

what every parent needs to know about Individualized Education Plans



Children's Education Alliance
of Missouri

What every parent needs to know about
INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLANS (IEPs)

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What every parent needs to know about INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLANS (IEPs)

Simply put, an IEP is a written plan that will describe the program(s) and special services the student requires to be successful. It is a plan that ensures that proper programming is in place to help the student with special needs to be successful at school. It is a working document that will be modified usually each term based on the ongoing needs of the student. The IEP is developed collaboratively by school staff and parents as well as medical staff if appropriate. An IEP will focus on social, academic and independence needs (daily living) depending on the area of need. It may have one or all three components addressed. Because the whole premise is that an IEP is a plan for one specific individual, the process cannot be completely standardized. However, outlined in the following pages are many important details that every parent needs to know!

THE BASICS

School teams and parents usually decide who needs an IEP. Usually testing/assessment is done to support the need for an IEP, unless medical conditions are involved. An IEP must be in place for any student who has been identified as having special needs by an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) which is made up of school team members. In some jurisdictions, there are IEPs in place for students who are not working at grade level or have special needs but have not yet gone through the IPRC process. IEPs will vary depending on the educational jurisdiction. However, IEPs will describe specifically the special education program and/or the services necessary for a student with special needs. The IEP will identify the curricular areas that will need to be modified or it will state whether the child requires an alternative curriculum which is often the case for students with severe autism, severe developmental needs or cerebral palsy etc. It will also identify the accommodations and or any special educational services the child may need to reach their full potential. It will contain measurable goals for the student.

WHAT AN IEP CONTAINS

- Overview of the student's strengths and areas of need
- Current level of the student's functioning or achievement
- Annual goals written very specifically for the student
- Overview of the program and services that the student will receive
- Overview of the methods to determine progress and to monitor progress
- Assessment data
- Name, age, exceptionality or medical conditions
- Transitional plans (for older students) *(More on page 3)*

Parents are always involved in the development of the IEP, playing a key role and giving a final signoff on the IEP. Most jurisdictions will require that the IEP be completed within 30 school days after the pupil has been placed in the program, however, it's important to check into special education services in your own jurisdiction to be certain of the specific details. The IEP is a working document and when change is needed, the IEP will be revised. The principal is ultimately responsible to ensure that the IEP is being implemented. Parents are encouraged to work with teachers to ensure their children's needs are being met both at home and at school.

Examples of specific services or support:

- Curriculum a grade or more behind
- Less of the current curriculum
- Braille
- FM systems (for the hearing impaired)
- Print enlargers
- Augmentative communication
- Teacher aid assistance
- Sitting, standing, walking devices
- Assistive technology, such as text-to-speech or speech-to-text
- A specialized laptop with specific software applications or switches
- Strategies, accommodations and any resources needed

Again, the plan is individualized and rarely will any two plans be the same. An IEP is NOT a set of lessons plans or daily plans. The IEP differs from regular classroom instruction and assessment in varying amounts. Some IEPs will state that a specialized placement is required while others will just state the accommodations and modifications that will occur in the regular classroom.

SPECIFIC CONTENTS OF AN IEP most states/counties require:

1. Date the plan will be implemented and date the student's placement was/is effective.
2. A signature from the parent and student (depending on age).
3. Exceptionality of the student or the multiple exceptionalities of the student.
4. Health issues (if applicable).
5. Personalized equipment required for the student to function and any equipment that may be on loan to the student.
6. Any equipment used on a regular basis. *Such as a walker or a feeding chair.*
7. Personnel involved during the time that the IEP is in effect. *Such as the vision resource specialist or the psycho-therapist.*
8. Curricular modifications and or curricular accommodations.
9. Amount of support that the student will receive. *For instance, the student will be in the regular class for physical education, science, social studies, art and music - but for language and math he or she will receive support in the special education classroom for 30% of the day. Or, it may simply state that the special education will provide language support for 20 minutes a day in the morning.*
10. List of the student's strengths and interests, which helps provide motivation when programming for the student; at the same time, it informs anyone working with the student.
11. Standardized assessment results and or scores identified.
12. Academic functioning (with date) and any supporting tests scores used to determine grade level (with description and date conducted). *For instance, if the student is in the 5th grade but is functioning academically at the 2nd grade.*
13. All subject areas requiring modifications or additional support listed.
14. Grade levels should also be included. *If the student is working at grade level in everything except math - this needs to be noted.*
15. Goals, expectations and performance standards clearly identified with specific details.
16. Strategies for how the student will achieve the goals or expectations clearly stated.
17. Evaluation comments added throughout the year. *An IEP is a working document. When something isn't working, it should be noted with suggestions for improvement.*
18. Parents, students (if applicable) and the school should all have a copy of the IEP.

