

A Parent-to-Parent Guide to The I.E.P. (Individualized Education Plan) Process *provided by Children Having Individual Learning Differences (C.H.I.L.D.)*

The IEP process can be overwhelming. As a parent, you receive a lot of information which you must process in a short period of time. You may feel pressured by your desire to ensure your child is receiving the services he/she needs. You may also be dealing with the emotions involved in your child's need for special education instruction.

The following are some words of advice from parents who have "been there." They provide guidelines for you as you learn to navigate your way along the path of special education. All of this information may not apply to your situation. Other questions you have may not be answered here. In the event you would like further assistance from a parent's perspective, feel free to contact one of us (we have included the names and contact information for Children Having Individual Learning Differences Board members at the end of this document).

Write a story about your child. Prior to your IEP meeting, write a narrative about your child. Be sure to include the following:

- His/her strengths academically and socially.
- What he/she learned this year in and outside of school.
- What is difficult for him/her to do in school.
- What helps your child learn.

For example, you may include what toys your child enjoys playing with and subjects your child is interested in. Provide examples. Information like this will help educators get to know and understand your child more quickly. They will also see an example of your understanding of your child and your desire to be involved in his/her education.

Write goals for your child's next year of school. At the IEP meeting, educators will address different aspects of your child's education. Educators may discuss your child's need for speech therapy, physical therapy, and/or occupational therapy, or specific instruction in reading or math. Their explanations of their evaluations of your child are usually performed within their area of expertise. It is important for you as a parent to be prepared with some basic goals for your child and ask educators questions about how their area of expertise relates to those goals.

Be prepared with your questions and concerns. Write them and bring them to the IEP meeting to discuss. You can also make notes to them with regard to the answers you receive and ask that they be added to the IEP document.

You can ask to see the IEP in advance. In preparation for your meeting, you may ask to see the IEP a few days in advance. Even at the time of the meeting, the IEP is considered a draft document and therefore changes can be made to it during the meeting. If a change is relatively minor, the change can be made on the document itself and initialed by a member of the IEP team.

You don't have to sign the IEP at the meeting. You are afforded up to 15 days after the meeting to review and sign the IEP. If this is the first IEP meeting and you have never signed an IEP, the district will not be permitted to give services to your child until you sign it. If this is not your child's first IEP, you have signed IEPs in the past, and you do not sign the IEP within the 15 days, it will be implemented as it is written. If, after reviewing the IEP, you desire to make additional changes, you may ask for another IEP meeting.

If you have a special request or major changes you would like to make to the IEP, it is best to bring them up prior to the meeting. If you would like to request changes that will significantly change the IEP (e.g., additional therapies, an aide), you should contact the Case Manager to meet and discuss the matter. The Case Manager can then address your concerns, propose potential resolutions, and provide you with information as to how the changes may be accommodated in the IEP.

If your request or change cannot be accommodated, it is a good practice to create a note with the date, your child's name, the request or change, the reason it cannot be accommodated, and your signature, and ask to have it added to your child's IEP while retaining a copy for your records. You may also write on the IEP that you consent to it being implemented, but you object to it for reasons stated during the meeting.

Keep track of the changes to the IEP. As you discuss the change during the IEP meeting, be sure to make note of how it will be implemented, when, and who will be responsible. As you receive periodic reports and consult with your child's Case Manager on your child's progress, you will be prepared to discuss its impact at your next IEP meeting and in a better position to suggest further changes if necessary.

If a teacher cannot be present for the IEP meeting, request that the teacher provide a brief summary report for the meeting. Having the teacher's comments in writing will help you better remember what was discussed at the meeting and the teacher's assessment and recommendations.

You can audio-tape record the IEP meeting. Some parents record the IEP meeting because it helps them remember the information related during the meeting. You must notify the district of your intent to do so prior to the meeting. It is also the right of the district to make a recording.

Your child should attend the IEP meeting when he/she is old enough. At the age of 14, your child is required to attend the IEP meeting. However, since the IEP meeting is ultimately about your child, it is good practice to invite your child earlier, when it is appropriate. Proceedings can be kept at his/her level, and in this sense, he/she is able to better understand the reason for some of the instruction and individuals involved in his/her education.

When your child is transitioning to the middle or high school, consider asking for a tour of the school and involvement of a school representative (e.g., Principal, guidance counselor, teacher). It is helpful for you to become as familiar as possible with the new experiences your child will be having and the new individuals with whom he/she will be interacting. You will be better prepared to tackle issues that might result from your child's new school environment.

You may invite other professionals to your IEP meeting. If you are working with a medical or educational professional privately, it is a good practice for you to invite this individual to your meeting.

Stay in frequent contact with your child's teacher(s) and Case Manager. It is important that your child's teacher(s) know(s) you are available to help in your child's education. It is helpful for you to initiate contact and make it clear that you are available for any questions or insights they might have. As much as possible, be sure to copy your child's Case Manager on the communication you have with other educators. This way, the entire educational team is kept "in the loop."

Your child has a right to receive all of the therapies as outlined in the IEP, regardless of school events, meetings, and other scheduling issues. Therefore, if your child misses therapy due to something other than his/her absence from school, your child has a right to have that therapy rescheduled and made up. Work with your child's Case Manager and therapist(s) to come up with reasonable solutions to scheduling conflicts created by holiday parties, school plays, and meetings.

You should receive regular communication regarding your child's instruction. Depending on your child's age and needs, you should be receiving frequent communication regarding your child's interaction with educational professionals. Educational professionals are constantly documenting their interaction with your child for their own records. Typically, if your child is very young and requires a number of different services, the communication is more frequent (e.g., at least once a week). As your child gets older and/or if he/she requires fewer services, these communications may consist of periodic progress reports. You should know that your child is receiving the educational interventions as outlined in your child's IEP. If you would like more frequent communication than is typical, you can request that this be added to the IEP.

Remember that you are equals and all on the same team. Although you sometimes feel outnumbered as the parent among all of the educators, you are the only person in the room that has the in-depth, whole-person insight into your child that comes with being a parent. Feel free to ask questions, ask professional terminology to be explained, and relate your child's experiences at home. If there is a difference of opinion, be sure to listen to their reasoning and be prepared to explain your reasoning in a calm and professional manner. Remember that you are all working together for your child's success.

Contact professional organizations that specialize in your child's needs. Be sure to contact the various groups that address your child's specific special education needs. They typically have websites you can scan for specific questions you might have. They also often address issues about the educational process and your rights as a parent as well as your child's issue. The more informed you become, the more confidence you will have as you navigate the process. You can begin by looking at the links provided on C.H.I.L.D.'s website at www.veronachild.org.

Feel free to contact one of C.H.I.L.D.'s Board Members:

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