Can't vs. Won't: A Quick Card for Teachers

Thank you for partnering with our family. This one-page guide helps us tell together whether a behavior is a skill gap or a choice — so we can respond the right way.

The 20-Second Check

When a behavior happens, pause and ask:

1. What happened right before?
Look for the trigger: task demand, transition, noise, hunger, fatigue, time of day.

2. Does it happen everywhere or just here?
If it only falls apart in one class, at one time, or with one type of task — that's information, not defiance.

3. Has the skill been taught and practiced here?
If not yet, we start with teaching, not consequences.

It's not a confrontation. It's a collaboration.

Can't vs. Won't At a Glance

	CAN'T = Skill Missing in That Moment	**WON'T = Skill Is There, Choice Made**
What it looks like	Shuts down, rushes, forgets steps, melts down when task is hard	Completes task easily other times, then chooses not to
What helps most	Teach a replacement strategy, break it down, offer a tool	Hold the boundary calmly, follow through on the known consequence
Example	Can't start writing → provide sentence starter + check-in after 3 minutes	Won't turn in finished work → restate expectation + agreed consequence

Can't = teach a strategy. Won't = follow through with consistency.

Language That Keeps Us on the Same Team

Try this instead:

- Instead of: "He won't listen" → Try: "He had trouble starting after directions. Can we try chunking + a check-in?"
- Instead of: "She's being defiant" → Try: "This happened right before lunch in a noisy room. Could we try seating or a movement break?"
- Instead of: "He can do it at home, so he can do it here" → Try: "What works at home is [___]. Could we try that version here this week?"

Free IEP Meeting Checklist: waterprairie.com/iepmeetingchecklist

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