

Communication Skills, and More, for IEP Meetings

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Conflict is inevitable – Agreeability is optional

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Words you hear in IEP meetings that are not in IDEA (at all), and a few that are (a lot)

I would like the AGENDA (0) I have created merged with the one you have created.
I also WANT (0) a copy of the DRAFT (0) IEP provided to me at least 5 days before the meeting.
My ADVOCATE (0) tells me this is my right under the law.
I DEMAND (0) that you provide my child a full assessment because it is in his BEST INTEREST (0) for you to MAXIMIZE (0) his education so he reaches his FULLEST POTENTIAL (0).
I also WANT you to provide me a detailed LOG (0) of everything you do everyday to show me his MASTERY (0) or lack thereof.
I am 50% (0) of this team; you cannot do anything unless I agree.
Because it is the only thing the Internet says will help him MASTER (0) everything, won't you even TRY (0) what I am asking?

We feel that your child's current IEP is APPROPRIATE (150+). This IEP was developed at the last three 6-hour long IEP meetings in which you were meaningfully, extensively, and vocally INVOLVED (30). We have INDIVIDUALIZED (20+) it to his NEEDS (64+) and will provide you periodic reports of his PROGRESS (21+).

More words (and their frequency in the federal regs):

REDRAFTING (the IEP) = 1

REQUEST = 86+

Parent may request: eval, referral, IEE, Due Process, Low Cost Legal info, Procedural Safeguards, to amend records, mediation, the rest of the references refer to LEA requests

BEST = 6

Refers to assessment, "best practice", best data (for applying for grants)

TRIAL = 0

POTENTIAL = 1

In regard to LRE and any potential harmful effect on the child or quality of services he/she needs

METHODOLOGY = 2

In definition of specially designed instruction and what may be discussed by school personnel outside of an IEP meeting

RESEARCH-BASED = 4

Interventions (3) and alternative procedures for determining SLD (1)

EQUAL = 17

In reference to funds, NOT as in "equal member of the IEP team"

TEAM MEMBER = 0

HALF = 3

Fiscal stuff

ONE-HALF = 3

Same fiscal stuff

~~Dealing with Challenging People~~
~~Dealing with Challenged People~~

The Challenge of Dealing with People

Types of people you may encounter:

The Confused / Incompetent / Absent Person

Don't	Do
Point it out to them	Teach a skill (one at a time) (How to set a schedule, organize homework, change a diaper, etc.)

The Angry / Hostile / Defensive Person

Don't	Do
Get mad right back at them	Diffuse and deescalate

The Righteously Angry / Indignant Person

Don't	Do
Deny or defend your previous actions	Apologize / Amend / Move on

The Irrational / Unpredictable Person

Don't	Do
Allow your mood to be affected by theirs	Be calm

The Addicted / DUI Person

Don't	Do
Make decisions about a student if the parent is under the influence (DUI = deciding under the influence)	Pursue a goal of sober interaction, which may require rescheduling the meeting

The Litigious Person

Don't	Do
Act afraid Dare them to take action	What in your professional opinion is appropriate to meet the child's individual needs and complies with the law

Soft Skills vs. Hard Skills

Soft Skills are skills that are applicable to any situation, such as communication and interpersonal behavior.

Hard Skills are situation or job specific, such as filing, sweeping, etc.

Some people may lose their jobs because they do not have the necessary Soft Skills and cannot get along with others.

People are more successful at work when they have:

- A friend at work
- Interesting and meaningful work
- Clear and reasonable expectations
- Frequent and useable feedback
- Fairness and consistency

Now, let's apply Soft Skills to the IEP meeting.

Many times, the IEP team meeting "train" leaves the track because people do not have the necessary Soft Skills and cannot get along with others.

An IEP meeting is more likely to be a successful meeting if:

- All participants feel valued and that you are there because you sincerely care about the child's education
- You exhibit behavior that indicates that you consider your job interesting and meaningful
- The discussion is based upon and reflects clear and reasonable expectations
- There is frequent and useable feedback during the meeting
- All parties feel that they have been treated with fairness and consistency

RUM CAKE

Gather ingredients:

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup Chopped Pecans

1—18 $\frac{1}{2}$ ounce package Butter Recipe Cake Mix

1—3 $\frac{3}{4}$ ounce package Vanilla Instant Pudding Mix

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup Light Rum

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup Water

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup All-Vegetable Cooking Oil

4 Eggs

Grease and flour Bundt pan, crumble nuts into bottom of pan.

Place cake and pudding mixes in large mixing bowl.

Add rum, water, oil, and eggs. Mix for 2 minutes.

Pour into cake pan and bake at 325 degrees for 60 minutes.

Before the cake is ready to remove from the oven, prepare the Hot Rum Glaze.

HOT RUM GLAZE

1 cup Sugar

1 stick of Margarine

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup Rum

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup Water

Place ingredients in a small sauce pan and boil for 2 or 3 minutes.

