

Center for Disabilities and Development

Iowa's University
Center for Excellence
on Disabilities

100 Hawkins Drive
Iowa City IA 52242-1011

319-353-6900 (local)
877-686-0031 (toll-free)

<http://www.uihealthcare.com/cdd>

Services include:

- ADHD
- ALS Clinic
- Autism
- Augmentative Communication
- Behavior
- Bowel and Bladder Management
- Comprehensive Developmental Evaluation
- Computer Access
- Down Syndrome
- Education
- Feeding and Growth Management
- Motor Evaluation
- Myelodysplasia
- Neuropsychological Evaluation
- Ongoing therapy (OT, PT, Speech)
- Pediatric Brain Injury
- Pediatric Sleep Disorders
- Prader Willi
- Spasticity
- Wheelchair and Seating



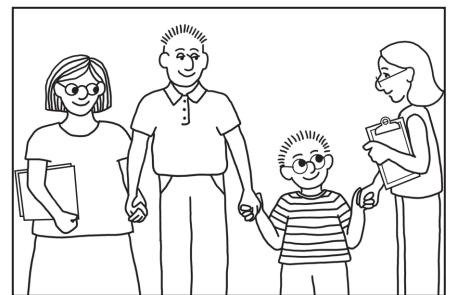
Becoming an Effective IEP Partner: 10 Practical Tips for Parents

By Connie B. Fanselow, ASK Resource Center
The Parent Training & Information Center of Iowa

Inform yourself
Educate yourself
Prepare for the IEP meeting

Participate actively
Ask questions
Request what you want clearly
Take notes
Negotiate
Engage your child in the discussion
Recognize success

1. Inform yourself. Take advantage of opportunities to get information and training on special education, the IEP process, parents' rights, and effective advocacy. Read newsletters and publications like this one. Get in touch with the Parent Training and Information Center of Iowa, your local Parent Educator Connection. Find out about advocacy organizations in your area that help inform and support families of children with disabilities. Attend one of the many conferences that are sponsored annually by statewide organizations to help parents and professionals keep up with current information about special education and disability issues. Conferences also offer an opportunity to meet other parents and expand your support network. Often scholarships are available to parents to help make conference attendance more affordable.



2. Educate yourself. You are already *the* expert on *your* child, but from time to time you may need additional information about your child's disability (or suspected disability) and what treatments, therapies, or educational approaches have worked for other children who have similar challenges. The Iowa Disability Resource Library has a large collection of books and other materials on specific disability conditions and all kinds of related issues. The DRL's resources can be accessed by phone, mail, or internet from anywhere in Iowa.

3. Prepare for the IEP meeting. Even though most educators do their best to give your child's IEP the individual attention it deserves, your IEP meeting may be one of many they participate in and everyone's time is limited. You can take some steps to help the whole team focus effectively on your child's unique needs:

▼ **Organize.** Keep the information you receive about your child: evaluation reports, correspondence, progress reports, IEPs, meeting notices, and notes of phone conversations. Find a method of organizing the documents that makes sense to you—a file drawer, notebooks, binders—whatever method is convenient for you to store, use, and share.

▼ **Define the issues that are important to you.** Chances are that if you try to present too many issues at one meeting, none of them will really get the attention they deserve from the team. Decide on the two or three most important issues to your child and focus on those issues and the reasons why they are vital to your child's education. Be specific and be prepared to explain why you think these issues are so important.

▼ **Gather your evidence and share it.** If you have evaluation reports, test scores or other evidence that will further explain your concerns, ask the team to review it. This evidence can be from your child's educational file, or it can be new information that you are sharing with the team from an outside source—a private therapist, counselor, physician, community service provider, or other person who knows your child well.

▼ **Offer suggestions or solutions when you can.** Because you spend so much time with your child, you may have developed your own methods to address learning or behavioral issues. Sharing those with the IEP team may help them to better understand your child and determine what educa-

tional approaches are likely to be most successful. For example, if you notice that your child has great difficulty remembering things he or she reads, but can easily remember long stories someone has told, that is useful information in planning classroom teaching strategies.

4. Participate actively. Even though it may sometimes feel like it's "us" (parents) and "them" (educators), *you are all part of a team* in developing your child's IEP:

▼ **Listen and learn.** Be open to ideas from the other members of the team. Be courteous of different view points, and respectful of the expertise the educators bring to the table—in turn, they are much more likely to be respectful of your expertise as a parent of a child with special needs.

▼ **Keep focused.** It can be very easy to get caught up in what happened last year, in the first grade, or even last week. But those issues are only important if they have a direct impact on the planning you are doing now for your child's next IEP. *Don't be distracted by "old wounds" or unrelated issues.* You have your work cut out for you drafting good, effective and measurable IEP goals for your child without devoting time and energy to issues that don't affect the next steps in your child's educational progress.

▼ **Don't personalize.** Personality differences exist and sometimes when they exist within an IEP team, the team's work is especially challenging, but all team members, including parents, need to remain "professional" in their working relationships. If the meeting does become emotionally difficult, ask to take a 5 or 10 minute break so everyone can come back to the table ready to focus on the task at hand. Even if there is someone on the team that "pushes your buttons," do your best to develop a workable relationship for the sake of the process.

