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Getting Started

- Effective Advocacy
- 4 Mistakes Parents Make
- Planning and Preparing
- Advocacy Tools
- 5 Rules for Successful IEP Meetings

In this chapter, you will learn how to be an effective advocate for your child. You will learn that the keys to successful IEP meetings are preparing, organizing information, and knowing how to present requests.

You will learn to use the IEP Meeting Worksheet to prepare and the Parent Agenda to express concerns and make requests.

You will learn “4 Mistakes Parents Make” and how to avoid them. You will also learn the “5 Rules of Successful IEP Meetings.”



Effective Advocacy

Who is your child's first teacher? You are. Who is your child's most important role model? You are. Who is responsible for your child's welfare? You are. Who has your child's best interests at heart? You do.

When you attend IEP meetings, you represent your child's interests. Your goals are to negotiate with the school, obtain quality special education services for your child, and build healthy working relationships with school personnel.

4 Mistakes Parents Make

1. Failing to make a long term plan for their child's education or the future

Some parents do not think about the future until it arrives. They don't have long-range goals for their child. They don't think about what they want their child to be able to do when he leaves the public school system. They don't have a plan.

Imagine your child as a young adult. What should your child be able to do? Do you envision your child working at a job and raising a family? Will he be a member of the community? What does he need to learn so he is prepared for "further education, employment, and independent living?"¹

Your child's special education is a long-term project. A plan will help you stay focused, anticipate problems, and prepare for the future. Your plan should include academic and behavioral, social, and emotional

goals, including hobbies, personal interests, sports and fitness, family, friendships, and the community. Your plan should be revisited and revised as your child grows.

2. Not understanding their child's disability and allowing the school to make decisions about their child's special education

Some parents don't understand their child's disability, how the disability affects the child's learning, or how the child needs to be taught.

They don't know what services and supports their child needs. They don't know if their child is making progress. They don't know the steps they must take to ensure that their child receives an appropriate education.

These parents have given decision-making authority to the school. They assume school personnel will make wise decisions about educating their child. The school may have low expectations for the child and parents tend to accept the school's low expectations.

If you do not ensure that your child receives an appropriate education and learns the skills necessary to be an independent, self-sufficient member of the community, you will deal with the outcome long past childhood.

And if you are tempted to lower your expectations, consider this: Your child will internalize your low expectations. A vicious cycle begins. Low expectations lead to low achievement.

3. Forgetting to keep your emotions under control

As a parent, your emotions may be your Achilles' heel.

If you are like many parents, when you learn that your child has a disability, you turn to school personnel and medical specialists for help. If you and the school disagree about what is appropriate for your child, you may feel shocked and angry. You may feel betrayed by the system you trusted. Once lost, trust is hard to regain.

4. Not documenting events and conversations in writing

“I told the IEP team that my child was not making progress. The team agreed and said they would provide more services.”

*“If it was not written down, it was not said.
If it was not written down, it did not happen.”*
-Pete Wright

Assume the school did not provide more services. How can you prove they agreed to do so?

One common mistake parents make is not writing things down as they happen. When you write things down — in a letter, log, or journal — you are taking steps to protect your child's interests.

In general, the best way to document events and problems is by writing short polite letters

to the school. Describe what happened or what you were told. Use facts, not emotions. Your letters will become part of your child's file.

Be sure to keep a copy of all correspondence for your records.

Planning and Preparing

Effective advocacy comes from research, planning, and preparation. When you know a meeting is scheduled, it is time to prepare.

Gather information and review your child's file. Review the current IEP. Use test scores to monitor progress. Identify problems and propose solutions.

Gather Information and Review the File

Make an appointment to talk with your child's teachers and/or therapists.

Do the teachers and related services providers think he is making satisfactory progress?
What areas

are they concerned about?

Take notes. Ask questions if you do not understand.

Make an appointment to observe your child in class.

Talk with your child about school. What is he learning? Does he believe he is making good progress?

All About IEPs

File all loose documents in your child's file. Make sure you have all recent test data.

Review the Current IEP

If your child has an IEP, review the goals. Did your child master the goals? Was mastery complete or partial? How do you know? Do you have objective data that supports your beliefs?

Review the periodic reports of your child's progress toward the IEP goals. Do the progress reports indicate that your child is on track to master the goals? If he was not making sufficient progress, did the IEP team meet to review and revise the IEP? What steps did the team make to help him meet the goals?

Use Test Scores to Monitor Progress

Review the test results, including state and district testing. Do you know what the tests measure? How did your child do?

Compare your child's current test data to earlier test data. Is your child making progress? How much progress? Do you have concerns about your child's program or progress?

Identify Problems and Propose Solutions

Review your notes from prior meetings. Review your contact log. Any unresolved issues? Any problems you want to bring up at the next meeting?

When you review your child's file, the current IEP, new test scores, and your notes, you will think about issues you want the team

to address. List these issues, your questions, concerns, and proposed solutions.

If you know the perceptions of your school district, it will be easier to devise win-win solutions to problems. Answer these questions.

- How do you view your child's problems?
- How does the school view your child's problems?
- How is the school likely to respond to your concerns?
- How will you handle the school's response?
- What solutions will you propose?

