



## Support your special-needs child

Creating an effective Individualized Education Program may not be easy, but your youngster will benefit in the long run.

**F**or parents of the estimated 6 million students who receive special education services in the United States, the mere mention of the letters “IEP” can evoke anxiety and even dread.

Mandated by the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, an IEP (Individualized Education Program) is a legal document that outlines a program, created through a team effort, that is tailored to meet a child’s unique needs. It is developed for every public school child who is deemed eligible for special education, and is reviewed at least once a year.

For some parents, the idea of sitting down with a group of professional educators to discuss their child’s strengths and

weaknesses may be an intimidating and emotional experience. However, experts recommend that parents prepare themselves so they reduce their stress and are better advocates for their child during the IEP-development process.

Parents should remember that they are an important part of this procedure – so much so that federal law requires schools to ensure that IEP teams include them.

“As parents, we see our children differently than a professional at school does,” says Brenda Smith, deputy director of Team of Advocates for Special Kids (TASK), a nonprofit organization that serves children with disabilities and their families.

The other members of the team who help write an IEP include general education teachers, a special education teacher, a school psychologist and a school administrator.

Depending on a child’s specific disability, other specialists – such as a speech or occupational therapist – may also be present.

Prior to the first IEP meeting, professionals conduct an assessment to determine whether or not the young student qualifies for special education. This assessment includes academic and IQ tests (among other diagnostic evaluations), vision and hearing screening, and questionnaires completed by the parents.

Going over the assessment results can be especially overwhelming for some parents, says Smith, so they should know that they have a right to a continuance if they need more time to review the findings. Parents are not required to sign an IEP at the initial meeting.

"A lot of time you feel rushed," says Smith, the mother of a special-needs son. "Hearing that assessment is hurtful for some parents. That's why we suggest they call another meeting after that. This is new for you."

Smith and other advocates recommend that parents bring someone else to the meeting – an advocate, family member or friend – for support.

Many experts also recommend tape recording all IEP meetings.

Parents should learn as much as they can about their child's disability and the IEP process beforehand, says Smith.

Groups such as TASK give free workshops in English and Spanish, and a wealth of information is available online, including helpful websites

such as Wrightslaw ([wrightslaw.com](http://wrightslaw.com)).

"Parents need to do their homework and network with others so they can get an understanding of their child's disability," Smith says.

The IEP meeting will be far more productive if the parents stay calm and respect what the professionals are recommending, says Janet Portanova, a specialist who has taught special



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education in Saddleback Valley Schools.

"We understand that it can be devastating, but we need you to focus with us on what we can do to develop the child to his or her potential," she says.

Parents should also be sure that the IEP is written to meet all of their child's needs. In addition to academic goals, this may include the development of speech and language, fine-motor, and social skills.

Parents may also want to request the use of special devices, if deemed necessary. For example, teachers of a hearing impaired child could be asked to wear a microphone that transmits his voice directly to the child's hearing aid.

One of the most important things for parents to remember: Document everything throughout the IEP process and their child's educational program, says Nick Davaei, a special education attorney who has participated in more than 1,000 IEPs as a legal professional, advocate, due-process liaison and special education teacher.

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He advises parents to always put any requests related to their child's needs in writing and save copies of all documents related to their child's education.

"At some point down the line, when I challenge a school district, the district representatives may say, 'We didn't know. The parents never complained. We were not notified about any of their concerns.' I can go back and say I have 15 emails that show otherwise," Davaei says. "A paper trail will help you in the long run. Everything has to be documented."

Davaei urges parents to view the IEP as a collaborative process and try to amicably work out differences in the best interest of the child. However, those who are unable to do so should know they have other options.

"It makes a huge difference when you have an advocate or an attorney," he says. "Then everyone will take your case more seriously."

Davaei adds: "If it's a complex case, and you've tried in good faith to resolve the differences and it isn't working, at that point you should definitely seek representation." 