



## School support for children with chronic and mental health needs


Children with physical and mental problems can face academic difficulties at school for many reasons. Accessing the services that children and youth may need to help them better manage and support their mental health needs or physical needs at school can be quite challenging. The 504 plan is developed to ensure that a child who has a disability identified under the law and is attending an elementary or secondary educational institution receives accommodations that will ensure their academic success and access to the learning environment.

### For teachers

It is very helpful for the teachers and other school personnel to learn and increase their knowledge about scleroderma to properly care for these children. They should be educated about the disease because they may have never heard of it, so knowing about the illness, the specific healthcare requirements, the mental health effect, and needed resources can help alleviate any anxiety or misunderstandings.

### For parents

- Meet with your child's teacher and other school personnel and provide them with any information they need to support your child.
- If the meeting is not requested by the school, you request it. It is necessary to have a meeting with your child's teacher at least. It is very important that your child's teacher know everything about your child. For example, it is helpful for the teacher to understand that your child may have difficulty with writing if his/her hands are affected by scleroderma. This may lead to slowness in completing their work. It is also helpful for the teacher to keep your child with other kids and prevent his/her isolation.



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## Children and scleroderma

- Give a permission to your child mental health specialist or healthcare provider to communicate with specialists at school, so they can work together to achieve certain goals for your child.
- Keep yourself in touch with your child's teachers all through the year.

(Throughout the school year, your child may miss many days of school due to pediatric rheumatology appointments, physical and/or occupational therapy, counseling, and other health related medical appointments. There may be times too that your child may not feel well enough to go to school because of his/her scleroderma and/or their medications).

A parent-teacher-child meeting is strongly encouraged for children who need modifications in order to have a successful school year. Be sure to put in writing some of the modifications that all of you have come up with. Make a copy for the teacher to have on hand.

Some of the modifications may include:

- Loop scissors, instead of regular scissors and big crayons
- Use of a soft grip pen and pencil, instead of standard pencil
- A set of textbooks at home and a set of textbooks in the classroom
- Extended time for classroom assignments or shortened classroom assignments
- Additional time to complete homework assignments
- Testing accommodations including additional time to take tests, oral tests, or dictation of long writing test items to teacher
- Short breaks between assignments
- Early out pass for an extra 5 minutes to stand in a shorter line for lunch
- Early out pass for an extra 5 minutes to get to lockers and report to the next class
- Note taking support from teacher or peer, copy of class notes and/or study guides
- iPad or chrome book
- Speak to text devices
- Use of elevators if your child has limited lung function and shortness of breath
- Gym accommodations for any physical limitations
- Air conditioning or room temperature indications
- Any bus accommodations that may be beneficial for you child

## Children and scleroderma

As it is known children with scleroderma have physical and mental challenges, so they need special services and support in both areas to function highly and be successful. Thus, your child may be evaluated by specialists academically, physically, and mentally to determine how the disease is affecting him/her and what type of services he/she needs to resist the school's environment.

Based on the testing results, parents and educators discuss the evaluations and develop an IEP which fits the child's specific needs with goals and objectives. Child having scleroderma may stay in his/her classroom or he/ she may move to another learning environments at the school several times per week.

Services that may be included in your child's IEP if eligible are:

- Adaptive P.E. – a modified version of P.E. that meets your child's limitations.
- Physical and/or Occupational Therapy – this is not physical or occupational therapy that your child would receive at a medical facility.
- Assistive Technology – additional equipment or adaptations, i.e. a computer or special writing adaptations.
- Nurse Monitoring – your child may need to take their medication at school and/or the nurse will know how to respond to your child's medical needs at school.
- School counseling – the school psychologist should be able to help the child with coping strategies. Children can become frustrated trying to keep up with schoolwork due to absences. Their self-esteem can be lowered by teasing, and/or their appearance.

How scleroderma children's mental illnesses can impact them at school?

Children with scleroderma can have mental disorders like anxiety, depression, PTSD, trauma, etc. Mental Health Disorders can affect classroom learning and social interactions, both of which are critical to the success of students. However, if appropriate services are put in place to support a young person's mental health needs, this can often maximize success and minimize negative impacts for students.

When figuring out the types of supports and services to put in place, it is important to keep in mind that all kids are unique with differing needs and coping mechanisms. The mental health interventions that are chosen to need to be based on the individual needs of each child and be able to flex to provide support as needed.

Possible accommodations or strategies that may help include:

- Allowing flexible deadlines or letting the student have an option to re-do work so they feel more confident turning it in.

### Children and scleroderma

- Helping the teacher to recognize escalating anxiety in a child and equipping them with the tools to intervene and help the child to implement strategies that help manage their anxiety.
- Pre-planning for group discussions to help reduce their anxiety about what they will share or say.
- Make plan for what to do when they are unable to focus due to worries.
- Allow for breaks or opportunities to de-stress.

