Making Inclusion Work in General Education Classrooms

Practical strategies for students with IEPs and their families

Who This Guide Is For

This guide is written for students with IEPs or 504 plans who spend most of their day in general education classrooms, and for their parents. Like the other guides in this series, it uses color-coded boxes when something applies mostly to one reader or the other. Otherwise, read it together.

Orange	Key points and important warnings for everyone
Purple	Specifically for parents — things to know or do
Teal	Specifically for students — things to know or do

Inclusion means you're learning alongside students without disabilities in the same classroom, doing the same curriculum, with the supports you need to access it. It is the default under federal law: schools are required to educate students with disabilities in the **least restrictive environment** where their needs can be met, and that starts with the general education classroom.

But being in the room is not the same as being included. A student who sits in general education all day but never accesses the material, never connects with peers, and never participates meaningfully is not included — they're just present. This guide is about the difference.

> **The test of real inclusion**
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> Real inclusion means you can (a) access the curriculum with appropriate supports, (b) participate in classroom activities meaningfully, and (c) build relationships with classmates. If any of the three is missing, inclusion isn't working yet — even if the schedule says you're "fully included."

1 Inclusion vs. Just Being in the Room

Schools sometimes claim inclusion based on where a student sits rather than what they actually experience. The difference matters because the outcomes are different.

Presence Only	Real Inclusion
Sitting in the class without modified materials.	Same material, adapted so you can engage with it.

Given the same worksheet as everyone but can't access it.	Given a version of the task that works for how you learn.
Always partnered with the same aide, isolated from classmates.	Working with different peers across the week; aide fades support when possible.
Pulled out constantly for services that conflict with core instruction.	Services scheduled to minimize missed instruction.
Graded as "participating" without evidence of learning.	Assessed fairly on what you've actually learned.
"Included" socially — seated at the lunch table — but not connected with anyone.	Real peer relationships supported by the adults when needed.

FOR STUDENTS

Honest question to ask yourself each week: am I actually learning in this class, or am I just getting through it? If you're spending most of the period confused, copying from a neighbor, or zoning out because nothing makes sense, that's a signal the supports aren't working yet — not that you're bad at school.

FOR PARENTS

The phrase "he's doing great — he's fully included" from a school often means the student is not causing problems. That's not the same as learning. Ask specifically: what has my child produced this month that shows what they've learned? If the answer is vague, push.

2 Know Your Accommodations — Really Know Them

Your IEP or 504 plan lists accommodations — things the school has agreed to provide so you can access the same curriculum as everyone else. But accommodations that exist only on paper don't help anyone. For inclusion to work, the accommodations have to actually happen in the classroom, every day.

Common accommodations in general education

- Extended time on tests and assignments.
- Copies of class notes or a note-taking partner.
- Preferential seating (near the teacher, away from distractions).
- Directions given in writing as well as verbally.
- Access to assistive technology (text-to-speech, speech-to-text, calculators).
- Breaks during long tasks or tests.
- Modified assignments (fewer problems, different format).
- Use of a laptop or tablet for writing.

- Quiet testing location.

FOR STUDENTS

You should be able to name your accommodations without looking them up. Not just 'I get extra time' but 'I get time-and-a-half on tests, I can use text-to-speech for reading assignments, and I can take breaks during long tasks if I need them.' If you don't know your accommodations well enough to ask for them, they will go unused. Get a copy of your IEP or 504 plan and highlight the accommodations section. Keep it somewhere you can find it.

When an accommodation doesn't happen

If a teacher doesn't provide an accommodation you're entitled to, it's often because they didn't know, forgot, or didn't understand the accommodation. Most of the time, a polite reminder fixes it: 'Ms. Chen, I have extended time on tests in my IEP. Can I take the rest of this in the resource room after class?' Start there. If reminders don't work, escalate — but start with a conversation.

FOR PARENTS

At the start of each school year, ask which general education teachers have read your child's IEP. You may be surprised. Many teachers receive a one-page accommodations summary — sometimes called a "snapshot" or "IEP-at-a-glance" — rather than the full document. Ask the case manager to confirm every teacher has seen the current accommodations and knows how to implement them.

3 Why Good Teaching Helps Everyone

The best inclusion strategies aren't separate add-ons for students with disabilities — they're teaching approaches that make the classroom work better for everyone. Teachers call this **Universal Design for Learning**, or UDL. You don't need to know the theory. What matters is recognizing it when you see it, because classrooms that use UDL are classrooms where students with disabilities do well.

