

Center for Autism and Related Disabilities

University of Florida/Gainesville

IEP Series Part 5 Tips for a Successful Meeting Transcript

Hello and welcome to the fifth and final training in this series on the ins and outs of the IEP process. This training series was developed to introduce the concept of IEPs to families who are navigating IEPs for the first time, but it may also serve as a reference guide for those who need a reminder or a “brush up” on specific components of IEP planning. It has been divided into five parts so that viewers have the option of watching which ever parts are useful to them. We hope you find this series helpful. So let’s get started.

Before we begin, I think it’s important to share a short disclaimer about the intended audience for this series. The content presented here was written for families of children who are eligible for IEP services. However, we welcome and encourage anyone who has an interest in IEPs and their development to participate. Hopefully professionals will find that learning about IEPs from the family’s perspective is a useful way to help ensure family participation and satisfaction with the process.

Each of the five trainings in this series will cover a specific, and relatively succinct range of topics so that participants can choose the training or trainings that address the topics of their specific interest. The purpose of this final training is to share tips on how to make your IEP meeting successful. Specifically, we will discuss how to prepare before the meeting, how to participate effectively during the meeting, and how to continue to be involved after the meeting has ended. Let’s begin.

Each training in this series has a set of learning objectives that represent skills that we hope you will be able to demonstrate after completing the training. In this training, our goals are for participants to name three strategies for keeping the IEP meeting child-focused, name two “to do’s” before the IEP meeting, and name two ways to be involved after the IEP meeting.

Before the meeting, the school must alert you in writing that there is a meeting being planned. They may suggest a date and time, but they must provide alternatives if you are not available. The school must document their efforts to involve you in the meeting.

Before and sometimes during the meeting, you will receive a copy of your procedural safeguards which explain your rights as a parent of a child with a disability.

Remember, if you can’t attend the meeting, you must inform the school so that they can reschedule.

Here is a helpful list of things you can do before the IEP meeting so that you can feel prepared going in.

First, look over last year’s IEP. Familiarize yourself with what your child was working on, what was mastered and what was not. Use the old IEP to help you generate ideas for what you would like to see included on the new IEP: goals, objectives, accommodations, modifications, etc. Also be sure that you remind yourself of what and how much therapy your child is receiving so that you can be prepared to discuss the appropriateness of these things during the meeting. It is possible that other team members may recommend an increase or decrease in therapy time, so it’s important that you know what that would entail.

As you are reviewing the old IEP, and perhaps any other documents such as evaluations, report cards, etc., keep a list of any questions and requests for clarification that you might have. Remember that during the meeting, you are entitled to stop and ask for more information at any time. Don't be afraid to ask someone to explain or clarify what they are saying, especially if it involves acronyms!

Make copies of anything you would like to distribute to the team. If you are going to be referring to any recommendations or evaluation results, for instance, it may be helpful for the other team members to have the document in front of them.

Consider creating an All About Me book or handout for the team. This document specifies things that team members should be aware of when planning for and working with your child. This is especially helpful if your child is going to have a new teacher or therapist, but we usually recommend making a new one every year regardless. It's a great place to document what your child does well, what he or she struggles with, what motivates your child, and any medical information that is pertinent to your child.

It can also be helpful to talk to other parents about their IEP experiences. They are likely to have some really great tips for making it a successful meeting. That being said, try to avoid focusing on all that may have gone wrong in another parent's IEP meeting; this can make you unnecessarily worried about the outcome of your own meeting.

CARD is always willing and able to help you prepare for your IEP meeting as well. A member of our staff can walk you through what to expect and help you prepare talking points for the meeting. We are also available to attend the meeting if that would be helpful to you

A few other tips to keep in mind:

Have your talking points ready. Be prepared to discuss your child's strengths and needs, as these will help develop the IEP goals and objectives. Also be prepared to talk about your priorities for your child. It's important that you feel that these are represented on the IEP. You will also want to be prepared to talk about the accommodations and modifications you would like to request for your child. This might mean recommending which ones are transferred from the old IEP to the new one. It also might mean requesting that new accommodations and/or modifications be added to the new IEP.

Any IEP document that exists before the official IEP team meeting is referred to as a draft because it cannot be considered official until all team members have signed off on it. You are welcome to ask to see a copy of any draft materials that team members are creating so that you can be prepared to discuss them at the meeting.

You are also welcome to invite anyone you would like to the meeting. This can be a family member or friend, an advocate, or a CARD staff member. This person can be there for moral support, can help you make your opinions and priorities known, or can just be there to take notes. Be sure to tell the school team who you will be bringing.

During the meeting, be sure to emphasize the importance of spending some time on your child's strengths. Not only is this a positive way to start the meeting, but it also helps the team members remember who the meeting is for. It also helps set the stage for a conversation about goals and objectives.