GETTING READY FOR THE IEP MEETING

Prior to the Meeting

The assessments have been done and the needs of your child are relatively well known. You have the background information you need to proceed. You have thought about the goals your child needs. You have also familiarized yourself with smart goals to better understand the contents of the IEP. You have familiarized yourself with the types of instructional assistance and program types that are available for your child. You have fully explored the types of support available including placement and program. If you are seeking a special placement, you have also pre-arranged to visit the placement site to be sure that this will be a good educational fit for your child. You should be informed of who will be attending the IEP meeting, which will enable you to address your concerns to the right people. You may want to make a list of the attendees and keep it in your IEP binder or portfolio. You are also encouraged to bring somebody to represent you if you feel it's necessary and in the best interest of your child. This could be your spouse, close relative, or a professional or attorney working on your child's behalf. In some cases, the child will also attend the IEP meeting.

What to Bring

Be sure to have a binder or an IEP portfolio. This should contain all assessments and/or evaluations on your child. If this isn't your first IEP meeting, you should have previous IEPs. You should have work samples from your child and any letters from the teacher and/or school board. Report cards and test results from previous terms and years will also be helpful. If you have had negative or positive feedback in writing from the teacher, be sure to include it. If your child is reading and or writing, samples of the level of reading and examples of writing will be helpful. Bring medical reports. Depending on how much material you have, it would be wise to organize the material into sections or tabs so that you can easily find everything. Making copies in the event that somebody on the IEP team asks for a copy is always a good idea. There should be no surprises in your IEP binder or portfolio; your team needs to be well informed and any document they may not have should be provided to them prior to the IEP meeting.

THE AGENDA FOR THE IEP MEETING

You may or may not see an agenda ahead of time, but you can expect the following:

- Current level of progress of your child
- Specific goals for your child
- Type of support or instructional/assessment strategies and services required
- Type of placement
- Specific program

Curricula or alternate curricula, teacher strategies, transition plans, special education support people and extracurricular activities will also be discussed.

IDEA requires that the IEP be written with input from you and the educational jurisdiction. However, there will most likely be a draft IEP at the meeting. Remember that this draft should be treated as a working copy for the meeting and not a final version. The meeting will provide you with the time to address, change, and revise any part of the draft IEP. In some cases, you may be sent a copy of the draft IEP ahead of the scheduled IEP meeting.

PLACEMENT OPTIONS

Each student has unique needs that must be recognized and planned for in the academic program so that each student will be able to function as effectively as possible in the school environment. This is where the IEP comes into play. Placement of students may vary depending upon their needs and exceptionalities.

- Regular classroom with program modifications
- Regular classroom with program modifications and additional support from the special education teacher
- Regular classroom for a part of the day and a special education classroom for the remainder of the day
- Special education classroom with a variety of direct and indirect support from special education teachers and consultative support staff
- Treatment program or residential program with complete and ongoing support from a variety of staff.

THE PROCESS

Before setting goals the team must first determine the level of performance using various **assessment** tools; the needs must be clearly and specifically defined. When determining IEP goals consider the student's classroom placement. Is the student in the least-hindering environment? Do the goals coordinate with the regular classroom activities and schedules, and do they follow the general curriculum?

After the **goals** have been identified, the team states how it will help the student to achieve the goals. This is referred to as the measurable part of the goals. Each goal must have a clearly stated objective of how, where and when each task will be implemented. Define and list any adaptations, aides or supportive techniques that may be required to encourage success. Clearly explain how progress will be monitored and measured. Be specific about time frames for each objective. Expect goals to be achieved at the end of an academic year. Objectives are skills required to achieve the desired goal; objectives should be accomplished in shorter intervals.

Team Members include parents of the student, special education teacher, classroom teacher, support workers and outside agencies involved with the individual, with each playing a vital role in the development of a successful IEP.

Education Program Plans can become overwhelming and unrealistic. A good rule of thumb is to set one goal for each academic strand. This provides the teams manageability and accountability to ensure that resources are available to help the student achieve the desired goals.

If the student IEP meets all of the student needs and is focused on skills for success, results and outcomes, the student with special needs will have every opportunity for academic achievement no matter how challenging his or her needs may be.

