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10 Things You Should Do BEFORE Your Child's IEP Meeting

By Lisa Simmons

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1. Read last year's IEP – It's important to review what came out of last year's plan. Was it successful ? Did the methods of instruction work ? Did the measurement process used really tell you if progress was being made ? Were the goals & objectives really functional for your child? Also try to think back to the actual meeting — what part of the discussion did you feel least prepared for ? Remembering will help you prepare better this time around!
2. Update your advocacy notebook — Hopefully you have a single book that allows you to keep all of your child's information (evaluations, old IEPs, correspondence with school & service providers, etc.) organized & easily accessible. If there is new information from Dr.'s, teachers, or related service providers that needs added to your book take care of the filing now. You'll be glad to have the most current information if the issue comes up during the meeting.
3. Do your homework — is there any new information on your child's disability, have you heard about any promising new intervention strategies that caught your attention? Now is the time to check them out. Research them on the internet or contact a local resource person who can tell you more or provide you with information to review.
4. Come prepared to "grow" your team — If you've found anything interesting during your research, the IEP meeting is an excellent time to share this information. Rather than contacting everyone individually or relying on 1 person to pass on your information, you can share it with everyone at once. If the information describe an intervention strategy you would like used in this year's IEP then be sure to bring copies so everyone can look over the information at once during the meeting. Few professional team members are going to be willing to sign off on something they don't understand or feel comfortable with. By helping them learn, you maximize your chances of getting what you want.
5. Make your list — Once you're organized & your research is complete is time to make your list. What are the issues you feel like really need to be addressed in your child's IEP. Remember other team members may want to add additional items during your discussion, but you don't want to be thinking afterwards, "Oh I really wanted to discuss X & forgot to bring it up." Right now, while you're calm & not

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under time pressure is the time to decide what the issues are from your perspective.

6. Prioritize — Because IEPs are a team process they by their very nature demand compromise. So once you've developed your list, you'll need to go back through & divide it into 2 categories.

A) the issues that are non-negotiable to me — they must be addressed for me to give my consent for this IEP and B) the issues that I am concerned about, but I'm not sure how I want them addressed or what the critical components are. On these issues I'm willing to compromise or settle for minimal supports while we gather more information.

7. Decide who's coming with you — IEPs tend to be extremely anxiety provoking for parents. When you are experiencing a lot of emotion it is unlikely that you will be able to absorb all the information be

given to you. Having someone else there who can listen to the discussion & take notes will free you up to participate in the discussion & focus on your own agenda.

8. What about taping the meeting — Recording IEP meetings can be a touchy issue for many school districts. However, if you cannot find anyone to come with you to the meeting you may want to consider tape recording it so that you can refer back to the discussion after you're home & calm. One caution, you will need to notify the school that you would like to tape record the meeting. Explain that it will be only for your reference & ask if there are any school guidelines or policies that you should be aware of regarding taping. Start this process as soon as you've been notified about the meeting as some school districts have time guidelines that the notice of recording must be given at least X amount of time before the meeting.

9. Determine your child's participation – If you see a future of self-advocacy for your child, then it is important to involve them in IEPs as early as possible. This will let them watch your advocacy skills & learn by imitation. It also give you the opportunity to get their input on what & how they would like to learn. If you aren't comfortable with your child attending the meeting, then consider how their presence can be felt by proxy. Two ways recommended by other parents are:

A) Bring your child's picture & set it in the center of the table – this should effectively remind everyone at the table that the decisions made will impact the life of a real person & shouldn't be arbitrary or for convenience sake.

B) Bring your child's portfolio — originally developed to introduce new teachers to your child, the portfolio illustrates all that is unique & special about your child. This is a wonderful way to remind participants that everyone has strengths & special qualities to bring to the "table of life". Check out the sample portfolio in our web resource section for ideas on how to do this.

10. Review your rights! — Right before you attend a meeting filled with professionals is the perfect time to read again how the federal laws "see" your role as parent. It will reinforce your feeling of importance within the team & also ensure that no one surprises you with any "questionable" tactics during the meeting.

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If you have completed all 10 steps you should be feeling pretty prepared. Now you can go into that conference room with confidence knowing that you are ultimate "expert" on your child!

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Lisa is director of the Ideal Lives Project, providing practical support for special needs families & professionals. Visit online at: <http://www.ideallives.com> or subscribe to her free newsletter at: <mailto:ideallives-subscribe@topica.com>

Understanding The Report

By Sandy Gauvin

Understanding The Report by Sandy Gauvin

"No thank you. Don't bother to send me the report about the testing results. I won't understand it anyway. I'll just listen at the meeting."

Those were the words of more than one parent I spoke with whose children had been tested to see if they needed special education services. I could always hear the discouragement in their voices as they spoke.

I heard the same tone of voice in a person a little closer to home just recently. A relative of mine has a son who has just been evaluated, and the parents had been given a copy of the report. He and his wife both have college educations, and they still had difficulty understanding what was being said. He looked totally helpless as he showed me the paperwork.

It's important to realize that every occupation in life has it's own terms, and special education is no different. Unless you work in that occupation on a daily basis, you can't be expected to know what those terms mean – not much consolation when it's your child's education and success that are at stake.

The good news is that there is help out there.

Here are some suggestions for how you can become an informed, active participant in the meeting:

- 1) Contact the special education office in your school district. Either someone there can explain it to you, or they can tell you who to talk with to help you understand the report.
- 2) Set up an appointment to speak with the special education person in your child's school.

If you can't get the information you want through the special education office for some reason, call and decide on a mutually convenient time when you can meet with the special education teacher and discuss the results. Perhaps you can even discuss what the recommendations might be regarding the best placement and the best program for your child.

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This way, when you go into the meeting, you will be more prepared.

3) Take notes as you discuss the report. If you take notes from the discussion, then you will have ready information to take into the meeting, and you won't be bogged down having to find the information in the report.

4) If you still have trouble understanding, you can contact your state Learning Disabilities Association. They will have answers for you and they may be able to suggest someone to go to the meeting with you to help you understand what is going on.

5) Know that it's okay to take someone into the meeting with you for support. Facing a group of professionals can be scary, whether you have a college degree or not. Having support with you can be very comforting, and if that support is someone who understands the process better than you, that's a bonus!

Remember, you are NOT alone in this process. You have a team of people who are there to help your child be successful. And working together as a team is the best way to make that happen. But, you have to play an active role in that team in order for your child to get the best services possible, and that may mean searching out people who can help you understand and take charge.

For more plain talk about learning disabilities, please visit us at www.ldperspectives.com.

Sandy Gauvin is a retired educator who has seen learning disabilities from many perspectives – as the parent of a daughter with learning disabilities, as the teacher of children with learning disabilities, and as an advocate for others who have diagnosed and unrecognized learning disabilities. Sandy shares her wisdom and her resources at www.LDPerspectives.com.



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