Family Connections: Empowering Families to Be Collaborative Participants in IEP Meetings

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Empowering Families To Be Collaborative Participants in IEP Meetings

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The partnership between home and school is an important one that is slowly being addressed through education policy and practices. Special education advocates in particular have embraced the need for strong family-school partnerships, and the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) requires that families be invited to attend individualized education program (IEP) meetings. While family involvement in the IEP process is encouraged, family members may feel an array of emotions—from excitement to trepidation—when embarking on the journey of serving as advocates for their children. Preparation, planning, and collaboration are key to success. This article offers recommendations for families about how to serve as active and collaborative participants during IEP meetings.

WHAT IS AN IEP MEETING? An IEP meeting is a process for planning special education services to be provided to children who qualify, based on eligibility requirements established by the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act. Specifically, an IEP is a written record outlining a child’s present level of performance and providing goals, objectives, and services for achieving those goals.

WHO SHOULD ATTEND AN IEP MEETING? IDEA requires that parent(s) or holders of educational rights be in attendance. Additionally, a regular education teacher and a special education teacher should be present, along with a local educational agency (LEA) representative, who has the authority to make decisions about the availability of resources in the school district. Additional team members who can provide relevant information about a child’s performance also should attend (e.g., psychologist, speech-language pathologist, social worker, etc.). Finally, family members are welcome to invite other individuals who may serve as support or have relevant knowledge about a child (IDEA, 2004).

ENSURING A STURDY FOUNDATION BY ADDRESSING CHALLENGES Educators and family members alike care about the children and want to see them achieve their educational dreams and goals. This provides a solid foundation for building a high-quality educational program. However, when speaking to families and educators of children with disabilities, it is common to hear conflicting reports about the effectiveness of the IEP process (Fish, 2008; Lo, 2008, 2009; Martin, 2005; Stoner et al., 2005). Fish (2008) conducted a survey of 51 predominantly white, middle- and upper-class families of students receiving special education services and found overall positive experiences related to collaborative decision-making. Meanwhile, studies examining diverse families’ perceptions included the presentation of pre-determined goals and objectives (Childre & Chambers, 2005), lack of diversity in IEP teams (Lo, 2009; Salas, 2004), and poor communication (Lo, 2009; Salas, 2004). Stoner et al. (2005) reported parents feeling confused and apprehensive about the process when attending meetings without the presence of an advocate, because they failed to follow specific protocol and collaborate with school personnel. Reported findings by English as a second language (ESL) families point to poor translations, which further break down communication and collaboration opportunities (Cho & Gannotti, 2005; Lo, 2008). Martin (2005) suggests that most school districts lack a consistent means of ensuring family satisfaction with the IEP process. Therefore, it is important to consider possible ways to prevent these issues by being prepared and remembering strategies for collaboration.

A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH Preparation and Planning Family members may feel anxious or stressed when walking into an IEP meeting. Much of this anxiety can be minimized by being prepared and collecting needed information in advance (Geltner & Leibforth, 2008). Families can collaborate with school personnel (Pretti-Frontczak & Bricker, 2000; Reiman & Beck, 2010) to acquire a list of invitees, assessment results, a draft IEP, and...
an outline of available services. Research suggests that the feelings of confusion and apprehension may be due to a lack of preparedness and experience, which often results in a lack of active participation in meetings (Fish, 2006, 2008). Finally, ensure that professionals have interpreters as needed for effective communication and translation (Lo, 2008).

**Effective Strategies To Use During IEP Meetings**

When it is time for the meeting, make sure to consider collaborative communication and teaming strategies. Research suggests that 55% of information is communicated through facial expressions and body language; 38% through voice pitch, inflection, and timing; and 7% through words (Mehrabian, 1971). Consider all these factors when making requests and suggestions. Second, be sure to ask educators to share positive information about your child, in addition to weaknesses and goals, as you establish common ground and open lines of communication (Snell & Janney, 2005). This can help you build a relationship with other team members. Third, feel free to ask questions if you require further explanation, disagree with documentation, or feel that your child’s needs are being overlooked. Conflict may be uncomfortable but it is an important part of the collaborative teaming experience, especially in such fields as education (Barsky, 2000). Research suggests that parents may feel a greater sense of equality when they contribute to placement decisions, behavioral goals, and the general IEP process (Reinman & Beck, 2010). Fourth, invite attendees whom you think might provide informational, emotional, or communicative support (e.g., family, friend, translator, advocate, specialist, etc). Taking an active and collaborative role during the meetings may help families to feel satisfied with their children’s educational path.

**AFTER THE MEETING**

Once an IEP meeting is complete, families should consider ways to maintain communication and stay informed about their child’s educational progress. Effective ways for maintaining collaboration include having regular team meetings to discuss challenges and progress (Snell & Janney, 2005). Since IDEA requires that families receive regular information about their child’s progress, families should feel free to ask for progress reports, work samples, tips for providing home instruction, and support to ensure effective program implementation.

Families also should keep and organize their child’s records so they can be accessed at any time (Wright & Wright, 2003). This can include child evaluations and eligibility reports, medical evaluations, all IEP documentation (including letters requesting attendance), progress reports, and work samples from throughout the school year. This will assist families in their efforts to serve as advocates for their children.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Family members of children with disabilities should be active and collaborative partners in their children’s education. Specifically, they can contribute positively to meetings and, thus, to the child’s educational process by preparing and planning before meetings, sharing their ideas and opinions during meetings, and maintaining records after meetings to ensure effective communication during the IEP process. ESL families are highly encouraged to request interpreters to ensure the accuracy of written and oral communication. When families are equipped to become active participants in the IEP process, they serve in critical roles of advocacy for their children, and establish and reinforce strong family-school connections that promote student success.

**References**