Signs a classroom is designed for inclusion

- Directions are given in multiple ways — spoken, written, and shown.
- Students can show what they know in different formats (essay, poster, video, presentation).
- Key terms and directions are posted somewhere visible, not just said once.
- The teacher checks for understanding before moving on, not after.
- Assignments are broken into steps with checkpoints, not just given as one big task.
- Flexible grouping — sometimes working alone, sometimes in pairs, sometimes in small groups.
- Time is built in for questions, even the ones students are afraid to ask.

A classroom can be good for everyone and still not be enough for you

Universal Design reduces how many accommodations individual students need, but it doesn't replace them. If you still need specific accommodations on top of a well-designed classroom, you're entitled to them. UDL is not a reason for a teacher to say 'I do that for everyone, so I don't need to do your accommodations.'

4 Understanding Co-Teaching

Some general education classrooms include a special education teacher alongside the general education teacher. This is called **co-teaching**, and it can look very different depending on how the two teachers work together. Knowing the different models helps you tell whether co-teaching is being done well.

Model	What It Looks Like	Good or Warning Sign?
One Teach, One Observe	Gen ed teacher leads; SPED teacher watches specific students to collect data.	Fine occasionally. If it's happening every day, the SPED teacher's expertise is being wasted.
One Teach, One Assist	Gen ed teacher leads; SPED teacher circulates to help students who need it.	Workable, but often turns the SPED teacher into an aide. Should not be the only model used.
Parallel Teaching	Class splits in half; each teacher teaches the same lesson to a smaller group.	Good — smaller groups mean more attention for everyone.
Station Teaching	Class rotates through stations; each teacher runs one station, plus an independent station.	Good — both teachers are using their expertise.
Alternative Teaching	SPED teacher works with a small group needing pre-teaching or re-teaching while gen ed teacher handles the rest.	Good when used strategically. Warning sign if the same students are always in the "alternative" group.
Team Teaching	Both teachers lead together, sharing instruction fluidly.	The strongest model — requires two teachers who plan together and know each other well.

> **FOR PARENTS**
> If your child is in a co-taught classroom, ask the school which models are used and how often. A co-taught classroom where the SPED teacher is always circulating as a helper is a warning sign. It usually means the two teachers haven't had adequate planning time — which is a scheduling and staffing problem, not a personality problem. You can raise it at the IEP meeting.

5 Working with Paraprofessionals and Aides

If you have a one-to-one aide (also called a paraprofessional or para) assigned to you, the goal of that support is not to be with you forever. It's to help you build the skills to need less support over time. A good

aide fades their help when you don't need it. A less-helpful aide hovers in a way that can actually get in the way of your inclusion.

What helpful aide support looks like

- Steps back when you're working independently or with peers.
- Prompts you to try something before helping.
- Helps you access the material, not does the work for you.
- Encourages you to interact with classmates, not just with them.
- Communicates with the teacher and your family, but doesn't replace you in those conversations.

What unhelpful aide support looks like

- Sits next to you in every class even when you don't need help.
- Answers for you when teachers or classmates ask you questions.
- Does parts of your work when you're capable of doing them.
- Creates a physical barrier between you and other students.
- Makes you feel like "the kid with the aide" instead of a regular classmate.

> **FOR STUDENTS**
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> If you feel like your aide is making your inclusion worse — sitting too close, answering for you, keeping you from socializing — that's a legitimate thing to bring up. Talk to your case manager, your parents, or the aide directly if you're comfortable. Something like: 'I'd like to try working independently during English this week — can you check in with me every 20 minutes instead of sitting next to me?' The goal is always to need less support over time, not more.

6 Social Inclusion: The Part Most People Ignore

Schools spend most of their energy on academic inclusion — getting you access to the curriculum. But social inclusion is just as important, and it's often where students with disabilities struggle most. Having classmates who know your name is different from having friends. Eating at the same table as other kids is different from being part of a conversation.

What makes social inclusion work

- Shared activities, not just shared space — working on group projects, being on the same team.
- Time without adult supervision to build peer relationships — lunch, hallways, after-school activities.
- Access to the same extracurriculars as other students, with accommodations if needed.
- Classmates who have enough information to understand differences, when the student is comfortable sharing.
- Adults who fade back rather than hovering, so peer relationships can form naturally.

FOR STUDENTS

If you want to join a club, sport, or activity, you're allowed to. Extracurriculars are covered by your civil rights under Section 504 and the ADA — schools cannot exclude you from an activity because of your disability, and they have to provide reasonable accommodations if you need them to participate. If you've wanted to try out for something but haven't because you weren't sure how accommodations would work, ask. Start with the coach or sponsor, then loop in your case manager if you hit a wall.

