

# Enhancing the IEP Team

## Strategies for Parents and Professionals

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As mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Public Law 105-17, IDEA '97), each child who qualifies for special education must have an individualized education program (IEP) (Auxter, Pyfer, & Heuttig, 1997). The IEP team who writes this plan consists of the parents, an administrator, a general education teacher, and any special education staff member who has tested the student or is providing services for him or her. Educators usually use the word *team* to describe this group and its process. But is this group of people really a "team"? This article discusses practical strategies for parents and professionals in assisting parents in becoming a more inclusive part of the IEP team process. Use of these strategies can create more effective and cohesive teams.

### What Challenges Do Teams Face?

Teams are typically composed of a group, which is defined as any collection of two or more people who are together for a common purpose (Shaw, 1976). In the case of the IEP team, people have gathered together to determine and provide the best educational services and plan for a particular student. But this process has its frustrations. Barriers to the IEP team process are well documented. Both parents and professionals face challenging issues, such as finding time to meet and coordinating schedules (Karge, McClure, & Patton, 1995). Parents can also feel frustrated by a perception of inequality on the team, being unfamiliar with school/legal procedures



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and policies, or not understanding special education terminology and jargon. On the other hand, professionals may feel frustrated when they interpret parents' nonparticipation as apathy or a lack of appreciation. Professionals may also be frustrated by parents' lack of knowledge and understanding of professional limitations (Mostert, 1996). Despite these barriers or challenges, IEP team members are mandated to work closely together as part of the special education process.

An effective IEP team is more than just a group of people who have the same purpose or goal in mind. A team is distinguished from a group by the interaction among its members (Friend & Cook, 2000). Effective IEP teams show the following characteristics: identifiable roles, positive social support, proximity, distinctiveness, fairness, sim-

ilarity, and effective communication (see box, "Harmonious and Effective IEP Teams Have ...").

### Characteristics of Effective Teams

#### Roles

Members of effective teams must depend on one another and support each other for the common goal, the child's educational needs. To beneficially meet the child's educational needs, each person on the team plays a specific, clearly defined role. Ambiguous roles can prevent the IEP team from reaching its goal to create a supportive and positive learning environment for the student. The role each person plays in the IEP team process is characterized by a set of specific behaviors. These roles can be either formal or informal (Brehm

& Kasson, 1996). A *formal* role is a set of expected behaviors based on a specific identifiable label. For example, a formal role would be that of the special education teacher. This person is expected to have knowledge of curriculum, modifications, and disabilities, and have specialized training to be in that specific role. Any person who is required to participate in the IEP meeting will be referred to as a *professional* and may include special education teachers, general education teachers, physical therapists, speech and language specialists, adapted physical education specialists, nurses, psychologists, administrators, or any other professional providing specific services to the student. Critical to the new authorization of IDEA '97 is the inclusion of the general education teacher at the IEP meeting. This change was created to promote connections between special and general education curriculums.

A parent or caregiver also has a formal role. This person has intimate and important knowledge of the medical history of the child and his or her daily routines, habits, likes and dislikes, behaviors, and family needs, and sees the child within his or her natural context. The parent or primary caregiver serves as an expert on the team and therefore should be acknowledged as such. For this reason, we refer to parents/caregivers as the *parent experts*. In fact, the reauthorization of IDEA '97 has expanded the parent's role to ensure that they are an integral part of the IEP team (see box page 42, "Issues Critical to Parents: Key Points from IDEA '97").

In addition to playing formal roles, people who attend the IEP meeting may also have *informal* roles. Informal roles are those that a person chooses to play that are not necessarily expected. For example, one person might be someone who often makes jokes to add levity to a discussion or deliberation point. Another person might be the one who generally mediates when conflicts arise. In addition to the varying roles that individuals play, which are critical for a successful team, people also come to the IEP team with differing perspectives (Friend & Cook, 2000).