Other ways to keep the focus on your child is to bring a picture of him or her and perhaps start with an anecdote about something your child did or said. You can also ask that everyone go around the table and share a story about something your child has achieved. It is important that there is a conversation about what works for your child so that the emphasis can remain on how to support your child in positive ways. And of course, it never hurts to bring treats!

You are welcome to record the meeting for your own reference; however, you need to tell the team in advance that you will be recording.

You may also request the chance to take the documents home to review before you sign off on them. Don't feel pressured to sign in the meeting unless you feel comfortable agreeing to what the IEP states.

It is important to remember that there is no magic number of objectives. They should be written to represent skills that can be mastered within one school year, not just addressed. Too many objectives and your child will likely not have enough opportunity to practice the skill to mastery. Too few objectives, and the IEP may not adequately challenge your child. You can use information about your child's general rate of acquisition of new skills, how long it takes him or her to learn something new, to help make this determination.

Another good rule of thumb is that goals and objectives should be things that your child will be able to practice outside of school as well. If it is a skill that is only practiced at school, it will take a lot longer to master. Furthermore, if there isn't much opportunity to use the skill outside of school, then it probably isn't a top priority.

Use the present levels of performance to help develop objectives as "next steps." For example, if your child can currently add single digits, then a next step would be to work on adding double digits. Another example: if your child can currently get dressed using picture and verbal prompting, the next step might be to get dressed with picture prompts only.

The sequence and "to do" list for an IEP meeting will vary based on its purpose. If this is your child's first IEP, meaning that he or she just transitioned from an IFSP or that he or she just received a diagnosis that makes him or her eligible for an IEP, then you will be asked to give written consent for placement.

If this is not your child's first IEP and your team is having a review meeting to update the IEP, the focus of the meeting will be to discuss the goals, objectives, and services for the upcoming year.

Remember

- You are free to disagree with the IEP.
- Signing the IEP does NOT mean you are agreeing to everything; it just means you were at the meeting.
- You can choose to have it written in the IEP that you were in disagreement.
- If you continue to disagree with parts of the IEP, you may:

Ask for another IEP meeting

Ask for more evaluations

Talk with the school principal or ESE administrator

Request free mediation services to help you and the school solve your differences

Ask for a due process hearing. The school may also request this

After the meeting, the school should provide you with a copy of the IEP. If, however, you reach the end of the meeting and you do not feel that you have finished the discussion, you can ask for another meeting. As with all of your child's records, you should keep a copy of the IEP handy. It's a good idea to have a "current" and "past" file of your child's educational paperwork.

If there are changes on the IEP that affect your child's day to day schooling, such as the introduction of a classroom aide, new therapy, or learning support, it can be helpful to prepare your child in advance for the change. This might mean talking to your child about it, showing pictures of the new person, environment, or support, or even having your child visit the school and meet new people.

It is also important that you communicate with the school team about what you can do to work on IEP goals at home. They should be able to give you some ideas about how you can embed learning concepts, both academic and social, into your child's daily routines. This is important for generalization and helps your child master new skills more quickly because they can be taught in context at home.

A few more things to remember.

An IEP is typically written for a period of one year. It cannot be written for a period longer than this; however, if the team agrees it is appropriate, the IEP can be written for a shorter period, such as 6 months. One reason this may occur is if the school team doesn't feel that they know your child well enough to gauge what he or she can learn in one year, so they use a trial period such as 6 months to trial goals and objectives, learning strategies, and accommodations and modifications.

Similarly, IEP meetings usually take place once per year; however a family or other team member can request a meeting at any time. An additional meeting **MUST** be held if any type of change is made to the IEP before the next annual IEP meeting.

If the team notices that the IEP is not meeting your child's needs, for example if the goals are determined to be inappropriate, the team should meet again to revise the IEP.

A complete re-evaluation of your child must take place at least every 3 years. The purpose of the re-evaluation is to formally assess your child's present levels of performance across disciplines and to confirm that your child is still eligible for an IEP and related services. A re-evaluation involves assessment by a psychologist, speech pathologist, OT, educator, and any other relevant professional.

And finally, please remember that you are not just there to sign the papers. Everyone at the meeting comes to the table with a relative expertise in their discipline, but you are the expert on your child. You are the person who knows best what has worked, and what hasn't, for your child in the past. You are your child's best advocate. Your knowledge about how your child learns and what motivates him or her is critical to the development of a successful IEP.

As the parent, you are a critical member of your child's educational team. Participating in your child's IEP is an important way to have an active role in your child's learning and success. Here are some ways that you can be an active participant in your child's education.

Participate. Be sure that you speak up if you have suggestions or additions, need clarification, or need to ask a question.

Share information. As we said a moment ago, your knowledge about your child's developmental and learning history is critical information to the development of the IEP. Be sure you feel that you have had the opportunity to share what you know about your child. This includes commenting about suggestions for goals and objectives or learning accommodations. Don't be afraid to say, "We've tried that before and it didn't work because..." or "We've tried that before but I think it's worth trying again."