Remove from oven and immediately pour on hot rum glaze (hot rum will cause cake to settle). Cool cake in pan for 30 minutes. Remove to serving plate.

IEP Team Meeting Checklist

Date _____

Start Time (Scheduled) _____ End Time (Scheduled) _____

Start Time (Actual) _____ End Time (Actual) _____

Location _____

Welcome / Introductions

Rights

Appropriate Personnel

_____	LEA Representative	(Required)		
_____	SPED Teacher	(Required)		
_____	GenEd Teacher	(Required)		
_____	Parent	(Appropriate documentation if not present)	Yes	No
_____	Other (Specify)	_____		
_____	Other (Specify)	_____		
_____	Other (Specify)	_____		
_____	Other (Specify)	_____		
_____	Other (Specify)	_____		
_____	Student (If appropriate)			

Purpose of meeting: _____

Review existing IEP

Discussion (Solicit/encourage parent involvement.)

Parent Involvement (Check if the parent offered ideas, asked, or answered questions.)

Offer of Fape (This is the system saying that the IEP being proposed is, in their minds, appropriate to the child's individual needs and inviting the parent to sign.)

Invitation to sign

Copy of "Finalized" IEP to parent (Check to make sure that everyone listed above signed the IEP.)

Next meeting scheduled (if appropriate)

IEP Meeting Agenda

Time (Start)_____ (End)_____

Date _____

Welcome

Introductions

Procedural Safeguards

Purpose of meeting:

1. Discuss and consider the Independent Evaluation,
2. Determine eligibility
3. Review existing IEP
4. Develop annual IEP
 - a. Personal info
 - b. Present levels
 - c. Goals
 - d. Accommodations
 - e. State testing
 - f. Services

Additional Concerns of any team member

Sign and finalize IEP and give copy to parent

Summarize and plan for future

Ten Ideas on Communicating Effectively with People

1. Write down what you want to say before you talk with them
2. Meet at the time scheduled and allow adequate time to talk
3. Use language they will understand
4. “Warm up” people before serious talk starts
5. Really listen to people
6. Meet in a comfortable or familiar place
7. Remember to smile
8. Be sincere with people
9. Give and get specific suggestions
10. Summarize what has been discussed

Additional Tips

- Listen, without interruption
- Maintain a respectful tone of voice
- Use “I” statements
- Be careful with “I understand.”
- Be aware of cultural differences and how they affect communication

Warning Signs of Potential Violence

Body posture stiffens
Voice becomes louder
Agitation increases
Announcing threats
Argumentative
Becomes defensive easily
Takes things personally that are not meant that way
Negative comments about most things
Complaining done with underlying agitation
Blaming

Survival Skills

Some of your best survival maneuvers will be *verbal* and *psychological*. Your mouth and your mind are critical tactical tools.

In establishing control, first control yourself.

Do not try to match, or exceed, the level or intensity of their outburst. To do so ensures that the event will escalate. With increasing escalation comes a decreasing chance that you will regain control.

Think before you speak. How would you feel / what would you think or do if someone said to you what you are about to say?

Avoid speaking out of anger and maintain a professional demeanor.

Watch your tone of voice. Even if your words are not disrespectful, your tone of voice may make them sound that way to an already agitated individual.

Lowering the volume or intensity of your voice may prevent the individual from becoming more agitated or angry.

Keep an eye on the hands of the potential aggressor. Are they carrying anything that is or could be used as a weapon? Are there things near them that could be grabbed and used as a weapon?

Create or maintain space between you and the potential aggressor. Angry people need more “personal space” than normal in order not to feel threatened. Additional space may give you additional time in which to react.

Move. You do not have to sit there or stand there frozen in time. Put some distance and/or furniture between you and the potential aggressor.

Consider using a “calculated distraction.” This may divert attention to something noncontroversial and nonthreatening. This may also serve to break eye contact and prevent “evil looks” from aggravating the situation.

If students are present, either send them out with an aide or another teacher (who hopefully will alert the principal / SRO), or ask the parent to step out into the hall with you so you may speak in private (hopefully the aide or teacher left in the room with the students will alert the principal / SRO).

Prepare for the Unexpected

Have a plan. Talk with your principal to see if your school has a specific policy to follow. Talk with your fellow teachers.

Schedule meetings. If a parent appears unexpectedly, politely ask them what they wish to discuss and tell them you are unavailable at the present time and are available to meet at XX date and time.

Notify the principal and a nearby teacher of the scheduled meeting’s date, time, and location. Share with them that you believe the meeting may be potentially confrontational, if you suspect this.

Stage the meeting space. Look around for potential weapons. Have seating prepared. Sitting is more relaxing and calming than standing. It is also harder for someone to attack you from a seated position.

While you may want to sit on the same side of the table, since this is more amenable to a friendly meeting, have a plan of where to move to create space and place barriers between you and a potentially violent parent.

If you expect conflict, ask another teacher or the principal to drop in and ask you something during the meeting. This will be a way to check on you without appearing to be checking on you.