### Harmonious and Effective IEP Teams Have . . .

- ◆ Clearly defined roles
- ◆ Respect and value for varying perspectives
- ◆ Social support
- ◆ Proximity
- ◆ Distinctiveness
- ◆ Fairness
- ◆ Similarity
- ◆ Effective communication

Relative to objective and subjective views of the child, different perspectives add to the team's effectiveness. As members of the same team, both parents and professionals bring critical perspectives on the child to the meeting. Professionals, when viewing the child, are often trained to be objective. Parents, on the other hand, are more frequently subjective. Loving, caring parents may be positively biased in favor of their child, whereas, professionals are taught to be distant from their students to aid objectivity. This often creates a clash because professionals may criticize parents who do not maintain objectivity and criticize them when they are "too close" and "favor" the child. While professionals keep the needs of the classroom or group in mind when looking at an individual child, parents always see their own child's needs as paramount. Acceptance of these perspectives can add to the feeling of teamwork and can be an opportunity for parents and professionals to create a holistic view of the child. One mother of a special education student and director of a special education program stated: "Almost any discussion about one's child raises protective emotions that are not present in other types of meetings. . . . Staff need to be respectful of that" (D. Owens, personal communication, January 18, 2000).

#### Social Support

Social support refers to people who share, listen, and offer understanding, compassion, and encouragement (Weinberg & Gould, 1999). Educators

must initiate and provide this support, because the parents and child need it most. Social support can help parents reduce stress, increase their knowledge about disabilities or school programs, increase understanding of others, and provide needed support through common experiences between parents. Social support can also help to enhance relationships between parents and professionals through sharing information, understanding, and compassion. The following are some strategies that IEP team members can use to achieve social support:

- ✓ The parent expert can
  - ✓ Find out about the local parent support group.
  - ✓ Bring a friend or someone who has had experience in the IEP process to the meeting.
  - ✓ Make sure the meeting starts with a list of the child's strengths and abilities. This will help set the tone for a positive meeting, and these strengths may help determine how goals and objectives will be later met.
- ✓ The professionals can
  - ✓ Inform parents before the IEP meeting of their local family resource center.
  - ✓ Give information on parent support groups and national organizations and agencies.
  - ✓ Ask if parents would like to talk with other parents who have children in special education before their first IEP meeting.

#### Proximity

Proximity refers to the idea that the closer people are to each other, the more likely they will develop a bond (Weinberg & Gould, 1999). If parent

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## Issues Critical to Parents: Key Points from IDEA '97

- ◆ Parent's participation is mandated in initial eligibility and placement decisions.
- ◆ Voluntary mediation is set forth as a means of resolving parent-school controversies.
- ◆ Modifications and accommodations must be made when children participate in IEPs.
- ◆ Before a child can be reevaluated, parents can participate in a review of the data and must provide informed consent.
- ◆ Parents help make all eligibility decisions.
- ◆ IEPs must include statements of how parents will be regularly informed of their child's progress toward IEP goals.
- ◆ The IEP team must review existing evaluative data provided by the parents.

Source: From "The IEP Meeting: All Together Now . . . ?" by J. Bordin and R. Lytle, 2000. *Exceptional Parent*, 30(9), p. 7. Reprinted with permission.

experts and school professionals are seldom or never in the same environment and communicate only during an IEP meeting once a year, they are unlikely to develop a strong team cohesion or bond. Often, school professionals work closely together all year long and may serve together on many IEP teams every year. Unfortunately, parents generally are not part of these day-to-day operations. For this reason, parents may feel left out when they come to the IEP team meeting. School professionals may have known one another for years and interact easily and informally with each other, chatting and joking. These kinds of interactions come with familiarity. For this reason, school professionals must help parents become part of the team. The more time parents and teachers spend together, the more familiar and comfortable they will be. In addition,

parents will develop a better understanding of the child's school context and skills. Team members may want to consider these tips to increase proximity.

