

Quest for the Best IEP

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*If women are from Venus,
and Men are from Mars
then the IEP process is from
somewhere north of Uranus.*

Yes, with special education you enter a strange land of acronyms, assessments, anecdotal records, IQ ratings, and benchmarks, so you will need a personal guide to help you navigate. Hello, my name is Lisa Cook and I will be your tour guide today. As a veteran with six years under my belt in this strange land, I have learned to advocate for my daughter and have worked to advocate for others. Even with experience, I am still amazed at what I see and hear at Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings.

Think of this as your road map with some detours that *LisaQuest* is unable to predict. You have to tailor your journey to suit your needs. At the end of the day, our desired destination is always the same, an IEP that will allow your child to be successful and feel supported as he or she embarks on his or her personal journey!

You have just received an invitation to attend an IEP meeting for your child. It may be the first or the fifty first, but for many parents the reaction is the same, a pit in their stomach followed by sweaty palms (okay maybe that was just me). For many parents, the process is daunting and overwhelming, so I have created a list of ten tips to help you on your journey.

1. Keep your friends and family close.

IEP meetings often reveal things that you, as the parent, may not be aware of. I have attended at least four meetings where the teachers wrote in their notes that the youth mentioned thoughts of ending their lives, something the parents never knew and had not been informed about before the meeting. It is important to have someone there to provide support, offer a kind word, or just to listen. For some parents, the information shared—a low IQ, a new special education classification, and more—can be devastating to hear. The IEP meeting is also a good time to bring service providers

who can identify and communicate strategies and techniques that work and do not work for your child.

2. The meeting time must be convenient (within reason) for you and your support person.

You can decline the time offered by the school and provide other proposed times for the IEP team to consider. It is critical that you are proactive in the scheduling process because if you fail to respond, the school can hold the meeting without you.

3. Find a local advocacy group and see if they have representatives who can attend the IEP meeting with you.

NAMI often has family advocates that can assist you with the IEP. If at all possible, try to meet with the advocate before the IEP meeting to make sure that you are all on the same page. Be open-minded and take the advocate's experience and suggestions into consideration.

4. Know the school's position on consequences, special education services, and how they work with families.

Parents are often amazed when they read over their school's discipline policy and learn that a number of required interventions are not implemented and that students with disabilities are simply suspended.

5. Do your research. Go to your favorite search engine and review your state's Standard Course of Study or Grade-Level Curriculum.

This is very important when the team develops benchmarks or goals for your child to reach. With this information, you can identify where your child currently is academically, according to grade level, and where your child should be.

6. Know who the key players are.

Identify each person in the IEP meeting and understand his or her role in the meeting. There are certain individuals who must be present during the IEP meeting. The U.S. Department of Education has many resources related to IEP meetings, which can be accessed

online at idea.ed.gov.

7. NO BLAME, NO SHAME, NO ENEMIES!

Even though you may have experienced difficulty with your child's school, remember the ultimate goal is to work together to assist your child in reaching his or her goals, so try your best to use words that bring everyone together. Remember that after you leave the meeting, your child has to go back to that school.

8. Celebrate your child and his or her achievements.

IEP meetings often focus on deficits but this is a wonderful time to talk about what your child does well and improvements you have seen. This is especially true if your child is in the IEP meeting. Take a few minutes at the beginning of the meeting to go around the table and talk about your child's abilities and achievements. You will be amazed at how this will change the dynamics in the room! It also helps to start, and hopefully keep things, on a positive note.

9. Read and review before you sign the IEP.

This is a binding document that will be in effect for one year unless you meet again to make revisions. It is important to be assertive and voice any concerns or questions. Make sure you get a copy and read the IEP before signing it.

10. DOCUMENT, DOCUMENT, DOCUMENT!

Always remember that if it is not written down, then it did not happen.

And most of all, remember that the IEP is there to help your child, so use it for your child's benefit and think positively. Happy trails!

To contact your local NAMI to inquire about a family advocate to help with the IEP process, visit NAMI at www.nami.org (click on *State and Local NAMIs*). 