The IEP is a long-range (yearly) planning document that is used in conjunction with the classroom **teacher's daily and short-range plans**. The actual programming details will be contained in the teacher's daily and short-range plans.

WHAT DOES IDEA SAY ABOUT IEP MEETINGS?

- The IEP meeting must be held at a location and a time that is convenient to all individuals attending. You are entitled provide input. The educational jurisdiction cannot unilaterally establish the time and place without your input.
- IEP meetings must be held once per year.
- The IEP meeting must be long enough to address all concerns. If you feel the length of time of the scheduled meeting may not fit your needs, discuss this with the principal of your school and state your reasons why.
- If this is not the first meeting and you are in agreement with the child's IEP, you can forgo the meeting and agree to the IEP.

RECENT SUPREME COURT DECISION

A recent United States Supreme Court decision is a groundbreaking win for parents in Missouri and across the country with Individual Education Plans. The court's ruling in *Forest Grove School District v T.A.* (the initials of the student) held that parents of students with disabilities had the right to reimbursements for private school tuition from public school districts, even when a child has never received special education services from a public school.

Undoubtedly, the floodgates will open for families who, for years, have battled with their school districts for their special needs children to receive a free, appropriate public education as prescribed by law. The challenge, and duty, of everyone in the education reform movement is to make parents of special needs children aware of this Supreme Court decision. We can no longer allow these children to be trapped in failing and inadequate school districts.

TIPS FOR ESTABLISHING GOALS

Writing good goals that meet the specific child's need are critical to the process. A large number of educational jurisdictions tend to use SMART goals, which stand for:

Specific
Measurable
Achievable (yet challenging)
Relevant
Time appropriate

A well-written goal will describe what the child will do, when and how he'll do it and what the time frame will be for achieving it.

- **Be very specific about the action.** *For instance: raise his/her hand for attention, use a classroom voice, read the pre-primer Dolch Words, complete homework, keep hands to him/herself*
- **Provide a time frame or location/context for the goal.** *For instance: during silent reading time, while in the gym, at recess time, by the end of 2nd term.*
- **Decide what determines the success of the goal.** *For instance: how many consecutive periods will the child remain on task? How many gym periods? How fluent will the child read the words - without hesitation and prompting? What percentage of accuracy? How often?*

What to Avoid when Establishing Goals

A vague, broad or general goal is unacceptable in the IEP. Goals that state *will improve reading ability, will improve his/her behavior, will do better in math* should be stated much more specifically with reading levels or benchmarks or frequency or level of improvement to attain and a time frame for when the improvement will occur. Using "*will improve his/her behavior*" is also not specific. Although you may want behavior improved, which specific behaviors are targeted first along with when and how is a critical part of the goal.

If you can remember the meaning behind the acronym SMART, you will be prompted to write better goals that will lead to student improvement. It's also a good practice to include the child in setting goals if appropriate. This will ensure that the student takes ownership over reaching his/her goals. Make sure you review goals regularly. Goals will need to be reviewed to ensure that the goal is achievable. Setting a goal too high is almost as bad as not having a goal at all.

GOALS TO IMPROVE BEHAVIOR

An IEP must be developed for any student who has been identified “exceptional.” Children who have been identified with exceptionality in behavior also require a plan specific to their behavioral needs. The plan must describe realistic and observable goals that are based on the child's strengths and needs.

If you are writing a plan to ensure that your student behavior will be successful, you will want to make sure that your goals are based on the student's past performance and that they are stated positively. Behavior goals must be relevant to the student's needs. Start slowly, choosing only a couple of behaviors at a time to change. Be sure to involve the student. This enables him to take responsibility and be accountable for his/her own behavior modifications. Be sure to provide some type of form to enable the student to track and or graph his/her successes.

Sample Statements:

- _____ will be accountable for inappropriate actions.
- _____ will complete tasks in the allotted time.
- _____ will be on time for each class.
- _____ will start tasks when asked.
- _____ will make appropriate decisions during recess and at lunch hour.
- _____ will complete and hand in assignments when asked.
- _____ will raise his/her hand before speaking.
- _____ will follow routines, instructions and directions promptly.
- _____ will use acceptable problem solving skills.
- _____ will interact with peers in a positive manner.
- _____ will demonstrate respect for others and the property of others.
- _____ will make positive contributions when called upon.
- _____ will act in a cooperative manner.
- _____ will follow routines. (List the specific routines and or rules)
- _____ will exhibit anger management.
- _____ will employ good decision making skills.
- _____ will work independently during
- _____ will work quietly without distracting others.