Advocacy Tools

Use the Pre-Meeting Worksheet

Use the Pre-Meeting Worksheet to prepare for the meeting. Fill in the information about the meeting time and date, location, purpose of the meeting, and who requested the meeting. As you continue to prepare, you will be able to answer more of the questions.

At the top of the Worksheet, write "Who, What, Why, When, Where, How, Explain." (5 Ws + H + E) If you write this down, you are more likely to ask questions.

Answer these questions in your Worksheet:

- What do you want?
- What does the school want?
- What action do you want the school to take?
- How motivated are they to give you what you want?

Location: _____

Date: _____

What is the purpose of the meeting? _____

Who requested the meeting? _____

Who will attend the meeting (e.g., teachers, administrators, parent, child)? _____

What do you want? _____

What do they want? _____

What action do you want them to take? _____

How motivated are they to give you what you want? _____

What will prevent them from giving you what you want? _____

How can you alleviate their concerns? _____

Learn more about “Preparing for Meetings” in Chapter 25, *Wrightslaw: From Emotions to Advocacy, 2nd Edition*.

- What will prevent them from giving you what you want?
- How can you address their concerns and fears?

Prepare a Parent Agenda

You can use a parent agenda to:

- Prepare for meetings
- Identify concerns and list problems
- Make requests and propose solutions to problems
- Identify issues and problems that are not resolved
- Improve parent-school relationships

If you use a parent agenda, send your agenda to the IEP team members before the meeting. Assume that some of the people will not read your agenda until they are in the meeting. Bring extra copies for people who misplaced or lost their copies.

Practice Making Requests

When you make requests, practice. When you practice, you prepare. Practice causes your anxiety to drop. State your problems or concerns clearly and concisely. Offer suggestions about how you want the problem to be resolved. Be open to options suggested by the school.

All About IEPs

Your Image

When you dress neatly and conservatively for school meetings, you convey a professional image. When you organize your child's file and bring the file to IEP meetings, you send the message that you expect to develop a professional partnership with other team members.

When you arrive early for an IEP meeting, you have time to relax and focus on what you want to accomplish.

Your interpersonal style affects how you feel and behave at IEP meetings. If you are a controller, you are likely to feel out of control at IEP meetings. If you are eager to please, your desire to be liked may cause you to agree to anything the school proposes. If you are a conflict-avoider, you may keep your concerns about your child's education to yourself. Look in the mirror. Do you need to change your style?

5 Rules of Successful IEP Meetings

Here are five rules for successful IEP meetings. Keep these rules in mind as you prepare for the next IEP meeting.

1. Know what you want

Make requests in writing. If you make a verbal request, be sure to follow up with a letter. If you have a problem, think about possible solutions to the problem. Describe the problem and solutions in clear language. You want the IEP team members to understand the problem and your proposed solutions.

When you are prepared, you can participate effectively in meetings.

Answer these questions:

- What do you want?

IEP Meeting

Worksheet

Child's Name:

Date:

School:

Child's Need/ Parent Request	School's Response	Resolved	Start Date	Responsible Person

Learn more about "Meeting Strategies" in Chapter 26, *Wrightslaw: From Emotions to Advocacy, 2nd Edition*.

- What action do you want the IEP team to take?
- What facts support your request?

If the team ignores or belittles your solutions, it is important to document this in a polite follow-up letter after the meeting.

2. Do not blame or criticize

When you describe problems or express concerns to an IEP team, stick to the facts. Do not blame or criticize. If a team member reacts defensively, be careful!

When people feel defensive, anxious, or angry, their ability and willingness to solve problems drops. If you stick to the facts, you make it more likely that the team will develop creative solutions to problems, rather than feel defensive.

3. Protect the parent-school relationship

In parent-school negotiations, you need to separate your personal relationships from the problems. If you view a person across the table as the problem, you are likely to feel mistrustful and angry.

When you negotiate, you have two interests:

- To solve problems
- To protect parent-school relationships

You will negotiate again!

4. Seek win-win solutions to problems

When IEP teams develop mutually acceptable solutions to problems, team members are committed to the success of their solutions. If negotiations shift to a win-lose perspective, and one side loses, expect them to sabotage the solution.

5. Understand the school's position

To be a successful negotiator, you must be able to step into the shoes of the people on the other side of the table. You need to be able to answer these questions:

- What are their perceptions? How do the school members of the IEP team see the problem?
- What are their interests? What do they want?
- What are their fears? What are they afraid will happen if they give you what you want?

When you can answer these questions, it will be easier to develop solutions that allow you and the school to meet your child's needs.

In Summation

In this chapter, you learned that you represent your child's interests as you negotiate with the IEP team for special education services.

You learned about four common mistakes parents make and how to avoid them. You learned the steps to prepare for IEP meetings. You have a step-by-step plan to prepare for meetings.

All About IEPs

You know how to use the Pre-Meeting Worksheet to prepare for meetings and the Parent Agenda to make requests.

Let's move on to the next chapter and learn about IEP teams and IEP meetings.

Endnote

1. 20 U.S.C. § 1400(d)