If you have any problem with your child school and you need more information, help, and support, visit

- Michigan Alliance for Families at:

<http://www.michiganallianceforfamilies.org/education/disputes/>

Or,

- Michigan Special Education Mediation Program at:

<http://msemp.cenmi.org>.

- Visit <http://www.acmh-mi.org/get-information/child-and-family-services/education/> if your child has any behavioral problems

Provided is a list of many other accommodations and strategies to help children with mental challenges at school:

- Provide consistent structure and clear expectations
- Allow for movement, breaks
- Allow student to turn in long assignments in pieces or help them to set shorter deadlines or mini milestones for themselves
- Have a secret code/cue to let student know when they have gotten off task and need to refocus or redirect behavior
- Utilize functional behavior assessments to understand purpose of behaviors if they exist and plan positive behavior supports
- Reduce stress and pressure whenever possible for easily frustrated students
- Understand that students with ADHD and other mental health challenges often have great intentions to turn in assignments, finish projects, etc....but fail to follow through no matter how much they try. Also know they are often their worst critic about it!
- Allow students to put answers right in test booklets

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- Have the student check in with someone on a regular basis (makes it easier to detect mood or other changes)
- Accommodate for possible impaired concentration- use cues to re-focus or strategies to engage memory
- During difficult times give hard copies of notes
- Help student develop strategies to deal with the demands of academics and relationships when struggling with moods
- Help student learn/practice ways to communicate feelings, moods
- Allow medication accommodations- water, bathroom breaks, snacks, rests from reading/visual blurring, reduce need to answer questions etc.
- Have a crisis plan in place if necessary and share it with other 'need to know' school staff
- Teach & practice steps for student who need help with self-regulation or de-escalation
- Help student's use realistic and positive statements about their performance and their future
- Reduce classroom pressures when appropriate
- Help students recognize and acknowledge their contributions and performance
- Break tasks into smaller workable parts
- Reassure students they can catch up- Be flexible because perception of school failure can exasperate depression
- Remember that depressed students often see everything in all black and white- good or bad- be sure to keep a record of accomplishments to share for cases when they are struggling to remind them, they are doing well in some areas
- Make sure curriculum is at an appropriate level- frustration sets in easy if too hard or boredom if too easy
- Be sure materials are at age level regardless of level of basic skills
- Give student options
- Avoid escalation or challenging prompts- avoid power struggles maintain calm and respectful
- Be aware that it is easy for adults to unconsciously express negative impressions of low performing, uncooperative students- try to stay neutral
- Teach social skills, anger management, conflict resolution
- Have student participate in creation of rules, routines...
- Stress progress not perfection

## Children and scleroderma

- Avoid pushing students to perform beyond their capability
- Watch comments about how people look, what they eat, etc....
- Avoid high levels of competition
- Try to accommodate situations and behaviors students has no control over
- Help students to come up with strategies to re-focus themselves
- Try to re-direct student's behavior make plans for alternative behaviors
- Allow students to re-do work to improve scores
- Post schedule and have predictable classroom routines & expectations
- Talk about mental health in a positive manner & educate other students
- Consider use of technology
- Do not engage in power struggles or verbal exchanges- state position clearly and calmly-
- Pace instruction, minimize downtime but give small breaks
- Systematically teach social skills including conflict management, and how to be assertive in an appropriate manner
- Structure activities so student is not left out and use activities that encourage positive student interaction
- Establish a feeling of safety for the child- greet them every morning, have a check in process later in day...
- Watch for increased symptoms and do not be afraid to interrupt activities that are upsetting
- Try to eliminate stressful situations, make classroom easy to move through, have a safe comfortable spot is possible
- Involve and partner with families and mental health professionals
- Incorporate breaks and large muscle activity into the day
- Be predictable, consistent, and repetitive
- Break assignments into manageable steps
- Identify a safe place student can go to regain composure when frustrated or angry- make sure student is capable and supervised if needed
- Establish regular meetings with family to get updates
- Know what to do if student is having delusional thoughts Youth Mental Health First Aid can be a great resource\*\*
- Reduce stress go slow when introducing new situations



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### Children and scleroderma

- Do assessments so you can build on any strengths you can capitalize on
- Help students set realistic academic goals
- Educate other students and encourage them to extend friendship

<http://www.acmh-mi.org/get-help/navigating/problems-at-school/>

<http://www.alastingmark.com/scleroderma-in-school/>

[https://www.google.com/search?q=what+is+504+plan&rlz=1C1HLDY\\_enUS792US792&oq=what+is+504+plan&ags=chrome..69i57j0l7.3135j0j8&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.com/search?q=what+is+504+plan&rlz=1C1HLDY_enUS792US792&oq=what+is+504+plan&ags=chrome..69i57j0l7.3135j0j8&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8)

<http://www.acmh-mi.org/get-information/child-and-family-services/education/>

<https://www.michiganallianceforfamilies.org/eligibility/>