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IEPs: How To Get Parents Involved

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Special educators understand the crucial role that parents play in the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process. Moreover, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that parents be invited to attend every IEP meeting. In fact, the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA indicated that parental involvement needs strengthening.

Sometimes special educators misinterpret a parent's lack of involvement. There are several barriers that can lead to that empty parent seat on the IEP meeting day. Below are considerations for special educators to make when seeking parental involvement and ways for educators to improve the IEP process for parents.



Why is it important to use simple language?

The language you use during the IEP process can intimidate some parents. Parents may feel that they do not have an adequate grasp of the educational process. Help parents by using language that is "parent friendly" and encouraging them to ask questions.



What can I do to make sure the IEP letter is clear?

Include the position of each participant on the IEP letter to help parents understand who will be attending the meeting. Prior to sending the letter, call the parent to try to determine a date and time that will work best. Calling parents in advance allows the educator to let the parent know that a letter will be coming home. During the phone call, ask the parent if they have transportation to the meeting. If the parent does not have transportation, your administrator may be able to arrange transportation for the parent to the meeting.



When do I need to explain terminology?

Elements of the IEP meeting including statistical analysis of test data, placement information, and programming

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can confuse and discourage parents. Help parents by explaining the information in a way that is easy to understand. For example, draw a bell curve when explaining standardized test results. If you use words like resource or self-contained, explain the difference between these classroom types. If you are discussing a particular reading or math program, bring a sample of the program with you to the meeting to show the parent. Above all, encourage parents to ask questions if they do not understand.



What if the parent speaks another language?

Correspondence with parents should be in their native language. If necessary, an interpreter should be present at all meetings.



What can I do to make parents feel at ease?

At the outset of the meeting, greet the family members, introduce them to each participant in the meeting, and explain the role of that person in the conference. Also, state the purpose of the meeting and the parents' legal rights. Make positive comments about the child, emphasize that parents are partners in the process, and provide enough time to talk about all the issues that arise during the meeting.



What if people disagree?

There is always a chance of disagreement. It is important for everyone at the meeting to keep in mind the child's interests. A photograph of the child at the meeting can help IEP team members keep the child's interests at the forefront of all IEP team decisions. The best way to resolve conflict is through informal problem solving. Give each team member enough time to verbalize their opinion. Keep the tone of the conversation as positive as possible and be ready to support your opinion with data or informal records.

The benefits of parent participation in the IEP meeting are very significant. Parents can give teachers an understanding of their child's home environment, communication is strengthened between parents and the school, and there is increased likelihood that the child will be successful.

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