The parent expert can

- ✓ Start a school logbook to write back and forth with the student's teachers. This will allow regular communication. This book might include information about the student's performance during activities or questions or thoughts the parents or teachers would like to share. This could also be done via e-mail.
- ✓ If one's schedule permits, spend time observing the student participating in the different services, such as physical therapy, in the integrated classroom, or in adapted physical education.

✓ Spend time informally talking with the service providers who work with the child.

✓ Volunteer to assist with special education services or with the learning activities that the child is engaged in.

The professionals can

- ✓ Invite parents to come and spend time in the class. This can be done informally by writing a note, calling the parents, or sending an e-mail. Consider having the student make up a formal invitation for their parents/caregiver to come and spend a day or a few hours with them at school.
- ✓ Complete a home visit. One special education professional stated: "Teachers need to go the extra mile to do home visits or meet with parents before the IEP meeting" (Eric Snedeker, personal communication, November 13, 2000).
- ✓ Host both special and general education classroom open houses on the same night.
- ✓ Offer to videotape the student during a day or week to share with the parents how the school experience is going. One special education teacher reported, "This technique works as authentic assessment since it illustrates change over time. Parents love it!" (Paulette Fox, personal communication, September 5, 2000).

Instructional assistants can help videotape a teaching session.

- ✓ Send a note home and ask when is the best time to call or to contact parents. Ask what would be the best way to stay in contact with them—e-mail, notes, home visits, and so forth.
- ✓ Make phone calls for "I caught your child being good."
- ✓ Make sure that all informal discussion while waiting for the IEP meeting to start is inclusive of everyone present. Avoid discussing items not related to the parents or child. This can make the parent feel like an outsider.
- ✓ Be sure to explain any educational jargon or avoid using it if possible.

### Distinctiveness

Distinctiveness refers to a sense of oneness or unity (Weinberg & Gould, 1999). An effective IEP team demonstrates distinctiveness through a clear commitment to the common purpose. Everyone at the meeting should be prepared and focused on this child and his or her family. For example, at the beginning of the meeting, the group could collectively answer the question: "Who is (*student's name*)? What are his or her strengths and gifts?" (Kroeger, Leibold, & Ryan, 1999). Each person can give a brief description of the child's strengths, which can be listed on a whiteboard for the team to view when determining intervention strategies. The following are some suggestions to increase distinctiveness.

The parent expert can

- ✓ Be prepared to acquaint professionals with the child. Bring photographs and past reports.
- ✓ Offer to submit a short biographical sketch entitled "This Is My Child,"

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**“Almost any discussion about one’s child raises protective emotions that are not present in other types of meetings. . . . Staff need to be respectful of that.”— parent who was also a special education staff member**

summarizing the child within the family. This could include information on siblings, grandparents, and other family members or friends who are important to the child.

- ✓ Bring information on the positive attributes of the child, along with any concerns about his or her learning or educational services.

The professionals can

- ✓ If the school has t-shirts, give one as a gift to the parents at the first IEP meeting. All IEP team members can wear their shirts at the meeting.
- ✓ Create a special slogan that represents the team/school philosophy and share it before the meeting or post it before or during the meeting on the chalkboard or in the meeting room.
- ✓ Share positive teaching experiences teachers have had with the child and the common vision for that student.

### Fairness

One way to ensure fairness on a team is through building trust. Trust can be enhanced by communicating that all people are respected and valued (Friend & Cook, 2000; Weinberg & Gould, 1999). To be fair, professionals and parents work toward agreement of the child’s abilities, skills, and common expectations. Each needs to know that the other is trying to create the best possible plan. The more parents hear from professionals and know that they are working for the child, the greater the likelihood of building trust. Each needs to know that the other is really trying to

create the best possible educational plan. The following are some suggestions to increase a sense of fairness.

The parent expert can

- ✓ Expect that the school professionals will treat both the parents and child with fairness and equity in their interactions. If the professionals do not, provide them with information to correct any misconceptions about the family or child.
- ✓ If parents feel uncomfortable, point out what they need to make the environment better. For example, if it is hard to understand the language or terms the professionals use, stop and ask them for a definition.

The professionals can

- ✓ Value the parent’s expertise and knowledge of their child in diverse settings.
- ✓ Make it clear that the purpose is to do the utmost best for the student.
- ✓ Value and respect parental requests for services.
- ✓ Acknowledge parents’ needs and perceptions of the child.

### Similarity

The more people have in common, the more they tend to be attracted to and enjoy each other based on common interests, likes, hobbies, or lifestyles (Weinberg & Gould, 1999). For a team to experience similarity, they must share similar attitudes, aspirations, and goals for the student. The common denominator for the IEP is the team’s concern for a particular child. Team members can create a sense of similarity in numerous ways.

The parent expert can

- ✓ Use pronouns like “we” or “us” and share a past history (e.g., “The last time we met, we decided . . .”) to further encourage a feeling of likeness.
- ✓ Gather as much information as possible to participate fully in team meetings.
- ✓ Share the family vision and aspirations for the child.

The professionals can

- ✓ If a professional is also a parent, share this perspective with the parent at the meeting.

- ✓ Think before speaking and imagine how a comment might affect the parents positively or negatively.
- ✓ Assist in developing a shared vision for the child, based on the parent’s and child’s desires and aspirations.

### Communication

Communication is the process of sharing information, ideas, thoughts, or feelings with another person. For an IEP team to meet its goal to provide the best possible programming for a student with a disability, the individuals within that team must communicate effectively.

Three types of communication are commonly present during an IEP meeting. These include written, verbal, and nonverbal communication. Written communication might include assessment information, observations, goals and objectives, notes from a previous meeting, or other such written documentation. Verbal communication includes things said to others at the meeting. Nonverbal communication includes the visual information sent without the use of words. Most communicated messages are nonverbal: In fact, up to 80% of communication is nonverbal and includes such things as facial expressions, gestures, posture, or body

**At IEP meetings, remember that up to 80% of communication is nonverbal and includes such things as facial expressions, gestures, posture, or body position.**

position. For example rolling one’s eyes would not create a positive environment for communication.

During an IEP meeting, most people would prefer to talk with someone who is leaning forward and giving eye contact, rather than with people who are looking at their watch and have their arms folded across their chest. These

subtle nonverbal messages are powerful and can express more than verbal messages. To enhance communication, try the following strategies.

The parent expert can

- ✓ Ask for information about the child, including suggested goals, before the meeting so that it can be reviewed for changes or questions.
- ✓ Write down any questions before the IEP meeting and bring them for clarification.
- ✓ Dress like the other professionals. This can make parents feel more like they are on the same playing field. This sends a message that everyone at the meeting is an expert on the child.
- ✓ Bring a notepad to write down any questions or comments that arise during discussions.
- ✓ If the child is receiving many services, consider asking to have as few people at the meeting as comfortable. Much of the information can be dealt with informally with professionals before the actual IEP meeting.
- ✓ Consider requesting that a certain person facilitate. If there is a specific individual at the school that the parents are more comfortable with, it is possible to have someone other than a school professional facilitate the meeting.

The professionals can

- ✓ Send information home before the IEP team meeting.
- ✓ Deal with difficult or controversial items before the meeting during an informal time with the parents.
- ✓ Try to reduce the number of people at the meeting unless the parents prefer to have everyone there.
- ✓ Be aware of nonverbal communication. Send positive messages during meetings by displaying friendly smiles and open, forward postures

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rather than looking bored, sitting with arms folded, and leaning back in a chair.

### Final Thoughts

The IEP team process has been in place for 25 years, since the passage of P.L. 94-142. It appears from the revisions to IDEA '97 that this process has yet to be fully inclusive of parents as equally valued and respected members of the team. A truly collaborative approach involves equal parity and common goals, as this article has shown. As parents and professionals tackle the important needs of a child, they must acknowledge each other's perspectives and evaluate their IEP team environment. All participants can work together to provide a more positive experience for all team members and thus design effective interventions to enhance children's well-being.

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