

Ask the Advocate... by Desiree Vandelac

The ABCs of IEPs - Part I

This is the first installment in a multi-part article on IEP Basics.

IEP meeting: Two little words that often evoke feelings of anxiety and dread in parents. I have often heard parents exclaim that they would prefer having a root canal to attending an IEP meeting. Too often parents enter the IEP meeting feeling as if they are going into "battle" and if that is not bad enough they feel as if they are going in "unarmed". Fortunately it does not always have to be that way. Enter "The ABC's of IEP", a multi part series to help you navigate the IEP process more easily. While these tips are by no way exhaustive they can get you moving in the right direction to enable the IEP meeting to be what it is supposed to be: A meeting to enable all of the members of your child's IEP team (including you) the opportunity to sit down and engage in an open and free discussion to ensure your child is receiving the services he/she needs.

Attend the meeting- I know this sounds obvious but I can't tell you how many times I've been told that parents did not attend an IEP meeting for a variety of reasons including they did not know about the meeting or the meeting was being held on a date or time they were unavailable. Prior to an IEP meeting the school must send you a written meeting announcement. This announcement goes by a myriad of different names depending on the state and school district where you reside. The meeting announcement should contain the date and time of the meeting, the reason for the meeting, and possible district employees that will be in attendance at the meeting. You are supposed to receive the meeting announcement far enough in advance to provide you "reasonable" notice of the meeting. While what is defined as "reasonable" can vary from district to district the average is at least 10 days notice. If you receive a meeting announcement and are not able to attend the meeting on the scheduled date and time immediately write a letter to the IEP team explaining that you are not available at the scheduled date and time and provide them at least three alternative dates and times in which you are available. Your presence and participation at IEP meetings is a critical component of providing "meaningful input" as a member of the IEP team.

Request copies of relevant documents prior to the IEP meeting- If your child has just completed any type of evaluation or testing request a copy of the report prior to the IEP meeting. If the team will be discussing your child's progress on his/her goals and objectives request a copy of the data/report they will be using to base their opinions on with regards to your child's progress. Having these documents prior to the meeting will allow you the opportunity to review the report and understand it's content before the IEP meeting. It is very difficult to provide meaningful input during an IEP meeting if the team is discussing a report you have not yet had the opportunity to read or review.

Do not agree to or reject anything in a meeting- Your best decisions are not made under pressure with several people waiting for your reply. All decisions should be made after

careful consideration. Let the IEP team know that you need to take the time to consider the information they have provided you with and you will get back to them in a few days with regards to the issue at hand. For example, if the school is recommending changing your child's speech therapy from 30 minutes a week to 15 minutes a week, rather than making a decision "in the heat of the moment" obtain the documentation supporting their recommendation and then take the time to discuss the change with your spouse, private service provider, etc. Then write a letter to the IEP team that includes the school's proposal, your agreement or rejection of that proposal and why. If you are rejecting the school's proposal and have documentation supporting your position be sure to include it with your letter.

Do not sign anything in a meeting, other than the attendance sheet. Get a copy of everything you sign regardless of what it is- The reason for doing this is simple: You do not want to agree to something unintentionally that you may not fully understand and if you do sign something you want to make sure that you know what you signed and that you have a copy of it for your records.

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Email your questions to "Ask the Advocate" at advocate@autismboulder.org. While I cannot respond directly to you, I will try to answer all of your questions in this column.



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