

How Motherhood Taught Me to Create an Inclusive Classroom

A Guidebook for Teachers



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I reference several apps and websites in this e-book. This is only to provide you with resources that may help you in the classroom. I do not have a paid partnership with any of the apps or websites that I mention in this e-book.

Finally, in parts of this e-book I use the term neurodivergent for clarity when I'm speaking specifically about students with neurological differences and not students with physical disabilities. The term neurodivergent is used when speaking about people who have differing mental or neurological function from what is considered typical. It is used to describe people who have autism, ADHD, dyslexia, language development disorders, and more.

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Introduction

If you were to ask most general education teachers what challenges they enjoy meeting head-on each year, I doubt they would say anything that has to do with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) or 504 Plans. In fact, I doubt that anything related to the paperwork or logistics associated with special education would crack their top ten.

It's not because they don't love the students who have these plans. It's not that at all! It's just that wading through accommodations and trying to figure out how to provide them in the general education classroom can be both difficult and time-consuming, especially if you are a new teacher.

I am not a special education teacher, and I never have been. However, my two sons just happen to have autism, and being both a mother of two autistic children and a teacher has given me a unique perspective. Who I am as a mother directly impacts who I am as a teacher every day.

Creating an inclusive classroom is my main priority. For now obvious reasons, I've spent a great deal of time combining my teacher knowledge and my mother knowledge to create an inclusive classroom. This includes figuring out the best ways to provide accommodations in my middle school English Language Arts (ELA) classroom.

In this guidebook, I'll share the teaching strategies that I use for providing accommodations and creating an inclusive classroom environment. I'll also share the personal experiences I've had with my sons that have influenced those teaching strategies and led to the creation of my inclusive classroom.

Tackling Paperwork

Imagine that it's the beginning of the year. You're doing your in-service training, putting your classroom together, and checking things off of a to-do list that's about five pages long. While you're working in your classroom, your special education teacher walks in and hands you the stack of IEPs and 504 Plans that you'll need for the year. Whether you're a brand new teacher or you've been teaching for years, receiving that stack of papers and knowing that there are so many kids with individual needs to be met can feel overwhelming.

So where do you start? The first step is to get every accommodation for every student onto one page. Rifling through the at-a-glance versions of IEPs and 504 Plans every time you need to remember how to modify an assignment or need a refresher on a behavioral accommodation isn't realistic. It's too time consuming, and it's easy to get lost in the paperwork and become overwhelmed.

If right about now you're thinking to yourself, "It's impossible to get that much information onto one page," I promise you it's possible. To help you get started, I've included the template for the Google sheets organizer that I use in my own classroom every day with this download. It looks like this.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S
1		Aids		Directions & Notes			Extra Time	Exams & Assignments		Organization & Planning		Physical Space		Reading, Spelling, & Assistive Tech				SEL	
2		Auditory Aids	Visual Aids	Detailed Directions	Short Instructions (1-2 Steps)	Paper Copy of Board Notes	Extra Time For Oral, Written & Verbal Responses	Chunk Assignments and Exams	Reduced Exam Length	Help With Planning Ahead	Help With Organizing	Minimize Distractions	Quiet Space	Allow Typing & Spell Check	Lower Grade Level Text Alternative	No Points Off For Spelling	Text to Speech	Give Choices	Help With Social and Emotion Regulation
3	Student A																		
4	Student B																		
5	Student C																		
6	Student D																		
7	Student E																		
8	Student F																		
9	Student G																		
10	Student H																		
11	Student I																		
12	Student J																		
13	Student K																		
14	Student L																		
15	Student M																		
16	Student N																		
17	Student O																		
18	Student P																		
19	Student Q																		
20	Student R																		
21	Student S																		
22	Student T																		
23																			
24																			
25		1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th												
26		Student A	Student A	Student A	Student A	Student A	Student A												
27		Student B	Student B	Student B	Student B	Student B	Student B												
28		Student C	Student C	Student C	Student C	Student C	Student C												
29																			

Tackling Paperwork

You'll need to spend some time customizing the organizer to fit your needs, but, as you can see, everything feels more manageable when it's on one page.

After you've filled out your organizer and have become familiar with each IEP and 504 plan, it's time to take the next step, which will help you start your year off smoothly. Talk to your special education teacher! Your special education teacher likely stopped in and had a quick chat with you about your incoming students when he/she dropped off your paperwork. However, after you've had a chance to read through everything, you should still visit your special education teacher - and the teachers who taught your students last year - and ask them for any extra information that will help you get to know your students. Your students' special education teachers and previous general education teachers can help give you background information on each student that will most likely include strengths, motivators, and triggers.

When you are visiting with their previous teachers and special education teacher, jot notes about your students on the backs of their IEP or 504 Plans. You can even add a column to the organizer specifically for notes and add your notes into your organizer later. The notes you include will look similar to these:

- *He gets anxious if the class gets too loud.*
- *She enjoys drawing and works best if she is allowed to draw after finishing her school work.*
- *He has trouble sitting still and has a favorite fidget that helps him focus.*

The more information you can get ahead of time, the better.

Making Accommodations

It's one thing to read an accommodation and another to actually make the accommodation. Struggling with how to provide an accommodation can be difficult. If you're struggling, you should - of course - ask your special education teacher for advice. However, here are a few ways that I make accommodations for students in my ELA classroom, many of which were inspired by my children.

The Accommodation: Provide Visual Aids

Sometimes providing visual aids is a little easier to do for some subjects than others. In math class you can use manipulatives. In math and science, you have charts and graphs at your disposal. In history/geography, there are maps and photos already incorporated into the text, but what about ELA?

I remember thinking during my first year of teaching, "How on earth do I provide visual aids as an English Language Arts teacher?" In my mind, the text was all I had available to provide visually for my students. It was through helping my sons at home that I began to learn how to provide visual aids for both my children and my students.

My oldest son can read anything, and when I mean anything - I mean anything! I'll never forget the look on his teacher's face in kindergarten when he read the word "inspiration" on the bulletin board behind her. However, I learned as he got older that while he could read and pronounce nearly any word, he didn't necessarily know the meaning of the word he was saying. I realized that he didn't always understand what he had just read, and this was causing some issues both at school with his schoolwork and at home socially.

I started using Google image search to show him a picture of whatever word I was trying to explain. I would point to the image and repeat the word, and this helped him make the connection. I began doing this with my youngest son also. This was a game changer for both of them and I now use this to help my students as well. It's common practice for me to use Google images to pre-teach vocabulary words not just for my students with IEPs or 504 plans, but for my whole class.