- _____ will use self control when confronted with a variety of situations. (Be specific)
- _____ will remain on task.
- _____ will work legibly and produce quality assignments and tasks.
- _____ will use the acceptable voice tones as instructed by the teacher.
- _____ will use appropriate language at all times and will display self control.

Remember to write goals positively, avoid using terms like _____ will not _____. Write goals that can be measured, be specific as to the duration or the circumstance under which the goal will be implemented and use specific time slots when possible. Remember, once the behavior plan is written, it is imperative that the student is taught the goals and fully understands what the expectations are. Provide him/her with tracking devices. Students need to be accountable for their own behavior changes.

GOALS TO IMPROVE COMPREHENSION OF WRITTEN MATERIAL

- Provide engaging and motivating materials to retain the student's interest. Be specific by naming the series, resources or books to be used.
- Highlight and underline key words and ideas and ensure the student refers to them.
- Teach the student about sentence and paragraph construction and how to focus on key points. Again, be very specific so that the goal is measurable.
- Provide information and clarification about how a text or resource is organized. The child should know the features of a text including the cover, the index, subtitles, bold titles, balloon texts, etc.
- Provide ample opportunities for the child to discuss written information.
- Develop re-telling skills with lots of monitoring and focus on the beginning, middle and ending key points.
- Develop research skills and strategies.
- Provide opportunities for group learning, especially to respond to written information.
- Show how pictorial and context clues are used.
- Encourage the student to ask for clarification if he/she became confused.
- Provide one-to-one support frequently.

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GOALS TO DEVELOP AND ENHANCE SELF-ESTEEM

- Academic expectations will be reduced to ensure success. Be very specific about the exact curricular expectations that will be omitted or modified. Recognize and reward quality performance.
- Student strengths will be highlighted by recording and sharing evidence of growth.
- Honest and appropriate feedback will occur on a regular basis.
- Opportunities for the student to demonstrate strengths will be maximized as often as possible. This could include oral presentations and opportunities for the child to share his responses as long as the child is ready and be successful.
- The student will be encouraged to become involved in extracurricular activities that support his/her interests and strengths.
- The student will use a form of personal expression which will include teacher response/feedback through a journal, one-to-one, or computer entries.

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GOALS TO FOCUS AND SUSTAIN ATTENTION IN INSTRUCTIONAL SETTING

- Ensure that the student is close to the source of information.
- Keep distractions to a minimum and demonstrate or model strategies to cope with classroom distractions. (This may involve some role-playing.)
- Establish a cue or prompt to ensure you have the student's attention prior to starting. (This could be a touch on the shoulder, saying the student's name, etc.)
- The student will repeat directions or instructions on a regular basis.
- One-to-one instructions will happen as necessary.
- The student will use organizers for lessons - main points, subheadings, materials needed, etc.
- Peer facilitation will be used.
- Established consequences will be in place for the lack of attention given during instructional times.
- When the student is not focusing - he/she will enter a note in his/her behavior journal stating the inappropriate behavior.

Write goals that can be measured. Be specific as to the duration or the circumstance under which the goal will be implemented and use specific time slots when possible. Remember, once the IEP is written, it is imperative that the student is taught the goals and fully understands what the expectations are. Provide him/her with tracking devices. Students need to be accountable for their own changes.

TIPS FOR ESTABLISHING ACCOMMODATIONS (aimed at teachers)

Individualized accommodations are put into place to help learners at risk and students with special needs to have success in their IEP or academic program. Typically, accommodations are listed in the student's IEP.

- Try ability grouping. Have a few peers who can support the student experiencing weaknesses.
- Provide photocopied notes to avoid having these students copying from the board or chart paper.
- Make use of graphic organizers.
- Provide organization tips and let parents know about the organization tips they can use to support these students at home.
- Declutter! If your classroom is cluttered, this can be very distracting for students with needs. Declutter and help students to declutter.
- Provide time management tips and skills. Sometimes it helps to have sticky notes on the student's desk to remind the student of how much time he or she has complete tasks.
- Tracking sheets. Provide a tracking sheet of expected assignments for the week/day.
- Keep lessons concrete. Use visual and concrete materials as much as possible.
- Use assistive technology when available.
- Provide a buddy and let the buddy know that their role is supportive.
- Keep instructions and directions grouped. Provide one step at a time, don't overload the student on too many pieces of information at once.
- Color code items. For instance, put some red tape on a math textbook along with red tape on the math notebook. Color code items that help the child with organization tips and that provide information about what is needed.
- Make sure there are visual clues around the room to help.
- Provide extra time for the processing of information.
- Larger size font is sometimes helpful.

