

IEP: Involving the Student is Important for a Successful Plan

The Individual Education Plan (IEP) can be one of the most important elements of your son's or daughter's school experience. An IEP should serve as a road map for success, built around a student's strengths with special attention given to areas of academic or personal growth.

The traditional IEP meeting will have representation from administrative staff, teaching staff (sometimes both mainstream and special education) a guidance counselor, a parent (or parents), perhaps a friend or professional known by the family and, most significantly, the student who will receive the services within the IEP.

Considering this potential gathering of several adults, being the center of attention may not be the most inviting situation to your daughter. All these people, all these questions, all these life decisions to be made within the space of an hour or two. It is little wonder that many teenagers approach the whole idea of the IEP meeting with great apprehension.

How can you encourage your daughter to take charge of her meeting and the IEP process? How can you emphasize to your son the importance of his position without scaring him away? Here are just a few ideas:

Make sure your son knows what the function of his IEP really is.

The IEP is not simply an education plan that charts out the daily class schedule, what percentage of time your son will comply with the regulations within the IEP, and the expectations the school has of your son. Rather, this tool is created to address both academic and personal modifications, specific instructional needs, measurements to determine success, and present levels of performance.

Ideally the IEP does hold your son accountable for the agreed elements with the plan, but

the school also needs to see that goals and objectives are followed and reached. Too often, an IEP will say something like, "John will do his homework during study hall 100 percent of the time," but there will be no plan of action documented to reach this goal. Whatever it takes, the school has as much responsibility as your son to see that the outlined IEP is followed. The IEP team needs to explore options to best determine how your son will reach his potential.

Tell your daughter that the IEP is her plan and that her opinions are valued.

When your daughter understands that she can have some authority in the IEP meeting, that she can have an equal, if not superior, voice, the IEP meeting need not be so intimidating. In fact, this forum can be a positive experience not only because of personal involvement in a key personal process, but also because of the growth in self-confidence that may occur from this experience.

The more times your teenager is able to speak for herself or himself, the easier it will become in the future. This holds especially true in the IEP meeting forum. Any contribution your son or daughter can make will be a valuable one since it comes from your child's own perspective. For example, if your daughter wants to be involved in some after school recreation, have her share this with the IEP team. Making such a statement in the company of so many people involved in her education can inspire your daughter to begin planning to make this desire a reality.

If you have a teenager, be aware of the transition component within the IEP and share this knowledge with your son.

When your son turns 14, he should have transition planning services available to him. These transition services should be outlined

in the IEP to ensure a progressive and smooth transition to adult life. Everything from recreation/leisure options to independent living to vocational training may be addressed here, depending on the plans your son wants to pursue. If your son has some long- or short-term plans, bolster him to communicate these to the IEP team in any way possible, such as by submitting a written statement to the IEP team, talking about them at the meeting, or sharing thoughts with you to bring to the meeting for him.

Support your daughter in connecting with at least one member of the IEP team on an independent basis.

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If your daughter can talk with someone involved in her IEP implementation and follow-through at school, she will be able to express concerns or other related issues with this person on an ongoing basis. This relationship will inspire communication without the pressure of having a number of people to talk with at once. This individual in the IEP

team can also serve as a messenger from your daughter to the entire team.

Let your son know it is okay to make changes in his IEP.

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An IEP is not written in stone; if the plan is not working toward a vision your son is comfortable with, then it should be changed. Much of an IEP becomes trial and error, and if parts are not meeting your son's needs, only these parts may need adjustment. It is important that your son knows it is his right and responsibility to bring his IEP issues to the team or to be a part of the team. The school has an equal responsibility to chart progress and any perceived difficulties in the IEP, so if these issues arise, a new IEP meeting should be called.

By following these guidelines, you can help your son or daughter feel comfortable as an active participant in the IEP process, which should make for a more comprehensive, effective plan.