is proposed following a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA), to address a target behavior that impacts the learning of the student and others. The BIP describes the desired behavior/the goal of the BIP and outlines the interventions to address the behavior. Interventions may include environmental, teaching, and reinforcement strategies. The BIP will also outline data collection and provisions for communicating with the home.

- To initiate a BIP, an IEP meeting is organized and includes all members of the student's educational team.

**Case Manager** – Every student with an IEP has a Case Manager. This is a special education teacher in the school building where the student attends. This staff member is the main point of contact for the family and student for any IEP-related questions and concerns. The IEP Case Manager is responsible for scheduling meetings, updating progress on academic and functional goals, and can provide support to your student at school.

**Eligibility Conference** – The meeting held to determine, review, terminate, or consider changes to a student's eligibility for special education services. For an initial evaluation for special education services, the educational team will review the case study evaluation at the Eligibility Conference.

**FBA** – A Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) is typically initiated by the school team to improve understanding of a target behavior. The FBA, typically facilitated by the school psychologist, school social worker, and/or behavior interventionist, includes observation, interviews, and data collection to identify when, where, and why the behavior is occurring. In order to initiate an FBA, the team needs to complete an INA and get consent from the parent/caregiver.

**INA** – Identification of Needs Assessment (INA) is the document that the school team will complete and share with the parent/caregiver that outlines areas for further evaluation and identifies which members of the team will assess. These areas are referred to as “domains.” At a virtual or in-person Domains Meeting, the parent/caregiver and members of the school team will review the INA and the areas that will be reviewed to determine eligibility for special education services. Upon reviewing the INA, the parent/caregiver can consent or not consent to the case study evaluation.

**Domains** – Categories that will be considered in a case study evaluation. The domains include academic performance, cognitive, communication status, health, vision and hearing, social and emotional status, and motor abilities.

**LRE** – Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), meaning to the maximum extent appropriate, disabled students are educated with students who are not disabled. LRE is determined by the IEP team for each student based on his or her individual needs.

**NOC** – Notification of Conference

**Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance** – This is sometimes referred to as a PLOP (Present Levels of Performance) and is a required component of the IEP when there is an IEP meeting. These are statements in the IEP, provided by the related services team members, the school counselor, and teachers. These statements should provide an overview of academic and functional abilities, identify strengths and areas of need, and the information should be gathered from various data sources. Information should include the impact of students’ needs on their learning and performance, as compared to same same-aged peers.

**Re-evaluation (Re-eval)** – Every three years, a student’s eligibility for special education services must be re-evaluated. The INA will be completed to identify areas that will be assessed, and an Eligibility Conference will be held with the educational team.

**Related Services** – Members of the school team who meet identified areas of need on a student’s IEP. This may include the school social worker, speech language pathologist, hearing itinerant, vision itinerant, physical therapist, and occupational therapist. These support services are determined through the eligibility process. These professionals will develop goals that will be monitored throughout the year and may provide direct or indirect minutes to support goal progress.

**Transition Planning and Services** – This will be a part of a student’s IEP by age 14.5 to help the teen plan for their post-high school lives. The goal of the transition plan is to assist the teen’s movement from school to post-high school activities (i.e., work, trade school, college, etc), and is based on their individual needs, strengths, preferences, and interests.



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