

Accommodations and modifications: Wait, they're not the same?

by Kori Hamilton and Elizabeth Kessler, professional special educator and NICHCY advisor

Being able to provide ample opportunities for success to all students requires a clear understanding of the needs of each individual student. Every student has a unique learning style, and some students require more help than others. Students who receive special education services have a plan in place to identify the type of support(s) that's needed.

One type of support is an accommodation, which is a change that helps a student overcome or work around the disability. A modification, which is a change in what is being taught to or expected from the student, is another type of support a student with an IEP may receive. Some adaptations might be very simple, like sitting a student in the front of the classroom to ensure the board is easy to see. Others might be more complex, like changing the criteria for an essay to make it achievable for the student.

Supports, accommodations, modifications, oh my! It is not uncommon for these terms to be misused interchangeably; so here is opportunity for clarification. Supports describe both modifications and accommodations. So, what's the difference between providing a modification and an accommodation?

An easy way to remember the difference between the two is to think of an accommodation as leveling the playing field for students by changing "how" they work through the general education curriculum. Modifications go beyond that, and alter the field (game) entirely. Modifications change "what" is learned and therefore change the content of the grade-specific curriculum.

Accommodations

An accommodation is a change that helps a student overcome or work around the disability. These changes are typically physical or environmental changes. Allowing a student who has trouble writing to give his answers orally is an example of an accommodation. This sort of accommodation extends across assignments and content areas.

What are accommodations? Here are a few examples:

- Teacher provides notes/outlines, allows type-written work, allows printed work, provides a peer note-taker, allows the use of wider lined paper for written tasks, provides highlighted text, allows the use of spell-checker,
- Daily agenda checks between home/school, additional progress reports
- Preferential seating, ability to leave room without permission, peer buddy, behavior reward system
- Extended time on assignments, shortened assignments, simplification of directions
- Tests read aloud to student, verbal response acceptable in lieu of written response, fewer multiple choice responses (2 instead of 4), multiple-choice response instead of fill-in-the-blank or short answer/essay, word banks provided for fill in the blank questions

Modifications

Modifications are generally connected to instruction and assessment; things that can be tangibly changed or modified. Usually a modification means a change in what is being taught to or expected from the student. Making the assignment easier so the student is not doing the same level of work as other students is an example of a modification. This change is specific to a particular type of assignment. Making a slight modification to an assignment can drastically improve a student's ability to be academically successful. Changing what is being taught could make the difference in whether a student becomes proficient in the general education curriculum, which in turn could result in the attainment of a regular diploma as opposed to achieving an IEP diploma.

What are modifications? Here are a few examples:

- Reduction of homework, reduction of class work

- Omitting story problems, using specialized/alternative curricula written at lower level, simplified vocabulary and concepts, alternative reading books at independent reading level
- Tests are written at lower level of understanding, preview tests provided as study guide, picture supports are provided, use of calculator
- Grading based on pass/fail, grading based on work completion

Truth about supports

The reality is that oftentimes a student requires both modifications and accommodations to support learning. Modifications and/or accommodations are most often made in scheduling, setting, materials, instruction, and student response. Modifications deliberately lower the intellectual level of the instructional content delivered, while accommodations are generally best practices used for all students, in a differentiated classroom. What is most important to know about modifications and accommodations is that both are meant to help children learn.

Many educators, special and general educators alike, are confused by these two terms. A third grade teacher in Michigan, who shared a student with autism with me, posted a big, colorful sign at the entry to her classroom. It read "Fair isn't always equal!" This was not just intended for our shared student, whose understanding of the world was very black and white, but for all students and parents who entered. Its intent was to inform everyone that this classroom teacher gave students what they needed to be successful. It wasn't always the same, but it was always what each student needed, and it was always fair.

National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities