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IEP Preparation

Preparation Before the IEP Meeting

Several steps must be taken before a student can be considered for receiving special education and, if appropriate, related services (for example, occupational therapy or in-school counseling). Before organizing and planning an IEP meeting, make sure all the actions on the following checklist have been taken:

- Educators work with parents (and the student when appropriate) to try, and then evaluate, intervention methods geared to the concerns that led to the referral.
- Decide whether the student should be formally evaluated. Written consent from parents is required.
- Evaluate the student through a variety of assessments, observations, and information gathering, targeting all areas related to the suspected exceptionality.
- Have the **multidisciplinary team** (MDT, the team that performs the comprehensive assessment on a student with a suspected disability) examine the data and determine whether the student meets the criteria to be considered eligible for special education and, if appropriate, related services. Record determination results.

- Have the MDT determine whether the student has a **specific learning disability**. Record data and findings.
- Inform school and other personnel of the need for a meeting and schedule it for a time when every person needed is available. (Arrangements may need to be made to cover a class or relieve someone from a duty in order to attend.) Schedule the meeting to review the evaluation and determine the student's eligibility for services.
- Send a written notice to parents informing them of, and inviting them to, the meeting.
- Allow sufficient time for invitees to respond and have an opportunity to request another time in order to accommodate the parents' and educators' schedules.

Setting Up the IEP Meeting

Once all the legwork is done and the multidisciplinary team has determined that an IEP meeting is the next appropriate step for a student, the first consideration is to ensure that all the people who will make up the IEP team are aware of and have plenty of notice to make arrangements to be present. It is critical to plan carefully when and where the meeting should be held, whether it will be a continuation of the eligibility meeting or held separately a short time later. (The IEP meeting should be held within 30 days of the determination of eligibility.)

Parent participation at an IEP meeting is very important. Federal and state regulations require that efforts be made to afford parents the opportunity to participate. Many parents work, and thus, it is important to check with the parent whenever possible before considering the schedule of the IEP meeting to be definite. Being sensitive to parent needs and time limitations can foster the quality of parent participation. It is a good practice to give at least 10 days' notice of a meeting, although there are times when that may not be possible.

The school is often the best place to hold the IEP meeting. The staff should, nevertheless, be prepared with an alternative meeting place if the school site is not appropriate. In rural areas where parents may live long distances from the school, it might be necessary to consider other options, such as conference calls. In such cases, it is very important to ensure parents have full access to any material to which other members of the IEP team may refer during the meeting.

Giving Notice

A phone conversation can meet the requirements of state regulations. Notice must be provided with the same care as meetings in which IDEA's definition of notice or hand delivery is required.

Schedule the meeting at a time convenient to the parents and the school.

The parents must be invited to the meeting. The location of the meeting should be the location of the meeting who will be attending. Make sure that they may invite someone who have knowledge about their child. If a translator or interpreter is needed, arrange for one.

When the student is older, or when transition planning will be discussed, the student *must* be invited to the meeting. At that time, it is necessary to give written invitation to the parents. Not all students are able to attend meetings, it is desirable to be part of his or her life.

Checklist Process for Parents of the Child

The essential work of the IEP team is to develop the IEP when appropriate. The IEP team should so parents can plan for the future. 10 days is suggested.

The notification process is as follows:

- The name of the student
- The name and address of the coordinator of the IEP team can be left

Giving Notice of an IEP Meeting

A phone conversation with a parent or a verbal invitation does not meet the requirement to notify parents of an IEP meeting. Federal and state regulations require that the parents of a student with a disability be provided with advance written notice of IEP meetings and any other meetings in which the parent has a right to participate in order to meet IDEA's definition of informed consent. If necessary, use certified mail or hand delivery to ensure that parents receive the notice.

Schedule the meeting at a time and place agreeable to the parents and the school.

The parents must also be afforded the opportunity to reschedule the meeting. The notice must tell the parents the purpose, time, and location of the meeting, inform them of who will be attending, and let them know that they may invite people to the meeting who have knowledge or special expertise about their child. They may also request a translator or interpreter, if needed.

When the student is 14 years old or older, or when transition services or planning will be discussed, the student also *must* be invited to his or her IEP meeting. At that time, it is necessary to provide a written invitation to the student also. While not all students are required to attend IEP meetings, it is desirable to invite the student to be part of his or her IEP team.

Note: There may be rare emergency situations in which an IEP meeting is needed and time does not permit a formal written notice. In such instances, documentation that notice was given via phone or face-to-face conversation with notes showing the notice requirements were met can replace the regular notification form or letter. Even in these circumstances, however, the notice must be given to the parents early enough to allow them an opportunity to attend or to reschedule the meeting if they are unable to attend.

