

IEP Season:

Five Things to Feel Comfortable About When Heading into That Meeting

By **Chris Abildgaard, LPC, NCC, NCSP**

SINCE MARCH 2020, WE HAVE BEEN CHALLENGED IN A VARIETY OF WAYS. WE HAVE HAD TO ADAPT TO WEARING MASKS, BEING SEPARATED FROM FAMILY AND FRIENDS, WORKING FROM HOME, AND FOR MANY STUDENTS, BEING EDUCATED THROUGH A COMPUTER. WE ARE NOW ENTERING THE TIME OF YEAR WHEN ONE'S INDIVIDUAL EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM (IEP) WILL BE EXAMINED AND REVIEWED WITH THEIR SCHOOL-BASED TEAMS TO DETERMINE HOW THE STUDENT HAS DONE OVER THE COURSE OF THE SCHOOL YEAR. THESE MEETINGS CAN BE EXTREMELY DAUNTING; IT IS IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER BOTH FAMILIES AND EDUCATORS BECOME ANXIOUS BEFORE THESE LARGER MEETINGS WHERE DECISIONS ABOUT A PERSON'S EDUCATIONAL FUTURE ARE MADE. AFTER SITTING THROUGH THOUSANDS OF IEP MEETINGS IN MY CAREER AND AFTER SPENDING THE PAST FOUR MONTHS ATTENDING IEP MEETINGS REMOTELY, HERE ARE A FEW TIPS TO REMEMBER, THINK ABOUT, AND PROCESS BEFORE HEADING INTO YOUR SON/DAUGHTER'S ANNUAL REVIEW.





1. Review last year's IEP and progress reports

As a consultant and someone who attends many IEP meetings with clients, I always remind my clients to reread last year's IEP. You, as a parent, want to make sure you review those notes from the previous meeting, reflect on any progress you have seen over the year, and begin to think about some objectives you may like to see your child work on so they can continue to make success within the school setting. Look at the focus of the last year's IEP. Was the focus on academic progress or social/emotional growth? This has been an interesting year, and many of us have witnessed our children learning from home. Although it is a different environment for sure, we can still use some of our observations as a conversation point for new goals and objectives. Think about how you saw your child attend class lessons, stay on task, manage materials, participate in Google Meets, etc. Your observations and feedback on your child's learning behaviors should be heard by the team and integrated in some fashion. Certainly, the IEP should be a document that helps bring a student's academic skill set to the next level; however, over the course of the next few years for sure, I am strongly advocating for just as much emphasis on the social/emotional wellbeing and growth of all students. We are in the middle of a pandemic, and how we regulate our emotions, communicate our needs, and find some semblance of social connection does impact a student's academic progress. By reviewing last year's IEP and thinking in a framework of building off of that last document, you will be helping the team (and your child) scaffold and continue a path of positive academic and social/emotional growth.

2. Open and reciprocal communication is key

It's good to have questions. It is okay to ask for data. It's important you ask for feedback and impressions before your IEP meeting. I tend not to like surprises at these meetings. I encourage my clients to send their questions to the team three to five school days ahead of time so the team knows how the family is feeling. Likewise, I ask the school-based team to

communicate with the family about possible ideas for new goals and objectives, recent observations, and any feedback they may have to help the family be more active during the meeting. If there is a sense of concern or questions around one's educational program, I often will have the parents reach out to the administrator so their concerns are heard ahead of time. This allows the administrator to craft some options for programmatic changes that can better meet the needs of the student and their family. While there are times the school-based team and the parents disagree, if both sides effectively communicate with each other and approach the IEP process as collaborative partners, agreements can be reached as the focus always needs to remain on doing what is in the best interest of the student.

3. 1 IEP, 2 IEP, 3 IEP meetings, oh my!

Here is the good news and something I tell my clients all the time: if you don't get everything accomplished at this IEP meeting, you can always call another meeting to finish. I completely understand wanting to get through everything in one meeting—that is ideal. Sometimes, though, sitting around a table for three-plus hours doesn't do a world of good. If you feel like there is just too much to discuss, write to the team asking for two separate meetings ahead of time. This way, you can focus on the goals for the first meeting and then prepare for the second. Most cases will not need to have two separate meetings. However, for those cases that are more complex and/or involve multiple people, agencies, consultants, etc., asking for that second meeting may make the most sense. Coming to the table multiple times does take time out of the parent's schedule and the schedule of the school staff. However, I have seen this approach to be more collaborative and unifying rather than trying to squeeze in one hundred things in a two-hour time block (if that) when people's emotions are already on edge and on high alert. These more extended, more stressful types of meetings can often be more dividing and adversarial, which tends to harm relationships, trust, and overall cohesion.

4. For older students (7th grade and up), ask for input

As we prepare and review the IEP from previous years, we also don't want to forget about student input. As students get older, it is so important for them to have input on their academic plan. Now, not all students will be ready to give this input when they are in middle school, but checking in with your child about how they like school, if there is something more they think they need, or if there is anything they think can change about their day or academic program can be beneficial. As students enter high school, it becomes even more important to make sure they are part of the process and develop an understanding of their own strengths and areas of need. As the adults and professionals in our students' lives, we certainly bring an important perspective and knowledge base to their educational program. However, we cannot un-

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derestimate the students' input and their perspective on what is actually working for them!

5. Do something for yourself the night before the meeting

It's the night before the IEP meeting, and you are...stressing! Believe me, being the father of two children with IEPs, I know the feeling. Hopefully, by this point, you have completed tips one to three and are now ready to do something for yourself.

Heading into the IEP meeting with a little stress and anxiety is not a bad thing. It keeps us on our toes, ready to listen and attend to what others may be reporting on. However, in order for us to be the best possible advocates for our children, we have to be in the right frame of mind. There is a time to put away the big IEP binder and relax to the best of our ability. Spend it with your family, cook a nice dinner, play a board game, go for a walk, or enjoy a glass of wine. It is okay to take care of yourself before these larger meetings, and in the end, it will prove to be more beneficial for you and your child.



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