



The *Preparing for a Lifetime of Self-Advocacy* Accommodation

“We can’t keep accommodating him forever.”

“She needs to be ready for the real world.”

This sentiment echoes through countless IEP and 504 meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and kitchen table conversations. It reflects a genuine concern: How do we support students with ADHD without creating dependency? How do we prepare them for a world that won’t bend to their needs?

It’s a question worth sitting with, because within it is one of the most pervasive myths in education, and one of the most damaging to neurodivergent learners.

The current accommodation debate presents parents and educators with an impossible dilemma: provide support and risk creating dependency, or withdraw support to build resilience. This either-or thinking forces us to choose between a child’s immediate learning needs and their long-term success. But what if this entire framework is backwards?

Consider two approaches to supporting a student who struggles with time management. In the first scenario, a teacher constantly reminds the student to stay on task, checking in every few minutes with gentle prods to refocus. The student receives support but remains entirely dependent on external management. In the second scenario, the teacher helps the student learn to estimate how long tasks will take, provides them with a visual timer, and gradually teaches them to monitor their own attention and advocate for breaks when needed.

Both approaches provide accommodation, but only one builds the foundation for lifelong self-advocacy.

The difference isn’t whether we accommodate. It’s how we accommodate, and more importantly, who holds the power in the accommodation process.

True accommodation isn’t a permanent crutch; it’s scaffolding that supports learning while building capacity. Just as we don’t keep training wheels on a bicycle forever, effective accommodations evolve as students develop skills and self-awareness.

Take that time management example further. The progression might look like this: The teacher initially provides frequent check-ins but gradually involves the student in the process. “How long do you think this assignment will take?” becomes a regular

question. The student learns to break down tasks, estimate time, and use visual timers independently. Eventually, they recognize when they need additional time for complex assignments and can articulate this need to teachers before the deadline arrives.

This progression transforms accommodation from something done to a student into something they learn to do for *themselves*. The ultimate goal isn’t to eliminate support, but to transfer ownership of that support to the person who needs it most: the student.

What the “real world” actually looks like

Now, let’s return to that opening question about preparing students for the “real world.” What if our assumptions about adult life are fundamentally flawed?

Here’s what we tell students school is preparing them for: rigid deadlines, inflexible systems, environments where they must simply “power through” challenges without support. But consider what adult life actually offers.

When adults hate their boss, they can quit their job. When students hate their teacher, they’re stuck for an entire academic year. When adults struggle to meet a work deadline, they typically have options. They can communicate with colleagues, negotiate extensions, or shift responsibilities to better align with their strengths. Students often face hard and fast deadlines with little room for negotiation.

In the workplace, adults can often find positions that lean into their strengths or collaborate with colleagues whose skills complement their own. In school, students are required to demonstrate competency across all subjects, regardless of their natural abilities or interests.

The irony is striking: the “real world” we claim to prepare students for actually offers more flexibility, more opportunities for self-advocacy, and more accommodation than most school environments.

What does successful self-advocacy look like for adults with ADHD? It’s not the absence of support. It’s the ability to identify needs, explore solutions, and implement strategies independently.

Successful adults with ADHD use apps on their phones to manage tasks, create environmental modifications that support their focus, and communicate proactively with employers about their work styles. They’ve learned to recognize their patterns, anticipate challenges, and implement solutions before problems arise. This isn’t dependency; it’s sophisticated self-awareness and problem-solving.

Building skills that last

Part of the accommodation paradox stems from how we view executive function struggles. When a student forgets their homework, arrives late to class, or struggles to organize their materials, these behaviors are often interpreted through a moral lens. We see laziness, defiance, or lack of caring.

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Paradox

This perspective is both inaccurate and harmful. Executive function skills like time management, organization, and task initiation are learned abilities that develop at different rates and in different ways for different people. For many parents and educators, these skills developed so naturally or with such minimal explicit instruction that supporting someone who struggles feels foreign.

But here's what years of clinical work with neurodivergent individuals shows: When we approach executive function challenges as skill deficits rather than character flaws, everything changes. Students who were labeled "unmotivated" suddenly become engaged when given appropriate scaffolding. Parents who felt frustrated by their child's "irresponsibility" find relief when they understand the neurological differences at play.

Many parents bring their own complex relationships with these struggles to their parenting. Some never experienced executive function challenges themselves and lack a framework for understanding their child's needs. Others struggled intensely but received little support, creating an internal narrative that "you just have to push through."

This is compounded by societal messaging that equates academic and organizational struggles with moral failings. We live in a culture that prizes independence, productivity, and self-reliance above all else. Within this context, asking for help feels like weakness, and providing accommodations feels like enabling.

But what if we reframed accommodation as empowerment? What if teaching someone to advocate for their needs is actually the highest form of preparing them for independence?

The path forward requires a fundamental shift in how we approach accommodations. Instead of asking "How can we fix this student?" or "What will make sure they're successful?" we need to ask "How



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This approach requires consistent, ongoing conversations with students about their experiences and needs. Whether you're a parent or educator, these questions can guide meaningful dialogue:

- Where do you notice you're struggling?
- What do you think would help?
- How will we know if it's helping?
- How can we make sure you're the one in charge of this accommodation or tool?
- How will we know when it's no longer needed?

These conversations should happen regularly, not just during times of crisis. They position the student as the expert on their own experience while providing adult guidance in problem-solving.

The goal isn't to prepare students for a world without accommodations. It's to prepare them for a world where they can identify, implement, and advocate for the accommodations they need.

This means teaching students to recognize their patterns: When do I focus best? What environments support my learning? How do I know when I'm overwhelmed? It means providing opportunities to practice self-advocacy in low-stakes situations before high-stakes ones arise.

Most importantly, it means trusting that when we give students ownership of their support systems, they rise to meet that trust. The same student who seems helpless when accommodations are imposed often becomes remarkably resourceful when empowered to co-create their solutions.

The accommodation paradox dissolves when we recognize that the choice between support and independence is false. True preparation for adult life doesn't come from removing supports; it comes from teaching students to advocate for, implement, and adjust their supports as needed.

This approach honors both the genuine concerns of parents and educators while centering the voice and agency of the student. It acknowledges that executive function challenges are real and lifelong while building the skills necessary for success across all domains of life.

When we shift our focus from "fixing" students to empowering them, we prepare them not just for graduation, but for a lifetime of effective self-advocacy. And isn't that what we wanted all along? 🗨️



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She is the author of several books for parents and educators related to supporting neurodivergent learners. Her most recent book, *Neurodiversity-Affirming Schools: Transforming Practices So All Students Feel Accepted and Supported* (Free Spirit Publishing), was released in January 2025. She started her career in education and now works as a mental health counselor in private practice outside of St. Louis, Missouri, specializing in supporting neurodivergent people of all ages.