Checklist Procedures for Notifying Parents of the IEP Meeting

The essential written notification of an IEP meeting (and students when appropriate) should be completed and delivered early enough so parents can plan to attend or request a change (a minimum of 10 days is suggested).

The notification letter should include the following:

- The name of each person expected to be attending the meeting
- The name and telephone number where the contact person (IEP coordinator or lead teacher) can be reached or where a message can be left

well in advance of the annual review date to ensure that all IEPs are current.

Helping Students Prepare

Though the basic purpose of the IEP is the same for students of all ages, the law includes additional requirements and provisions for students age 14 and over. These students face transition into activities after leaving school, and their IEPs reflect the need for identifying realistic goals and developing skills to reach them. An important component of this process is the input of the student. Though the regulations require that students 14 and over be included in their IEP meetings, students of all ages would benefit from participating in the process, insofar as appropriate.

Self-advocacy is a learned skill for all students and a challenge for many. For individuals with exceptionalities, it is even more critical to be able to communicate their needs and interact with others in a way that can be understood and respected. Participating in the IEP process, at any age, gives the student a meaningful opportunity to begin to develop self-advocacy skills and the confidence to use them.

Even young students have a lot to say about themselves—their strengths, their needs, their interests and preferences, and what they would like to do in the future. A student's presence at IEP meetings reminds other team members that IEPs are opportunities for communication that focus on the student's abilities and interests. Students have much to gain from being involved in the IEP process.

The development of an IEP can be a positive learning experience when professionals and parents have a mutual respect for each other and value input from all team members. Preparing students for the meeting will help them feel comfortable enough to speak up regardless of who is present. Through participation, students are accepting responsibility, making informed decisions, communicating with adults, understanding their exceptionality, and making connections between current programs and future results.

Below is a list of activities that can be done by educators and parents to help a student prepare for his or her IEP meeting:

- Spend time allowing the student to think about what he or she wants from education.
- Fully explain the purpose of the IEP meeting and who will be present.

- Review the parts of the IEP and what each one means.
- Share information that others will have, such as the past IEP, and be sure the student understands what it says.
- Share with the student the kinds of conversations that might occur at the IEP meeting.

Characteristics of an Effective IEP Team Meeting

An effective meeting is characterized by clear goals, members feeling involved, voices being heard, opinions respected, concerns addressed, and a sense of accomplishment. The most important component of a meeting is the people in it. In an effective meeting, the group has an opportunity to give input and express views but remain positive and focused on the intended purpose and outcome. The facilitator takes the role of conductor at the meeting. Just like an orchestra conductor, he or she predetermines the program and directs the participants. The composing of a symphony takes effort, but the results are music, not spontaneous noise. Developing a quality IEP may take more than one meeting. Noise is spontaneous—it takes effort and planning ahead to create music!

There are things the facilitator can do to create an atmosphere that is conducive to harmonious interaction and keeps up a steady pace. Following are a few suggestions:

- Take time at the beginning of the meeting to get to know the participants. Through an informal (and unpressured) conversation, the facilitator may be able to get a sense of everyone's attitudes and concerns ahead of time and make them more comfortable.
- Gather extra resources that may be useful to explain or support educational findings or decisions, such as books, research, or other materials. The facilitator may ask specialists to help locate resources. Have these on hand for the meeting, if needed.
- Prepare a written agenda with time blocks in mind. For example, consider about how long it might take (with time for comments and questions) to go through each item on the IEP form. Allow a little extra time for unanticipated events. Keeping in mind that a meeting of this nature should not run more than 1.5 to 2 hours, the facilitator can then decide whether the objectives can be accomplished in one meeting, or whether two would be more reasonable.

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- Check to be sure that the proposed meeting location has needed access and adequate space for each person expected at the meeting. The facilitator should ensure that participants are arranged so that no one is crowded or obscured and everyone has equal opportunity to see, hear, and be heard.
- Plan to create an open, welcoming atmosphere for the meeting by arranging to have pitchers of cold water on the table or a light snack provided. A small flower arrangement gives life to a room; or make the atmosphere more student-centered by adding some student-made art or decorations to the room.

The nature of an IEP meeting makes it special. Developing an IEP for a student shown to have exceptionalities often involves a mixture of people who have very different points of view and motivations, or even different cultures and languages. These strategies and ideas could apply to many kinds of meetings, but are particularly helpful and effective for use with IEP and other educational program meetings.