

School-Based vs. Medical Therapies: What Families Need to Know

A Resource Document



Many children receive speech, occupational, or physical therapy in school, in medical settings, or both. These services can look similar, but they serve different purposes and follow different decision-making processes. This fact sheet offers general information to help families understand the differences and work effectively with their child's school and healthcare providers.

School-Based (Educational Model) Therapy

School-based therapies are intended to help students **access, participate in, and make progress in school**. They are part of a child's **IEP or 504 Plan** when the IEP/504 team determines that therapy supports the child's educational needs. These services:

- Focus on skills needed to **access their educational program within the school environment**, such as communication, mobility, sensory regulation, navigating the school building (inside and out), and classroom participation.
- Are provided based on individual student need under **IDEA or Section 504**, which requires schools to offer a **Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)** to students with disabilities.
- May occur in a variety of school settings — classrooms, playgrounds, therapy rooms, or small groups, or other settings, based on the child's unique needs.
- Are provided **at no cost to families**.

A key factor in deciding school-based services is determining **what the child needs to access and participate in their school day**. The IEP team looks at what supports are necessary for the child to take part in classroom activities, follow routines, and make progress in learning alongside their classmates. Examples of school-based therapies can include support with school communication, handwriting, behaviors, motor skills, or navigating the school building, the bus, or the playground. Teams may consider multiple data sources, including teacher reports, evaluations, and classroom performance.

Medical (Clinical) Therapy

Medical or clinical therapy focuses on a child's **overall development, health, and functional skills across all settings**, not just school. It is part of the child's healthcare plan and is guided by medical evaluations, diagnoses, and insurance requirements. These services:

- Address daily living skills, development, and functional needs at **home, in the community, and beyond**.
- May focus on goals such as strengthening, coordination, speech clarity, feeding, self-care, mobility, or sensory processing that support the child's medical or developmental needs rather than needs specific to school participation. Medical therapy may also include rehabilitation or recovery following surgery or an injury.

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- Are delivered in clinics, private practices, hospitals, or at home.
- Are typically covered by **insurance or Medicaid**, though families may have co-pays or other costs.

How School-Based and Medical Therapies Can Work Together

School-based and medical therapies can complement each other. School therapy supports access to the educational environment and programming, while medical therapy targets broader developmental and functional goals. Many children participate in both school-based and medical therapies. Although the purposes and goals may differ, coordination can help provide consistent strategies across environments. Families may find it helpful when:

- School and medical therapists **communicate**, with parent permission
- **Goals are aligned** where appropriate (though not identical)
- **Strategies** used at home, school, and therapy support one another

Not all goals will overlap, and that's okay — each system serves a different role.

Tips for Families When Considering Therapy Services

Families may want to ask questions such as:

- How does this therapy connect to my child's educational needs, medical needs, or both?
- Who will be involved in determining whether this therapy is appropriate and how goals will be developed?
- In what settings will the therapy take place, and what might the frequency or format look like based on my child's individual needs?
- How will progress be monitored and shared with our family, and how can we support these skills at home and in the community?
- Are there any costs or insurance considerations for this therapy, or is it provided as part of my child's educational services?
- How can school-based and medical providers (if both are involved) coordinate or communicate to help ensure a consistent approach for my child?

Keeping copies of IEPs, medical evaluations, and therapy reports can support communication across providers and help families track progress over time.

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Key Points to Remember

- **School-based therapy** helps a student access and participate in their education. Decisions about these services are made by the IEP or 504 team and are based on the child's individual needs at school.
- **Medical therapy** focuses on a child's overall development and daily functioning across all areas of life, such as home and community settings. These services follow medical and clinical guidelines.
- **A child may receive one type of therapy, the other, or both**, depending on their needs.
- **Working together matters.** When families, educators, and healthcare providers collaborate, it helps ensure services are consistent and effective across home, school, and community settings.

If Families Have Concerns About a School's Decision

If you believe your child needs a therapy service to participate in or make progress at school, but the school team disagrees, you can ask for more discussion and clarification. Families can request that the IEP or 504 team review existing information, consider additional evaluations, or talk more about how the child's needs affect participation in the school day.

It may also be helpful to share reports or information from outside providers. If the school has completed an evaluation and you disagree with the results, you may be able to request an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE).

If the team is still unable to reach an agreement, families have access to both informal and formal dispute resolution options to help resolve concerns.

Additional Resources

- The Inspired Treehouse - **What's the Difference Between a School Therapist and a Clinical Therapist?**
theinspiredtreehouse.com/school-therapist-clinical-therapist
- Associates in Pediatric Therapy - **Outpatient Therapy Vs. School-Based Therapy: What's The Difference?**
kidtherapy.org/outpatient-therapy-vs-school-based-therapy-whats-the-difference



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