

IEP Meetings: Tips for Professionals

An IEP meeting is an opportunity to develop a collaborative partnership between staff members and families. The following strategies can be useful in developing a positive relationship with families of children with special needs.

- Be specific about the intent of the meeting. Communicate clearly the purpose of the meeting and who will be attending. Ask family members if they would like to observe the student in the school environment before the meeting. Realize family members often see the student in different settings and behaviors may vary depending upon the environment.
- Let family members know how much time has been allocated for the meeting. Offer several meeting options, i.e., before school, early afternoon, or after school. Due to requirements of their jobs and the need to arrange child care for siblings, families may need adequate time to set up arrangements for the meeting.
- Consider the make-up of the student's immediate family. Ask if someone else in the family needs to be included in the meeting.
- Be sensitive to the education and literacy level of the family members participating. When written materials have been sent home, follow up with an additional conversation if there are concerns about the ability to read the materials. Many adults need to hear and see information in order to process it.
- Respect the cultural background of the family; people from all cultures appreciate courtesy and kindness. Provide resource materials in the family's native language, if possible. Many organizations now provide materials in various languages.
- Send home information before the meeting. Having a draft IEP to review, as well as other additional information, means family members are able to participate more fully in the meeting if they have had an opportunity to review the material beforehand.
- Once the meeting has started, set a positive tone. Make the assumption that everyone involved is participating with the best intentions. Remember many families are still learning the skills necessary to communicate effectively with school staff.
- Organize your thoughts before talking with a family member. It is okay to say, "I need a minute to gather my thoughts." When talking with family members, ask yourself if you are conveying information in a way that strengthens your relationship with the family.
- Understand you may need to present your information several times. IEP meetings are often emotional for family members. And, just like students, adults have differences in how they learn and retain information. Avoid being defensive if a family member asks several times for an explanation.
- Let family members know how much you care about and enjoy their child. Families want their child to be liked by others. Focus on strengths of the child before sharing concerns.
- End the meeting and schedule another date to reconvene if communication has broken down. Very little progress will be made if there is a lack of communication or if members can't think clearly due to emotions. While it may be inconvenient, it is important when making long-term decisions about a student's program.
- Set up times for staff and family members to check for progress of the program. Many excellent programs fail when there is no follow through by the IEP team members.
- Follow up the meeting with a personal contact in order to make sure questions have been answered and materials understood. Most families want a positive relationship with school and effective communication is a key building block.