Communicate. This means communicating during the meeting itself, but it also means being open to communicating with the school team in a manner and on a schedule that is feasible for all involved. This makes it a lot less likely that anything discussed at the IEP will come as a surprise to you. Furthermore, consistent communication with the school team shows your desire to be involved in an ongoing way.

Remember that the IEP meeting is your chance to formally point out things that concern you, but also remember to acknowledge things that you are pleased about: ideas and strategies that are working, positive interactions you have witnessed between your child and the educational team, skills that your child has shown progress on.

Feel welcome to ask for clarification. This includes asking the other team members to explain an acronym or phrase that you are unfamiliar with, but it also means asking a team member to explain why they are making a recommendation or why they have come to a certain conclusion about your child. This will help you gauge where their recommendations are coming from and whether their assessment seems accurate based on your own experience with your child.

I'm sure it is no surprise to see that being a member of a team also involves the willingness to compromise. Remember that everyone at the table comes with their own ideas about what to address with your child. This is why it's important that you come to the table with your top priorities in mind. Know where you are willing to compromise and, if applicable, where you are not.

It is also helpful to remember that when you are making suggestions or respectfully disagreeing with another team member, you should try to do so in a way that comes across as helpful and not critical or accusatory. This helps everyone at the table keep your child's needs in mind in a way that discourages people from taking things personally.

Here is a helpful website that we found that shares some tips for building a strong team.

Help the teacher get to know your child. I like to recommend that team members "share secrets" about the child, meaning that you can share what works for you when you are with your child at home and that other team members can share what works for them when they work with your child in the school setting.

Be collaborative. Be actively involved in the development of the IEP, from initial discussions to the final draft.

Communicate, communicate, communicate. Just as you don't want anything to come as a surprise to you when sitting down to the IEP meeting, you also don't want to put the other team members in that position. Feel welcome to briefly talk to other team members about your ideas and questions before the meeting so that they, too, can be prepared to discuss them at that time.

Be even-tempered. This can be hard because, let's face it, this is your KID we are talking about, but it's important to be perceived as a team player and not give the perception that there are two "sides" to the table, the family and the school team. If tempers get heated, you should feel welcome to point this out, ask for a break, or ask to reconvene at another time. Also, if you worry that you will not be able to keep calm or may become overly emotional during the meeting, consider bringing someone for moral support.

It can really help you stay focused on the meeting if you keep notes, or if you have someone else take notes for you. This way you don't have to worry that you will forget something that is said, promised, or agreed upon at the meeting. Also, if someone else is speaking during the meeting, it is helpful to write down anything you want to say or ask once they have finished talking. And remember, it is your right to audiotape the meeting proceedings, but be sure to alert the team before you press "record."

Another way to help your child as part of a team is to work with the school staff to get your child organized. See if you can find out in advance how the classroom is structured, take pictures of the classroom, and create a daily communication system between school and home to help your child remember what he or she needs to do or bring back and forth from home and school.

Be an active member of the school community as much as possible. This is your way of supporting the environment that supports your child. It also helps your child become part of the larger school community as well. This can be an avenue for friendship development as well as parent-to-parent support.

Sweeten the relationship. This simply means that it never hurts to say thank you to the other members of your child's team. What's that old saying? You get more flies with honey than with vinegar....

Although many teachers have a great deal of background in special education, some do not. Further, it's important that your child's teacher understand your child's specific learning needs. Feel free to provide samples of previous work that shows what your child can do independently versus with prompts, etc. It can also be a great help to teachers to see video of your child performing in other environments. That being said, teachers are busy people, so try to keep the requests for your child's teacher to read an evaluation summary or report to a minimum.

And finally, you want to feel confident that you know your rights and responsibilities as a parent of a child with a disability. We may joke that the procedural safeguards handbook is a great remedy for insomnia, but seriously, read it. Understand it. Feel comfortable with it.

The internet can be a great place to get ideas for goals and objectives for your child, but it can also be risky because you may or may not find a reliable source. The two books listed here are a good start because they list a series of skills in order from basic to complex. You can use these guides to "browse" the options and generate good ideas for your child's IEP.

Teach Me Language is a great resource for both academic and social goals. It has a particular emphasis on more abstract concepts.

The Syracuse Curriculum Guide offers a scope and sequence from kindergarten through age 21. It is basically a book of tables across each learning domain indicating skills from basic to complex.

Here are several more resources that you may find helpful.

We hope you have found this training, and this series, helpful. Remember that a CARD representative is also available to help you prepare and/or attend an IEP meeting. Feel free to contact us by phone or through our website if you have questions or would like additional support in making sure that your child has the best IEP possible.

Thanks again for joining us.