

IEPs From a Teacher's Perspective

I've never been in a parent's shoes during an IEP meeting before. I can only imagine what it feels like for a nervous mom or dad to step into a school for the first time and face a room of unfamiliar faces... service providers, nurse(s), administration, regular and special education teachers; the list goes on. It can be intimidating!

As a special education teacher, one of the first IEP meetings I ever held was with a co-worker and his wife. They walked in with a large poster board so they could "map" out our IEP path. The poster had a topic in the middle and then detailed circles all around it attached by long lines (spider webs). The middle circle had the child's name and age. The circles contained her healthcare needs, interests, academic strengths, fine and gross motor skills, communication skills and her need for assistive devices, transportation needs, behaviors, and self help skills. After we discussed each item, we proceeded to write a lengthy statement including those same items. We discussed her annual goals, who would provide services, and how long services would be provided.

In the end, I left that meeting confident that we had written a thorough and successful IEP. I loved that process, because it was visually appealing, too. When I interacted with the young girl whose IEP we wrote, I could see all those qualities tied to her name described in that plan.

Over the years I have had the opportunity to write many IEPs and have gained a wealth of experience in working with parents. My IEP meetings last anywhere from thirty-sixty minutes. I love making agendas so that my meetings are not too long. All in all, I've only ever had one parent refuse to sign an IEP. I was young and inexperienced, and that experience shook me up a bit.

Overall, however, my experiences have been very positive, and I'd love to share a few tips, from a teacher's perspective, that I believe would be helpful for those stepping into the IEP world for the first time! Here are my suggestions:

FIRST - Visit school before your child is enrolled (perhaps in the spring). Ask to meet a teacher and tour the building or classroom. Introduce yourself to the school principal and secretary. You want to become familiar with the school your child will

be enrolled in. Then make another appointment to come in early (before school starts) in the fall so that you can have a personal meeting with the new teacher. Bring your child to this meeting and provide important written information about him/her. Create a personal information sheet to hand to the teacher (and perhaps a small gift as a kind gesture). Let the teacher know how excited you are about this transition. Remember teachers have a lot on their plates the first week before school. This piece of information can be very helpful as she/he makes plans for YOUR child.

SECOND - Be prepared for that first IEP. It's different from the Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP). I believe too many parents allow the staff (therapists and special education teachers) to individually develop the IEP. New parents may want to bring current evaluations, medical information, behavioral information, sensory issues, communication skills/assistive devices, self help skills, and so on. Can your child eat independently, does he/she need assistance in the bathroom, mobility planning. Educate yourself on the purpose of an IEP and what your role is in the IEP process. Advocate for your child's needs, be their initial voice in the public educational realm. This early meeting is beneficial to both family and educational staff. Preschool usually does not start the same time as elementary schools start, this gives you plenty of options to set up an IEP meeting if it has not been done.

THIRD - You know your child best. Speak up and be heard.

ASK: Always Seek Knowledge. Ask about specific programs within the school such as related services, sensory needs, mobility needs, or medical needs. Ask who will be providing services, where in the building are the services provided, what the duration of the services is, and what related services looks like.

Don't be afraid to ask questions and please don't be afraid to speak up. Talk to other parents about the preschool setting, participate in the classroom if you can, ask what you can do to support the educational staff.

Believe it or not, I still have some parents that ask, "What is an IEP?" I know it's hard to believe especially since I teach middle school. I remind them that it's the Individual Educational Plan that they have been part of annually. However, I while I understand that some parents aren't as involved in their child's education plan, I encourage you to know your rights, be kind (the parent who storms into a classroom and demands certain services makes the entire process unbearable), stay updated with the laws and procedures, become familiar with special education jargon and

acronyms, and be an active advocate!

– Rhonda Jones, *Springible Contributor*

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