

These tips will help you center yourself and take some stress out of the process. When you know the process better, you get yourself listened to. You start moving barriers and start getting to Yes, in this culture of NO.

Common Parent IEP Mistakes:

- **Not understanding that if you don't write it down, it didn't happen.** Get everything in writing. Phone calls are great for communication and keeping things friendly, just follow-up with an email so that it is in writing. "Dear Mrs. Special Ed teacher, thanks so much for chatting with me today. I wanted to follow-up with a quick email to list what we talked about, just to make sure we're on the same page." Then do a short bullet-point list. I just spoke with a mom last night who has spoken to school officials four times in the past six months requesting evaluations, but it was all verbal, so today it's like we're starting the request process all over again, and what she did never really existed. Everything must be in writing.
- **Not valuing yourself as an important and equal member of your child's IEP team.** You know your child better than anyone else. You are also a member of your child's IEP team, and your importance and status is equal to that of every other team member. They may have Ph.Ds, they may wear a shirt and tie and have fancy titles. That does not mean that their opinions have more value or that they necessarily have more knowledge of your child's needs.
- **Not understanding the value of, or taking advantage of the parental concerns portion of the IEP.** You should always have an ongoing list of issues you want to be addressed for your child. When that IEP invitation comes, formalize it in a letter and include it with your response. A friendly "Great, I can make that date and time, and here is my list of parental concerns for his IEP that I wish to discuss at the meeting." Per PWN (see below) all of your concerns must be addressed.
- **Being too nice.** Maybe nice isn't the right word. Perhaps it's polite or forgiving. Why is it acceptable to hold IEP meetings without teachers or therapists on hand? It's not, especially if it's a priority area of concern for you. When you return your invitation RSVP with your concerns, list the people you wish to have present at the meeting. If they don't show up, you don't hold the meeting. Reschedule. If you were at the dentist, and they cleaned and fixed your top teeth, then it was time for the bottoms and they said "Oh, I'm sorry, we have to stop now. We have another patient coming in now, so we have to end here." Would you stop? No, you wouldn't. So if you are not done with the IEP meeting, you either finish or make an appointment to reconvene. Stop being so nice, so forgiving. Speak up. This is your time to discuss the needs of your child. In the real world, things don't fit into nice packages and time slots. I am not going to sacrifice my child's education for an administrative inconvenience.

# Tips for Success: Common IEP Mistakes

- **Not reading your Procedural Safeguards.** Yes, we all have tons of them. Read them. Particularly Prior Written Notice or PWN. Prior Written Notice clearly states that concerns and requests made by the parents must be accepted or rejected — and that the IEP team must list the reasons for accepting or rejecting the parent’s proposal. This is huge!
- **Going to an IEP meeting without a Special Education advocate.** I’m not just saying this because I am one. Take someone with you. Per the IEP team member description, the person must have first-hand knowledge about the child. Even if things are going really well between you and your child’s school, take someone—your sister, best friend...someone. And your spouse or the child’s other parent, of course. IEP meetings are busy, there’s much information being tossed around and it’s a very emotional time. Another set of eyes and ears is always a good thing. Extra moral support is always a good thing. It may boost your confidence if you are sitting across the table from 12 other people.
- **Blindly requesting more services.** More is not always better. The correct amount of the correct services, that’s what is key. Think of a parent requesting more speech services, all the while not realizing that there is an issue with hearing. Forty hours of speech therapy a week isn’t going to help a child if the hearing issue isn’t being addressed. Any advocate will tell you, we request more evaluations than we do services. We want to make sure we are finding the specific area of need and targeting it with the appropriate supports.
- **Accepting the “Jiffy Lube” version of the IEP process.** Has this ever happened to you? You get an invitation to attend the IEP meeting and you go. They have the IEP all written up, they read it to you (you give a few verbal comments here & there), then put it in front of you to sign, along with the PWN. You sign it, leave and see them for 45 minutes again the following year. Chances are there is little to no parental input on IEPs done in this fashion. This is your child’s future and your time to advocate for them and get them what they need.
- **Comparing your child’s IEP to others’ IEPs.** Let me remind everyone, they are Individual Education Plans. What another child is getting may not be appropriate for your child. It’s not about who is getting the most services. Using the “I want my child to get PT twice a week because I know you do that for the Smith family” is a completely invalid argument. It doesn’t matter what any other child is getting. It matters what your child is getting, and if that is appropriate to address his/her needs.
- **Not remaining child focused.** The entire process is about, and should be about, your child. If you feel a teacher, clinician or administrator “wronged” you and your family, handle it appropriately. (There are lots of different ways to do this, from filing formal complaints to just voicing concerns to the superintendent and so on.) But don’t hold it against the school staff meeting after meeting and try to “get them.” This isn’t about “getting” anybody. This is about your child and your child’s needs.