

Here's what you need to know before your child's next IEP meeting!

By Malia Corde, a member of the Brain Injury Association of New Jersey's Children & Adolescents Committee

The school year has begun and, for some parents, this can be a very stressful time. I hope this article will help alleviate that stress for you and offer helpful hints and ideas about how to make your child's next IEP meeting a successful one.

Preparing for the IEP Meeting

Whether you are preparing for your first IEP meeting or your tenth, there are things to be prepared for. As your child's parent, you are his/her BEST advocate. Though schools offer a professional perspective, it is parent's knowledge that will help guide the individual part of your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP). Have you ever heard the saying, "no two children are alike?" Even if two children have the same diagnosis, their individual needs can be very different. As a parent that is where your expertise comes into play.

Before an IEP meeting, think about your child. Write down some characteristics that will help the school understand who your child is. What are the things that make him/her happy, what does he/she enjoy doing, what are some of his/her successes and what are his/her greatest challenges. You can use the Positive Student Profile as a guide to help you think about your child's abilities, successes, challenges, and needs.

Attending the Meeting

Make sure that your IEP meeting covers everything that needs to be addressed and in the right order. First, be sure you have a good discussion about your child's strengths and needs (current academic and functional status), then a comprehensive conversation about your child's annual goals and short-term objectives (which should be based on the core curriculum standards for all children to the maximum extent appropriate). If your child has challenging behaviors, make sure that a functional behavior assessment has been conducted prior to the IEP meeting so you have the information you need to develop a positive behavior support plan.

The next part of the IEP meeting should focus on the services and supports your child requires to achieve his/her annual goals and short-term objectives. Remember that a placement is not a service! Services might include full- or part-time special education teacher or aide, related services (speech, occupational or physical therapy, etc.), travel training, assistive technology, etc. Consider what types of accommodations your child might need to access the whole school day. Your child may need services or accommodations in one or all of the following areas:

- Instructional
- Positive behavior supports
- Transportation (to and from school, after school activities)
- Physical access to school (handicap access)

- Curriculum (longer test times, short breaks, special seating, oral testing, etc)
- Technology (use of special computer software and/or adaptations)
- Extra-curricular activities (clubs, sports teams, etc)
- Nursing care (special healthcare procedures and/or administration of medications)

Only after you have identified the services your child needs to succeed, should you talk about where the services will be delivered. Federal and state law and research support the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom in the school they would attend if they did not have a disability and with the supports they need to be successful in academic, non-academic, and extra-curricular activities. If the general education classroom full-time is not appropriate for your child, it is still important to ensure your child learns the regular curriculum as much as possible and has opportunities to interact with their non-disabled peers in positive ways.

These are the types of things to think about in order to have your child be successful meeting his/her goals. Remember, you can always update your child's IEP at any time during the year if you feel that adequate progress is not being made or if you feel that your child has mastered a specific goal and you want to adjust or change that goal for the remainder of the school year.

Working With Your Child's School

Make sure that whenever you have a phone call with any one at the school in regard to your child that you follow up the call with a letter that reviews exactly what was discussed and what the outcome of the discussion is supposed to be. If you are requesting something of the district, make sure you put it in writing and send the letter certified mail with receipt requested. By law the district has 20 days to answer something that a parent has put in writing. (You have fifteen days to review their recommendations and decide whether you want to agree). If you have put a request in writing and the district has not addressed your concern, then you have written documentation to show that they are in violation of the law.

Just like the education professionals on an IEP team, parents are an essential part of the IEP team. Ideally, an IEP is developed through a partnership in which both sides recognize that they need the other. Both parents and professionals need to collaborate effectively and learn to brainstorm ideas identify what will work best for a child. Be open to new ideas and suggestions. Likewise, if there is a specific reading program or math curriculum that you feel would benefit your child, then research it and bring that information to the IEP meeting. In fact, it is helpful to send this kind of information to the team in advance of the meeting. Be prepared to express to the IEP team why a particular service or type of intervention would be beneficial to your child's learning experience. That does not mean that they have to agree to it, but it is helpful if your presentation and your reasoning are backed by data and research.

The IEP meeting is a time when both parents and professionals need to listen to each other and objectively hear what the other side is saying. Don't forget why you are there and what you are trying to accomplish—a free, appropriate public education for your child, in the least restrictive (most inclusive) environment.

Monitoring the IEP

Once an IEP document is completed, parents can monitor their child's progress in several ways. For children who are higher functioning, parents may be able to simply review their homework several times a week. Whereas, parents who have a child that requires more services and accommodations need to ensure that the teacher keeps ongoing data about their child's progress towards each specific goal. It is not always necessary for teachers to take data on a daily basis, but they do need to document a child's progress frequently and ensure that progress is measurable. Parents can also request a weekly informal telephone conference or a formal monthly face-to-face conference on their child's progress. Whatever method you and the others on the IEP team use, make sure someone will be responsible for collecting the data that is documented in your child's IEP.

Any time you have a concern about your child's progress or lack thereof is a good time to request an IEP meeting. You will also receive a report on your child's progress toward his/her IEP goals at the same time that you receive your child's regular report card, at least as often as children without disabilities get their report cards.

Your child's progress toward a goal may be impacted by a variety of factors. A teacher may not have been trained in a specific program, the program being used may not be compatible with the way your child learns, or a special education teacher may not be familiar with the general education curriculum. This is a good time to think about what you wrote down initially about your child and what types of services and accommodations your child needs. You may decide with the help of the IEP team that more or different services and accommodations need to be made in order for your child to be successful in reaching a specific goal.

As the parent you'll recognize when things are not going well with your child's academic program. If you feel that your questions and concerns are not being addressed—even though you have written documentation, and that you have raised your concerns through the proper chain of command—then you have the right to request mediation in order to come to a resolution on a matter.

Remember that your child's education is the most important thing, and he/she needs you to effectively advocate for his/her needs. By doing so you are also developing advocacy skills in your child, which is the best gift that you can offer him/her.

If you would like to know how to obtain more information on how to effectively advocate for your child and work with your child's IEP team here are some helpful resources.

Statewide Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN)

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Newark, NJ 07102

973-642-8100

800-654-SPAN (7726)

www.spannj.org

Office of Special Education Programs
PO Box 500, 100 Riverview Plaza
Trenton, NJ 08625-0500
609-292-0147
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Education Law Center
60 park Place, Suite 300
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