

*6 **New and Improved*** IEP* Meetings *(and any other kind of “I” meetings!)

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

The words, “IEP meeting,” can strike fear in the hearts of parents and educators alike. Anger, apprehension, dread, and a variety of other emotions may rise to the surface in anticipation of the meeting in which an Individual Education Program is written for a student who receives special education services. But we can change this! And many of the following tips can be used at any type of “I” meeting: IPP, IHP, IOP, IHP, IWRP, INP, ISP, etc. (If you don’t know what all these mean, that’s OK—I made some of them up!)

Have “pre-IEP” meetings. Schedule individual meetings with members of the team prior to the official meeting. Share your thoughts and ideas, brainstorm, and get a feel for the other person’s position. Many details can be ironed out during these “private” one-on-one meetings. Also, you and the team member can get to know one another on a *personal* basis, away from the posturing and game-playing that may occur at planning meetings.

Start with a clean slate. If previous meetings have been contentious, don’t bring grudges to the next meeting. Stay out of the muck; it gets everyone dirty. Go the extra mile, and say something like, “I’m sorry we’ve had difficulties in the past. I want you to know that I’m willing to do whatever it takes to work with you for the benefit of my child and her education.” Parents who have extended this olive branch of peace have reported excellent results! (Educators can also take this initiative and demonstrate their professionalism.)

Be proactive, not reactive! Anticipate issues and problems and be prepared with a number of solutions. If you don’t, the solutions others propose might be worse than the original problem. And don’t “take the bait” or react to others’ emotional outbursts; this will take you off course. Stay focused.

Think win/win, not win/lose! Use strategies that allow everyone to feel they’ve “won.” Compromise whenever possible. Instead of rigidly holding tight to what you “will/will not accept,” adopt the *consensus way* of thinking: “I can/cannot live with that.” Be willing to accept a solution that’s “less than perfect” if it’s something you can “live with.”

Remember, the IEP isn’t written in stone. If things aren’t going the way you think they should, don’t get stuck fighting over one or two issues. Compromise and move on to the next issue, then call for another meeting in a month or so to renegotiate the unresolved issues. You might want the “whole pie,” but remember that one or two pieces of the pie are better than none!

See yourself as a negotiator. Don’t ask questions that can be answered yes or no. Instead, ask: “What will it take to [buy my child a computer]?” (Fill in your own request.) The response you get will include information which will keep the discussion moving forward: “Well, a computer would cost \$1,000, and we don’t have that much money...” You follow with, “I see. So, what will it take to find the \$1,000? Can we look at the district budget, the special ed budget, and the building budget?” Continue in this fashion and new information will be revealed.

Leave your ego at home! When the going gets rough and emotions are high, don’t take things personally. Hold your head high, maintain your composure, and focus on what’s really important: the education (and future) of your child. It’s not about power and control, winning/losing, who’s right or who’s wrong!

Let your child lead the meeting! Not only should your child *attend* the meeting, but he should lead it to the best of his ability. In addition, your child should

**Nothing great
was ever achieved
without enthusiasm.**

Ralph Waldo Emerson

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be involved in the writing of *meaningful and relevant* goals. (Memorize those two words!) Too often, we write *meaningless and irrelevant* goals for students with disabilities. Then, when the child does not achieve those goals, we tend to blame the child instead of looking at what we did or didn't do!

A younger child may not have the patience to attend the entire meeting, so let her attend at least the beginning of the meeting when she can share her hopes and dreams, and the end of the meeting to write the goals. The course of the meeting will radically change for the better when the child is present. Everyone must speak *to* the child, not about her. It's *her* education! Remember whose meeting this really is! Since this is a new way of doing things, if team members talk *about* the child like she's not there, gently remind them to talk *to* her.

Begin the meeting with hopes and dreams. You and your child can lay out the big picture by sharing your dreams: "I want to be an artist when I grow up," and "Our dream for Julia is that she'll go to college, find a great job, get married, and make us grandparents." Send a powerful message of high expectations during the first part of the meeting. These expectations should then drive the child's education. For example, if Julia's dream is to go to college or attend vocational school, she'll need a solid, academic education in general education classrooms—years spent in life-skills or resource rooms won't cut it!

Change the atmosphere to change the outcome. Take an active role in planning the meeting and be creative! Have it in the classroom, the cafeteria, the library, your home, or other neutral territory, instead of the "official" meeting room. Don't sit at a table; it's an artificial barrier you don't need. Pull chairs into a circle and get up close and personal! Meet outside, sit on the grass, and be infused with fresh air and fresh thoughts!

Instead of bringing "professional advocates" to the meeting bring family or friends who know your child well. They'll bring common sense to the meeting, and their expertise and knowledge about your child can have a positive influence. Professional advocates may know the law, but their presence can also inflame an already tense situation. Do whatever it takes to *reduce* tension, not increase it!

Be festive and have refreshments! Food is the great equalizer. Who can be tense when yummy food and drink comfort the senses?

Use your tape recorder to play music! Many parents have been told to "record the meeting", but if *you* were on the receiving end of being recorded, you probably wouldn't react too positively. So don't use your tape recorder to tape others, use it to play some soft background music to put everyone at ease.

Break the tension! If frustrations and disagreements begin to escalate, be creative in breaking the tension. Lead everyone in thirty seconds of deep breathing or ten jumping jacks, stand up for a group hug, or find some other way to break the tension (and generate laughs at the same time)!

IEP and other planning meetings don't have to be awful ordeals! They can and should be positive, thoughtful exchanges which result in an appropriate, meaningful plan for success. Make the next meeting the kind everyone will remember with pleasant memories. The goodwill generated may influence the meetings of others! If your child's IEP for the new school year has already been written and you're not satisfied, call another meeting to renegotiate and use these tips.

Keep these thoughts uppermost in your mind: (1) if you can't change something, change how you feel about it, and (2) to effect change in others, change yourself, first. And always remember, *attitude is everything!*

***Tact is the knack of making a point
without making an enemy.***

Sir Isaac Newton