

Best Practices!

Activity-Based Goals = Success!

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

Check out these goals:

1. Kathie will write her articles correctly, using appropriate grammar, syntax, and spelling, three out of four times, with 85 percent accuracy.
2. Kathie will demonstrate author-level language proficiency according to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.
3. Kathie will maintain correct body posture and finger use while typing, per accepted therapeutic standards.
4. Kathie will improve her behavior.

If the writing style of these goals is familiar to you—or if you’re scratching your head, wondering, “Huh?”—it’s time to adopt activity-based goals when writing IEPs (Individualized Education Programs) for students with disabilities!

Before describing a new and better way of writing goals, let’s review some pertinent issues about the way many IEPs are written. (Note: this article focuses on goals for children with disabilities who are in the general ed environment. The following ideas can be modified for use in segregated resource rooms, but keep in mind that students in those settings are usually not being taught the general ed curriculum.)

Goals written like the ones in the beginning of this article are essentially gobbledy-gook to everyone except the person who wrote them! How can we expect a classroom teacher to interpret “special ed” lingo or other professional jargon? In addition, many goals focus on isolated skills or remediation. How are these relevant to the general ed curriculum?

The “three out of four times, with 85 percent accuracy” method of measuring achievement is

artificial. Children who *don’t* have disabilities are not measured this way! This is a “medical model” (“fix the problem”) type of measurement. It might work in a therapy session, but it’s a dangerous, subjective, open-to-anyone’s-interpretation method in a classroom!

What about goals written in such a way that there’s no way to accurately measure them, like, “Kathie will improve her behavior”? What does this mean? Improve how? In what setting? By whose subjective opinion?

An *effective* IEP is a *living document*, not a sheaf of senseless gibberish that is filed away as soon as the IEP meeting is over. *Meaningful* goals are written in plain English, and describe *real-life activities* which a child can master (instead of isolated behaviors or skills). If your next door neighbor—or someone else who knows nothing about special education—can read and understand the goals and objectives, they’ve been written well. And goals and objectives written in common language are far more likely to be implemented than goals written in professional lingo.

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Think of IEP goals as a set of instructions for a substitute teacher. If, for example, the classroom teacher is absent one day and she didn’t have the opportunity to meet with the substitute, could the sub pick up your child’s IEP goals from the teacher’s desk first thing in the morning, read them quickly, and know what to do? If so, the IEP goals are useful and meaningful. And one way to ensure this outcome is by writing activity-based goals.

The following recommendations (used with permission) from The Schools Project of the Specialized Training Program at the University of Oregon, detail valuable ideas for writing effective activity-based goals:

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2 - Activity-Based Goals = Success

The purpose of writing an IEP goal is to describe a complete picture of competence by identifying the activity-based outcome that you intend the student to achieve by the end of the school year. First, an effective IEP goal describes something a student will do as an outcome of instruction (i.e., by the end of the school year) that is typical of others the student's age. Second, it describes the parameters under which the student will do the activity (i.e., where, when, how often, or with whom?). Goals describe answers to the following three questions:

1. How will the student's competence change as a result of instruction?
2. When, where, or with whom will the student do the activity?
3. What kind of help or support will the student need?

The goal is "good" if it includes the following critical features:

- The goal is an activity.
- The goal says what the student will do.
- The goal describes the natural conditions under which the student will do the activity.

A goal is not an activity if it designates performance of isolated skills or behaviors, such as "Sue will read at a 3.5 grade level," or "Bill will learn the value of coins."

A goal does not describe a student's competence if it describes staff behavior rather than student behavior, such as: "Monica will maintain adequate dental hygiene," or "Dianne will have more opportunities to be integrated."

Following are a few goals I wrote using these guidelines:

- Benjamin will move around his homeroom, go to and from art, music, PE, lunch, and recess in his wheelchair, daily, without assistance from an adult.
- Dylan will make choices about his lunch selection, his free-choice activities in class, and what games to play at recess, using communication cards.
- Emily will read easy-reader books of her choice and will retell the story to her teacher and/or her classmates to demonstrate comprehension.

- Matt will communicate with his classmates and teachers using words instead of gestures when he's angry, upset, or needs help.