What NOT To Do

Do NOT:

Make threats
Argue (even if you could win)
Do anything to elevate the tension
Touch, push, or otherwise incite a physical confrontation
Bring up yesterday's "baggage"
Talk down to the person
Forget to listen
Play the Blame Game
Try to "win"
Be defensive
Overgeneralize
Be "right"
Cave – Roll over – Give in – Give up – Placate
Say "I understand"
Dare anyone to do anything
Poke anyone in the eye (just checking to see if you are with me)

Additional Things to Consider

- Prepare yourself mentally for parent meetings
- Create an atmosphere of mutual respect, sensitivity, and collaboration
- Demonstrate genuine interest in the content of the meeting and the child's progress
- Be sensitive to parent's emotional response and lack of understanding concerning education and SPED jargon
- Recognize parents' emotionally charged responses as a natural part of dealing with their child's disability; do not take the responses as a personal attack

In the Event an Incident Happens

- Ensure the safety of students and staff first
- Notify principal / SRO / appropriate authorities
- Do not disturb the area where the incident took place
- Identify witnesses
- Have witnesses write their account of the incident
- Write your account of what happened while it is still fresh in your mind

Words to Lose and Words to Use

Words to eliminate from your vocabulary during IEP meetings:

Budget
Money
Funds
Can't
Won't
Best
Maximize
Full or highest potential
Minimum
Vote
We've always done it that way
We don't have...
That's the way we do it, etc.

Words to use instead:

Appropriate
Individual
Progress
Consider

Examples:

When a request is made the school could say, "We can't afford that." (BAD) or "We can't do that." (BAD) or "I don't know if our budget will let us do that this year." (BAD) or "This is what we have to offer." (BAD) or "This is where we start all students." (BAD) ...or..."We feel that what we are proposing is appropriate." (GOOD)

If a person wants something and says that he/she knows that 2 other students receive the same thing the school could say, "We think what we are proposing is what is best for [the child]." (BAD) or "We feel what we are proposing is appropriate for [the child's] individual educational needs." (GOOD)

How you say things is important as you are "considering" requests and writing an IEP that is "appropriate" to the "individual" child's educational needs.

It is OK to be a "broken record". When a question is repeated, we do not have to state the answer in a different way. When we do, we run the risk of misspeaking.

This is NOT meant to appear as though to encourage or condone the intentional misinforming or misleading of anyone at an IEP meeting.

The job of the IEP team is to write an appropriate IEP to meet the individual needs of the student.

If that has been done, using the correct verbiage is merely telling the truth.

Questions that Actually Work, and a Few that Don't...

Question: Words addressed to an individual to elicit information or evoke a response.

Tips:

Listen more – Talk less

Ask about alternative options

Ask open-ended questions

Focus on creating a cooperative discussion instead of an adversarial argument

In other words, Identify, Clarify, and Address the “Need” (ICAN)

Questions can help a meeting participant be able to say, “I CAN agree with that.”

Questions to consider asking:

Could you help us understand what you are asking (or proposing)?

Can you tell me more about _____?

What do you mean by _____?

Do you have anything (documentation, doctor report, evaluation results, or data) to share with us to support your request?

Would you explain why it is necessary and how this would benefit your child's education?

Are there alternative ways that the same outcome could be achieved?

If you were to think outside the box on this, what might it look like?

What else has been tried so far?

What will happen in the long run if we continue as it is now, if we change to _____?

How can we address _____?

Did you hear anything new that gives you a different idea?

How do you feel about _____?

What concerns you most about _____?

What is a logical next step?

What should we talk about (or consider) that would help this move forward?

What can you do (at home) or what can we do to make _____ be effective?

Questions to avoid:

What's the matter with you, anyway?

What's your best offer?

Is this OK with you?

What do you want?

Are you crazy?

10 Tips for Breaking an Impasse

1. Restate all the things they have agreed on so far, praise them for their work and accomplishments, and validate that they have come a long way. Then ask something like: “Do you want to let all that get away from you (or us)?”
2. Take a short break (minutes, not days). Often things look different, and people are easier to work with, when you reconvene.
3. Focus on the future. Remind them that the past is just that...the past. The IEP is a future-oriented document. What do they think is appropriate for tomorrow?
4. Suggest a trial period or plan.
5. Develop criteria for a successful outcome. This might help them see that you just can't jump to their desired outcome without considering other things or without other things being done first.
6. Use brainstorming. (From “out of the box” to “out of this world.”)
7. Shift to another topic.
8. Reality-check. State facts: “That is not an IEP team decision.” “That goal does not address the area of need.”
9. When all else fails, the system has the responsibility to offer FAPE. Even if it escalates tension, there may come a time when you have to state what the system is proposing and move on. (Parents can file Administrative Complaints, request Mediation, and file for a Due Process hearing if they disagree with what the system proposes.
10. Beg. (Just Kidding. I wanted to have 10.)