5. Ask questions. If you don't understand something that is said, or if you haven't been given all the information you need, ask about it. Educators, like other groups of professionals tend to speak in their own jargon and may use shorthand references that sound like alphabet soup. Don't assume that they intend to leave you in the dark when they use abbreviations, just ask them to explain terms that are not familiar to you.

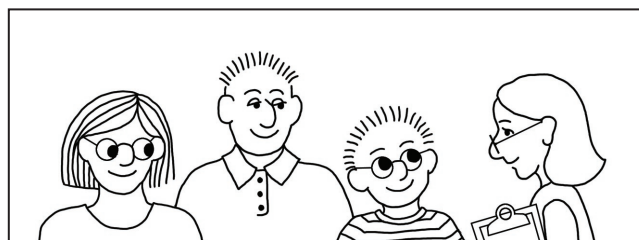
6. Request what you want clearly. Our experience as advocates has shown us that most special education disputes arise out of ineffective or incomplete communication. Even if you believe you have made your requests for your child's IEP obvious, other members of the team may not always recognize as clearly that you are expecting them to either accept or reject a specific proposal. If in doubt, ask again. If you still don't get the response you need, go home and follow up in writing. A written request is often the most effective way to make things happen. Be specific. Let the rest of the team that you are making a request and that you expect it to be included in the IEP if they agree, or you expect to receive your written notice of refusal if they do not agree.

7. Pake notes. Many parents find it helpful to take notes at the IEP meeting so they can review them later. If you find it is too difficult to participate and take notes at the same time, it is perfectly acceptable to ask someone to accompany you to the meeting to take notes. As a matter of courtesy, always inform the school if you intend to bring someone else to the meeting. Parents often ask if they can tape record meetings. The short answer is, yes, you can. Although, a better question is, *should* you record a meeting? That depends on your reasons. It has been our experience that the presence of a tape recorder at an IEP meeting tends to make people overly conscious about what they say and often distracts from the work that needs to be done. If you need a tape recorded record because you have trouble remembering or can't take useful notes, make it clear to the other members of the IEP team that you would like to record the discussion just for that use. If you think

you may be able to "catch" someone saying something you don't like and "use it against them", you are better off leaving the tape recorder at home.

8. Negotiate. As a parent you want the best for your child, and it is often emotionally difficult to accept anything less, but to be an effective IEP partner, you must be able to consider compromise and do some give and take negotiating for what your child needs. Whether we like it or not, the reality is that school districts have limited resources—limited time, limited staff, and limited money.

The IDEA promises children with disabilities a "free appropriate public education." Over the years our courts have interpreted that to mean that children must get more than a "minimal" benefit, but not necessarily a "maximum" benefit from their public education. We often use the examples of a serviceable Chevy and a top-of-the-line Cadillac (or maybe Lexus). What most parents want for their child is a "Cadillac" education, fully loaded, with all the extras, but what the school owes to your child under the law is a sound, serviceable, and road-worthy "Chevy." The difference between the Cadillac and the Chevy makes conflict very natural, so as a parent you need to learn to negotiate. Work hard to get all the services and supports that you think are *vital* to your child's success in school and life, but be willing to let go of some of the relatively minor "extras" you would like to have the school provide.



9. Engage your child in the discussion. Talk to your son or daughter about school—the things they like and don't like—the things that are easy or hard—and think about how their feelings impact

the IEP. Depending on your child's age and abilities, you may want to have them participate in the meeting, or a part of it, and discuss the goals that they are going to be working on during the school year. Students often are the first to know what works for them and what doesn't, and can be very helpful in identifying the services and supports they need. *Children do well when they can*—it is the job of the IEP team to identify the barriers to your child's success and create a roadmap that will help your child reach his or her goals.

10. Recognize success. Don't get so caught up in the fight that you fail to notice when you win. If you start viewing your relationship with the school as a constant battle, you may not be able to recognize the things that are going well for your child and the things the school and AEA have done to make that happen. Let the other members of the IEP team know that you appreciate their efforts. It is their job to educate your child, but even so, everyone likes to have their hard work acknowledged. Educators have a responsibility to do the best they can for your child and all the other children they serve, but they often get the feeling that no matter how much they do it will never be enough for the parents. They are probably right about that—as a parent you will always want more and better opportunities for your child. Just remember to say "Thank You" for the Chevy that starts and runs faithfully every day, even if you still have your eye on the bright, shiny Cadillac in the showroom.

For more information contact:

ASK Resource Center

The Parent Training and
Information Center of Iowa

321 East Sixth Street, Des Moines, IA 50309-1903

Phone: 515-243-1713; Toll free: 800-450-8667

Fax: 515-243-1902; Email: info@askresource.org



*PTI Iowa is a federally funded project
of the US Department of Education*

Available for easy download!

Becoming an Effective IEP Partner:

10 Practical Tips for Parents

and

IEP for IEPs:

***Information Especially for Parents on
Individualized Education Programs***

<http://www.uihealthcare.com/cdd>

Just click on **WHAT'S NEW**
and you'll find PDFs of both articles.