- Provide auditory supports to avoid the student from having too much text to read.
- Give repetition and clarification regularly.
- Provide close proximity to the teacher.
- Seat the child away from distractions whenever possible. Think critically about seating arrangements.
- Provide reminders on the desk - taped 100s charts, number lines, vocabulary lists, word bank lists, taped alphabets for printing or writing, etc.
- Provide a study carrel or alternate place to work for specific tasks.
- Provide scribing or a peer for scribing when necessary, or utilize the speech-to-text software applications.
- Give ongoing feedback.
- Pay close attention to lighting. Sometimes preferential lighting can make a world of difference.
- Provide a “chillax” area, a quiet location to enable the student to 'chill out or relax'.
- Provide headphones to remove extraneous noises.
- Let the child provide oral responses instead of written where appropriate to demonstrate understanding of concept.
- Provide time extensions as necessary.

Be selective when determining the accommodations that will best help the student. If the accommodations don't work after a specified period of time, try something else. Remember, the IEP is a working document and its success will depend on how closely the contents are implemented, monitored and revised to meet the student's needs.

7 STEPS TO BEING YOUR CHILD'S BEST ADOVCATE

1. Positive Parent-Teacher Relationships

Positive interactions between parents and teachers are best for your child. Both parties need to ensure the child comes first and that the goals for the child are key and shared. Share your views, offer advice and become a good working team. Make shared decisions about the child's goals. Touch base often, share concerns in a friendly manner always anticipating outcomes. Learn how to have effective conferences.

2. Be Well Informed About Your Child's Needs

Learn as much as you possibly can about your child's needs. Find out what the best practices are and how your child's needs are best met in the school setting. Ask good questions! Find out which organizations and professionals are most appropriate for the needs of your child and learn as much as you can. Learn about the issues and controversies and be practical. Sometimes our expectations can be high, but they also need to be practical and manageable.

3. Be a Note Taker

Keep good records. Keep a journal of all correspondence you have with the school staff, organizations, support services, phone calls, etc. A record of all verbal and written dialogue will help you to become an expert on your child's program and needs. It will provide you with review type information and can be used to persuade school staff to follow through with verbal commitments and take you seriously because you are on top of things!

4. Know What Records the School Is Keeping

Always ask for copies of records or information that is kept in the student's file at school. Make sure you have all letters, documentation, program plans, conference notes and anything else pertinent to your child's education. Make this a part of your record keeping.

5. Ask Questions

Be candid. If you don't understand terms being used, ask for clarification. Make sure you completely understand the process, procedures, planning and interventions being discussed on

behalf of your child. Getting the answers to the questions you may have will avoid any sense of frustration.

6. Include Your Child

The whole process is about your child. Talk to your child. Your child's point of view is very important. He or she should not be left out of the loop. Your child's feelings are extremely important.

7. Remain Positive and Think Positively

Sometimes this is the most difficult step. How do you get positive outcomes? Certainly, it isn't by becoming aggressive. Build a productive working team by remaining positive. It's your best method to getting those positive outcomes. You can be assertive, but know the difference between aggression and assertion. It will help to build a two-way, trusting relationship. Remember: Anger, hostility, aggression and frustration will not be productive in ensuring the best program is in place for your child. Two-way trusting relationships will maximize your child's benefits.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

Remember that the IEP meeting is really an informal meeting established to support the best interest of your child. Reduce your anxiety about attending the meeting by being well prepared and having a supportive individual attend with you. You do have the right to tape record the meeting as proof of what was said. If you decide to tape the meeting, let the school know in advance and keep the tape recording as a part of your IEP binder/portfolio.

If you have everything in place as mentioned above, you should be more than ready to attend the IEP meeting.

FINAL TIPS

- Include any curricular modifications. If the curriculum states that the goal is to count to 50 and you state count to 10, this is a modification.
- Include any curricular accommodations. This will include things like scribing, a quiet setting to take tests, assistive technology, etc.
- Provide any support staff that will be involved in the IEP
- Indicate materials and or resources to be used
- Most importantly, make sure the IEP is based on priorities for the student.

REFERENCES

"The Complete IEP Guide - How to Advocate for Your Special Ed Child" (5th edition)

- By Lawrence M. Siegel.

"From Emotions to Advocacy" (2nd edition)

- By Pam and Pete Wright.