The next step is to define the objectives which enable the child to reach a goal. Here are the short term objectives for Benjamin's goal, and these would continue in increments until the goal is met:

1. Benjamin will turn in his assignments by taking them from his desk to his teacher's desk, pushing himself in his wheelchair, measured by teacher and student observation, by October 1st.
2. Benjamin will go with his classmates, from homeroom to art class and back, pushing himself in his wheelchair, measured by teacher and student observation, by November 1st.

Note: per IDEA 2004 reauthorization, short-term objectives are required only for students who take "alternate" statewide assessments. Students who take the "standard" statewide assessment no longer need short term objectives in their IEPs.

Following are specific recommendations for writing effective short term objectives from The Schools Project:

The purpose of writing instructional objectives is to define what the student will learn in order to support the achievement of a particular IEP goal. Remember that an IEP goal describes what the student will do at the end of instruction, while IEP objectives define all the skills which will support the accomplishment of that goal. IEP objectives are derived from the goals, and need to be much more specific than the outcomes sketched by the goals. Instructional objectives need to answer the following three questions:

1. What are the specific conditions under which the student will perform the skill? In other words, how will the student know to perform the skill? When or what will prompt the student in naturally-occurring situations to perform the skill?
2. What are the specific behaviors the student will perform?
3. How will the student's performance be measured in order to know that she has learned the skill?

Short term objectives should satisfy these critical features:

- The objectives are driven by the IEP goal.
- The objectives are observable and measurable and easily understood by everyone.
- The objectives result in ordinary and individually meaningful outcomes.

Double check objectives by asking:

1. Is the objective related to the IEP goal?
2. Is the objective clear, concise, easily understood, and written in everyday language?
3. Do the objectives represent a broad range of skills that can be taught within the context of the activity, rather than simply being a task analysis of the activity goal?
4. Do all of the objectives say clearly what the student, not the teacher, will do?
5. Do the objectives support the student's positive image and involvement with peers who do not have disabilities?

I hope you can easily see the differences between activity-based goals written in plain language and goals written in the traditional fashion! I feel sure my next door neighbor could understand what Benjamin's goal and its objectives meant. So could I, so could his teacher, and most importantly, *so could Benjamin!* Have you ever considered how silly and ineffective it is to write goals which *the child* doesn't understand and/or has no interest in achieving? The child is the most important member of the team, and never more so than when it's time to write goals! They're her goals, not ours! And the goals must be *meaningful and relevant* to the student if they're to be achieved.

One of the greatest benefits of activity-based goals is that "measurement" becomes very easy: is the child doing it or not? The teacher, a parent, and even the child can tell if he's accomplishing the goal/objective!

What will it take to ensure activity-based goals are included in a child's IEP? If you're a parent, draft

new goals and objectives using these techniques with help from your child, then share them with members of the IEP team during one-on-one informal meetings. Next, convene the IEP meeting, and use your draft goals as a beginning. If this year's IEP has already been written, follow this same strategy, and reconvene another IEP meeting.

If you meet with resistance, negotiate! Some educators may declare that goals and objectives must be written a certain way. But the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act does not include any recommendation to write things like, "three out of four times with 80 percent accuracy." If educators say they have to follow the "rules," they're most likely referring to school district and/or state education policy, not IDEA! So if you meet with resistance, negotiate with, "What would it take to try this for three months," or "What if we write half of the goals this new way and see what happens by the end of the first semester?"

If you're an educator, you may be in the position to change school or district policy so that all IEPs include activity-based goals. If that's not possible, you may be able to select one or two children and use their IEPs as "test cases" to prove this method is more effective.

As mentioned earlier, many IEP teams write goals based on the medical model. These reduce children to "patient" status and elevate educators to "physicians/healers." When we move beyond (1) attempting to remediate the disability, (2) focusing on isolated skills, and (3) measuring children against standardized norms, we'll write IEP goals that "enable a child to be involved in and progress in the general curriculum" (per special ed law).

Our efforts can ensure effective teaching for teachers and effective learning for students. In addition, students with disabilities will be included and they'll become the successful children they were born to be!

The child is the most important member of the IEP team!