FOR PARENTS

Social inclusion often requires careful but intentional adult support — especially in middle school, where peer dynamics are volatile. A case manager who knows your child can sometimes facilitate connections (a lunch bunch, a structured club, pairing with a specific peer on a project) without making your child a "project." Ask what social supports exist at the school. Many schools have peer mentorship programs or inclusive clubs that aren't widely advertised.

A hard truth about social inclusion

Schools cannot manufacture friendships. They can create the conditions where friendships might form — proximity, shared activities, time without adult hovering — but the relationships have to grow on their own. Adults who try too hard to engineer friendships often produce the opposite. The best adult role is usually the one that makes itself unnecessary.

7 When Inclusion Isn't Working

Inclusion is the default, but it's not automatically right for every student in every class. Sometimes a student is in a fully inclusive placement and the data shows it isn't working — grades are dropping, the student is falling behind, behavior is deteriorating, or the child is consistently miserable. When this happens, the answer is to change what's happening, not pretend it's fine.

Signs inclusion isn't working

- Assignments are consistently incomplete or very different in quality from peers'.
- The student reports feeling lost most of the time.
- New behavior problems emerging, especially avoidance (refusing school, somatic complaints, skipping class).
- Regression on skills the student had previously mastered.
- No meaningful peer connections after sustained time in the setting.
- Anxiety or depression tied specifically to the school day.

Options short of leaving the general education setting

Before moving to a more restrictive placement, there are usually options that preserve inclusion while adding support:

- Add or strengthen accommodations that aren't addressing the current need.
- Request an assistive technology evaluation for tools that haven't been tried.

- Request more specially designed instruction within the general ed setting.
- Add a pull-out period for targeted intervention in the specific area that's struggling, while keeping inclusion in other subjects.
- Request an updated evaluation — the student's needs may have changed.
- Add related services (counseling, OT) if the challenge is emotional or regulatory, not academic.

Less restrictive first, more restrictive only if needed

Federal law requires the least restrictive environment where the student's needs can be met. The LRE test is not "is the student succeeding?" — it's "can the student succeed here with appropriate supports?" Before moving to a more restrictive placement, the team should document what was tried and why it did not work.

FOR PARENTS

A more restrictive placement is sometimes the right answer. If your child is genuinely struggling and the inclusive setting has been given real support to adapt, it's not a failure to consider a different placement — it's responsive. The problem is when placement moves happen too quickly (before supports are actually tried) or too slowly (after years of a student drowning in a setting that wasn't working). Trust your data and your child's experience, not just the school's description.

8 What You Can Do to Make Inclusion Work

Most of this guide has been about what the school should do. This section is about what the student can do — the parts of inclusion you have some control over.

Small habits that add up

- **Know your accommodations** and remind teachers at the start of the semester.
- **Sit somewhere that works for you.** Front row, away from a specific window, near a friend who helps you focus. This is a choice you get to make.
- **Ask questions in the moment**, even small ones. If you wait until you're lost, you'll be lost for the rest of the period.
- **Use a planner or app** to track assignments. Teachers often post to online systems inconsistently. Your own record is more reliable.
- **Follow up when something doesn't happen.** Accommodations missed once are usually an oversight; missed repeatedly, they need to be raised with the case manager.
- **Build relationships with one or two teachers** who know you well. Having an adult at school who understands you makes hard days shorter.

FOR STUDENTS

The single most useful thing you can do: have one conversation with each new teacher at the start of a semester, where you introduce yourself and mention your accommodations. Two minutes, maybe after class the first week. Something like: ‘Hi, I’m Alex. I have an IEP — the main things are extended time on tests and I use a laptop for writing. Is it okay if I check in with you if something comes up?’ Teachers who know you advocate for you. Teachers who don’t know you can’t.

A Final Word

Inclusion is a setting, but it’s also a practice. Being included means your classroom is set up for you to learn, your teachers know your plan, your classmates know you as a person, and you have a voice in how things are going. No school gets all of that right all the time. The goal isn’t a perfect year — it’s a year where the adults and the student keep talking, keep adjusting, and keep each other honest about what’s actually working.

A note on this guide

This guide is general information, not legal advice. If your child’s school is failing to provide accommodations required by the IEP, if inclusive placement is being denied without appropriate consideration of supports, or if you are facing a change in placement you disagree with, consult a special education advocate or attorney who knows your state’s procedures.