

The Legal Center for People
with Disabilities and Older People



Colorado's Protection & Advocacy System

Ten Tips to Parents to Improve Participation in IEP Meetings

By
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It was a beautiful but busy Monday morning. The brisk air signaled autumn's approach as Brenda hustled to get her two boys off to school. It was the second week of school and she and the boys still had that mixed feeling of anxious anticipation that came with a new school year. She opened Jeremy's back pack to put in his sack lunch and found a note informing her that his IEP meeting was scheduled for the following Friday afternoon. Her mood immediately changed as anxiety overcame anticipation and turned to dread. Jeremy, her beautiful 8-year-old, had a learning disability and obsessive compulsive disorder. He needed special education. She was pleased that the school district provided special services, but dreaded the meetings needed to design his program.

Brenda knew that the school professionals wanted to do the right thing for Jeremy, but she was never sure what that was. She worried that the school district's limited resources affected the school staff's recommendations. She knew she could ask questions in the IEP meeting, but it was hard to do. As a parent she felt alone, finding it hard to speak up, and difficult to disagree with these trained professionals. They didn't always seem open to her questions and ideas. Once, as the school psychologist left the meeting early, she said sarcastically she hoped he wouldn't be late for his golf game. That comment hadn't improved the tone of an already tense meeting. As she looked at the IEP invitation, she wondered if her husband was even available next Friday.

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Parents of children with disabilities face similar dilemmas all the time. Here are 10 tips to make it easier.

Ten Tips for Improving Parent Participation in an IEP Meeting

1. Prepare and plan for your meeting. Look at the current IEP. Think about what is working well and what isn't. Review recent evaluations and assessment information that you have. Do you have copies of the most recent assessment information done by the school district? If not, ask for it. Make a list of questions you want to ask at the IEP meeting and points you would like to make.
2. Do you have someone who can help you plan for the meeting and attend the meeting with you? If possible both parents should attend an IEP meeting, but it is also very helpful to take someone else as an advocate or support person. It is hard to advocate for yourself. Having someone to brainstorm with you ahead of time, take notes in the meeting, and ask questions can reduce your anxiety and help you participate more effectively.
3. Look at the notice inviting you to the IEP meeting. The notice should tell you who the school district intends to have at the IEP meeting. Are there additional individuals that you would like to attend the meeting? You have the right as a parent to invite other individuals who have knowledge or expertise about your child's special needs. For example, perhaps your child receives speech therapy or other therapies from a provider in private practice. Would you like that professional to attend the meeting to make recommendations to the other members of the IEP team?
4. Are you and the others you would like to attend the IEP meeting available at the time scheduled? You have the right to have the meeting arranged at a reasonably mutually convenient time. If the meeting is not scheduled at a time that works for you, you should contact the appropriate school staff to reschedule.
5. While at the meeting make sure you ask all of your questions and get your questions answered. Educational professionals often speak in their own language. If you don't understand something that is said, don't hesitate to ask

that it be restated in more understandable terms. It is part of an educator's job to communicate effectively to parents and others. It is important that all team members understand what is being recommended in the meeting.

6. Communicate what you would like to see in the IEP. As the parent you are a member of the IEP team and as the parent you have important information about your child's strengths and needs that should be shared with the other members of the IEP team. While wanting to provide appropriate services, school staff can sometimes forget whose child it is. You are not just the parent. You have an important perspective to share and you do not have to just agree with what other members of the team recommend.
7. Make sure the meeting focuses on developing a program to meet the unique needs of your child. Special education is specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability. If the needs of other students or the administrative needs of the school staff creep into the discussion the meeting

can get off track and result in a poor plan. These other needs may be important but should not influence your child's IEP. The IEP should be designed to meet the unique needs of your student with a disability.

8. Make sure issues are discussed sufficiently and the meeting does not end without completing the task. Sometimes it takes longer to complete the IEP than the time the school has allotted. For example, the IEP meeting is scheduled from 3:00 to 5:00 and the discussion becomes rushed as five o'clock approaches. Or, sometimes the meeting runs long and individuals cannot stay for the entire time. There is nothing wrong with scheduling another meeting to complete the IEP when all the needed team members can be available.
9. Keep your cool. Try not to take comments about your child personally or encounter disagreement with anger. That can be difficult. You may be justified in your anger, but the views of parents who become too angry can sometimes be discounted. So, try to keep your anger in check and keep cool.

10. Finally, review the IEP document to make sure that everything agreed to in the meeting is written into the document.

About the Author

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