

Advocating Ain't Easy During IEP Process

Individualized Education Program. Did reading those three words create a burning inside you where frustration, confusion and helplessness meet? You're not alone. Many parents of children who have disabilities, from mental to physical, have the same struggles when it comes to working with schools on their child's Individualized Education Program (or IEP).

Education is extremely important for all children, and all children are not the same. The need for these IEPs and for the teachers and schools putting these programs together is extremely important and plays a huge role in the development of your child. So why does it have to be so hard?

If you are finding yourself in IEP misery while fighting for your child's rights, know that you are among a vast group of parents who face the same challenges year-in-and-year-out. While we can't refine this process for you (and trust me, we wish we could), we can give you tips on how to be the best advocate for your child.

You are your child's advocate -

This may be something you already know, but when it comes to the best interest of your child's education, YOU have to take control. Teachers and schools have many different children that need individual attention and different teaching techniques. Unfortunately, to them you may be just another case in their file. Remember that you are the one who has to advocate for what is right for your child. Don't assume Mrs. Crabtree will follow through on all of her promises from your first meeting. While that would be nice, there's no guarantee. Take charge and lead the way.

Build a team -

Sometimes it may not feel like this is something you can accomplish, but it's very important. Build relationships with the teachers and school personnel. Get to know them personally. You are all working towards the same goals and though it may be frustrating at times, remind yourself of this. Work together with teachers, even when you disagree. It's important to band together and march towards the same goals

you have all set for your child. If school personnel is making you feel pressured to make certain decisions, remind them that you are an equal member on this team and you are here to fight for what's best for your kid.

Be in the know -

From the lingo to the rules for your child's school, to even the rules for your county, know your rights and your child's rights. To be the best advocate for anything, you have to be knowledgeable in the subject. As a caregiver, you are already an expert in the disability your child has been diagnosed with. That's what caregivers do when it comes to their loved one's health. They become the most knowledgeable person in that subject because they are fighting for their child's life. This is the same way you should look at your child's IEP. Know the rules, regulations and processes so you can walk in to every conversation informed.

Get organized and be prepared -

Like you don't have enough going on, right? Just like managing your child's health, managing their education plan should be taken with the same amount of organization and attention to detail. Create a filing system and keep copies of everything. Document phone conversations you have regarding your child's education. Be ready for each meeting you have with your child's educator. Walk in with questions and concerns. Lead the conversation when you can.

Don't IEP alone -

When you are advocating for your child, meeting with a room full of education professionals can be intimidating. As a caregiver, you might feel completely out of your element. For every meeting you attend, try to bring your partner or a friend with you. Discuss your talking points prior to the meeting so that you both can make sure you cover the topics you want to cover. It's always good to have the support of a loved one with you.

Stay cool, calm and collected -

IEP meetings are not like a day at the spa... they are hard to navigate, defeating and sometimes confusing. But it does not help the situation if you lose your cool. Try to remember this in trying times where you feel like you are overcome with anger. And,

remember, it's valid to feel angry. This is the education of your child that you're fighting for! It's a passionate topic. Nothing gets solved out of anger though. If you feel like you are hitting your boiling point, end the conversation or meeting and revisit when emotions aren't running so high.

Don't follow up just to follow up -

There is a difference between regular contact and too much contact. Yes, you need to have regular updates to understand your child's progress, but don't become the first person in the school personnel's inbox each day. If you try to micro-manage, you may get push back from your child's educators. This is part of their job, and to some extent, you have to allow them to do their job. Keep calls to a minimum and try not to become the pushy parent that every teacher tries to avoid.

Keep your child in the loop -

As important as it is for you to know what is going on with your child's IEP, it's important for them to know too. Talk to your child about the subjects you are meeting about with their teachers. Let them know what they should be expecting from their teachers. Try to keep them as informed as possible without overwhelming them. Don't talk badly about the process or their teachers in front of them. If possible, let them be part of their IEP process.

Identify the big goals -

What is it that you want for your child? Obviously you want the best for them, but think about tangible goals. Do you want them to learn braille this year? Are you hoping to increase their communication skills? Understanding what you want for your child will help your "team" create a plan that can achieve these goals. Or, if there are no resources to support a goal you have for your child, find this out upfront so you don't have unrealistic expectations for your child's school.

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