

Parent Do's and Don'ts in the IEP Process

By Mark Keith

The purpose of this document is to help make you as parents more successful in the IEP process for your child. The IEP decision-making process revolves around the flow of information about the child being discussed. This information flow takes the information gathered from many different sources, gathers it, and at specific points in the IEP process, formally analyzes it and uses this analysis to decide what needs to be done for the child in question to try and provide the child with an appropriate education. The information gathering process is an ongoing, all the time activity. Hopefully, informal analysis of the information is going on all the time by all the participants of the child's IEP team. The IEP meeting, however, is the place where the IEP team, sits down, formally reviews the information that has been gathered, and determines how the child can be best helped.

As a parent, it is critical that you can function as an effective member of the IEP team. This is the most effective way that you can represent the interests of your child to ensure that they get an appropriate education. Your role as part of the IEP team does not start at the beginning of the annual IEP meeting and end when the meeting is complete. It is a full time job. Also, as with any group setting there are certain things you should and should not be doing to make your participation as successful as possible.

To have as positive an impact on the IEP process as possible, there are a number of Do's that you should follow while you are participating in the IEP process. They are as follows:

1. Educate yourself. Learn all that you can about your child and your child's issues. Knowledge, for a parent, is critical. Knowledge gives you a degree of power and a degree of control during the IEP process. The more you know, the more effective you will be advocating for your child.
2. Keep important papers and bring them to meetings. Evaluations, medical reports, school records from other districts, old IEPs, and other documents all have value in the IEP process. They give you evidence and information in tracking your child's progress as well as what works and what does not. They can be useful in meetings or as supporting information to either prove or disprove a point that is being dealt with in the IEP process. Such documentation can often help prove the need or success or failure of a service that you are looking to add or remove from your child's day.
3. Be honest with yourself. This is probably one of the hardest things for any parent. You must attempt to leave the emotional attachments behind and look at your child and the disability together. Being able to do this will give you a strong foundation to work from, as it will be built on the truth of your

child's situation. Try to shelve both your hopes and fears to look at what is actually happening at that point in time with your child.

4. Make lists. Write down what you want your child to learn and what you want for the child educationally. Now take that list and write down how the disability impacts the ability of your child to learn. Now write down what you do to help your child be successful. How do you help him overcome those obstacles raised by the disability. Save these lists. They will be helpful to you in planning for your next IEP meeting. They will help give you a focus and goals that you are trying to reach.

5. Find out what services and placement options are available for your child. Don't wait for the IEP meeting. Investigate and schedule visits to see those services and placement options in action. You need to know what the school folks are talking about and need to see and decide for yourself whether one kind of placement option or service is better than another for your child. See how the placement and services work together in the particular setting. If you have not seen and investigated them, you cannot make a truly informed choice.

6. Ask Questions. There are no stupid questions. If you need information or an explanation, ask for it. The district should be willing to provide whatever reasonable information about their programs that you ask for. Do this well before any IEP meeting, so you will have time to review and digest the answers and follow up with more questions if you have need.

7. Find out what you can do at home to support the school program determined in the IEP. This will help to provide consistency and reinforcement for your child with the program. Repetition and reinforcement are very critical to help your child learn. You should be a partner with the school for your child. This is especially true for children with sensory impairments.

8. Keep communication with the school and the IEP team open. Build your relationship with the school. Communication should be a two-way street. You need information on what your child is doing to properly evaluate how successfully the IEP plan is working and you need to be giving feedback – BOTH GOOD AND BAD– to the teachers and therapists that work with your child so they know of any issues, concerns, problems, or positive results that you are seeing. This feedback helps both you and the school staff understand more fully how the IEP is working. That is important because it lets everyone know if there may need to be changes or if things are moving forward. Communication also eliminates the possibility of surprises among the IEP team. Surprises are often not a positive in the team setting, so the less that they arise, the better. Communication also fosters a good working relationship among members of the team, including the parents and helps the whole process work more smoothly and with a better opportunity for success.

9. Discuss discipline issues. You can help the school staff understand what works for you and they may be able to help you find some new techniques as well.

10. Always respect the opinions of others. You can disagree, but be polite. Remember, that other person is trying to help your child. There is no reason to be rude or nasty. Often, disagreement can help you and the other team members look at issues from a different angle and find different ways to accomplish the goals you are trying to set for the child.

11. In the IEP meeting, bring someone who is not emotionally attached to take notes for you.

12. Always be prepared for questions.

13. When talking about outcomes and services, use words like 'appropriate'. Remember, the law does not require the best services, but services that are appropriate for the child's education.

14. Understand your rights. You cannot advocate effectively for your child if you do not know what your child's rights and your rights as parents are. There are also a number of Don'ts that you must know as well to advocate effectively for your child in the IEP process. These are:

- Do not use words like 'best' or 'optimal' or 'maximum'. The IEP process is not designed to provide the best services available. The process is designed to provide appropriate services so the child can receive FAPE – a Free, Appropriate, Public Education.
- Try to not be confrontational. Interrupting others on the team, making accusations, making personal attacks, and questioning the motives of others destroys what trust may exist and will make it very hard for the team to work together to resolve issues that need to be resolved to get an appropriate education for your child. This does not mean you can't disagree. You can. Just disagree in the 'right' way.
- Avoid emotional outbursts. While the IEP process is an emotional activity for any parent, it is important that you try to be objective when working in the IEP process. Emotional outbursts often erode a parent's position on the team. The parent can cease to be perceived as an equal partner and instead be looked at as an emotional parent. This is not because the staff is trying to downgrade anyone, but because emotional responses often take away from the intellectual, thought out response that you as a parent need to provide. Facts and information rule at the meetings, not tears or outbursts.
- Don't be intimidated. You, as the parent probably know your child better

han anyone else, including those in the room. You are an equal partner in the IEP process and need to remember that. Your opinions and thoughts matter. Speak up, be your child's advocate.

- Don't focus on specific remedies. You have a goal you are trying to reach. There are often multiple paths to get there, and choosing one different from your desire does not mean that the path is wrong. Ask questions, but look at the how the remedy fits getting to the goal.
- Don't fail to understand the district's point of view. They are trying to help your child and want to help your child. Their experiences may differ from what you think, so listen and ask questions. Understand why the district has the opinion it does.
- Don't expect the school to 'fix' your child. This is a realistic expectation. Dealing with any special need is a long process, and involves learning how to adapt and cope with the disability. But the district doesn't 'fix' the child.

Finally, as a parent, don't quit, don't give up, and don't lose hope. You must always remember that raising a child with a special need and working with the school system in the IEP process is a marathon, not a sprint. It is your responsibility to advocate for your child.