Medical vs. School Diagnosis for Autism

MILESTONES AUTISM RESOURCES

Introduction: What This Toolkit Covers & Why It Matters

This toolkit explains the differences between **medical** and **school-based** diagnoses of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), why both are important, and how they affect support and services for children. Many families encounter confusion navigating these two systems, and understanding each process can help ensure a child receives the right interventions, accommodations, and benefits. This guide empowers caregivers, educators, and professionals to work collaboratively and advocate effectively.

Step-by-Step Guidance

Medical Diagnosis:
Purpose: To identify and treat a **health condition** or disorder.

1. **Referral or Concern:** Pediatrician, caregiver, another provider, or the individual notices developmental, adaptive, communication or behavioral concerns.
2. **Developmental Screening:** Often done in early childhood visits.
3. **Comprehensive Evaluation:** Conducted by a licensed clinician (developmental pediatrician, psychologist, psychiatrist, or neurologist). This may include:
    - Clinical interviews
    - Standardized tests (e.g., ADOS, ADI-R)
    - Medical history and observation
4. **Diagnosis:** If criteria from the DSM-5 are met, a medical diagnosis of ASD is made.
   Follow-up: This diagnosis can lead to insurance-covered therapies like ABA, speech, OT, or mental health care, or documentation for accommodations (e.g., a 504 Plan).

School Diagnosis (Educational Eligibility):
Purpose: To determine if a child qualifies for special education services under the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**.

1. **Referral or Request for Evaluation:** Initiated by a parent or teacher.
2. **Multidisciplinary Evaluation:** School team evaluates academic, behavioral, and social functioning.
3. **Eligibility Determination:** School team, including the parent, determine if the child meets criteria under IDEA's "Autism" category and show that it affects educational performance.
    a. The disability adversely affects educational performance.
    b. The student needs special education and related services.
4. **IEP Development:** If eligible, school creates an IEP outlining supports and accommodations. If the child is not found eligible, they may consider creating **a 504 Plan**

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which outlines accommodations and supports the child may need that are not considered special education services.

5. **Services Begin:** Supports are provided in the school setting, regardless of medical diagnosis

Key Differences

Category	School Eligibility (IDEA)	Medical Diagnosis
Determined by	School evaluation team	Licensed medical professional
Primary Purpose	Access to special education	Health treatment or clinical management
Driven by	Impact on education	Clinical criteria and diagnosis manuals
Outcome	IEP, 504 plan	Medical record, therapy, possible 504 Plan

Tips or Common Mistakes

- **Tip:** A **medical diagnosis** is needed for insurance-funded services; a **school diagnosis** is needed for special education services.
- **Tip:** You can pursue both diagnoses simultaneously.
- **Tip:** Keep copies of all reports and bring them to meetings with providers and educators.
- **Mistake:** Assuming one diagnosis automatically triggers services in the other system—they are **independent**.
- **Mistake:** Believing the absence of an educational diagnosis means your child doesn't qualify medically, or vice versa.
- **Mistake:** Waiting for the school to suggest a medical evaluation—parents can and should initiate it independently.

What to Ask / Advocate For

- **At the Doctor's Office:**
    - "Can you refer us for an autism evaluation?"
      "Will this diagnosis help us access therapies covered by insurance?"
      "Do you coordinate with schools if needed?"
- **At the School:**
    - "Can we start an evaluation for special education services?"
    - "Will the school consider outside medical evaluations?"
    - "What supports are available while we wait for results?"
    - "What evidence is needed to qualify under the Autism category for an IEP?"
- **In Both Settings:**
    - "What are the next steps after diagnosis?"
    - "How can I make sure my child gets the support they need in all environments?"
    - "How do these diagnoses affect long-term planning and transitions?"

Key resources

The Ohio Department of Education and Workforce have created this interactive graphic for families to help them navigate the process

A Guide to Parents' Rights for Special Education (English)

A Guide to Parents' Rights for Special Education (Spanish)
Ohio Coalition for the Education Of Children with Disabilities (OCECD)
OCECD staffs several Information Specialists across the state to support Spanish speaking families
Department of Developmental Disabilities (DODD)
Disability Rights Ohio (Resources in Spanish)