

Preparing for a Successful School Meeting

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Sources: Chapman, Randy Ten Tips for Improving Parent Participation in IEP Meetings. Mauro, Terri. Before You Go to an IEP Meeting. About.com (no date), <http://specialchildren.about.com/od/ieps/bb/beforeIEP.htm>. Moir, Lindsay. Lindsay's List: 10 Tips for Parents. Comhnadh Consulting. (no date), www.oacrs.com. The Right Question Project, Inc. A Constructive Mean to Advocate for your Family. 2001.

Review Documentation

- Look at the current Individual Education Plan (IEP), Behaviour Safety Plan (BSP) Report Card and any other documentation that you have received from the school
- Review your child's recent evaluations and assessments. If the school hasn't provided you with copies, be sure to ask for them prior to any meeting.
- Review notes from previous meetings (within the last year), as well as copies of the IEP, BSP and Report Card to see what changes or progress has been made.

Prepare Your Questions & Concerns

- Make a list of questions you want to ask at the meeting. Be aware of the difference between open (requires more explanation) or closed (yes or no answer questions) ended questions, and structure your questions in a way that is most likely to get you the type of answer you are looking for (i.e. instead of asking "Are you incorporating recommendations from our OT for his sensory diet into his day?" ask "Can you give me some examples of things you do daily that meet his sensory needs as per the recommendation from the OT?")
- Make a list of your concerns, then see if you can break them into 3-4 manageable categories or topics; and then prioritize the points
- Make a list of at least three things the school is doing well, as it is wise to provide them with positive feedback

- If you need more room to express your points, create a document separate from your agenda that can be photocopied and handed out to everyone at the meeting. The document should summarize your suggestions and concerns. Be sure to use bullet points, so that the document doesn't overwhelm. Also, be sure to cite clear examples from within the past year, and the relevant education legislation

Note Attendees

- To be well prepared, review the guest list to be informed of who will be present at the meeting. So, if it is a large group that includes both school staff and school board personnel, or a smaller more intimate team meeting, with just your child's immediate school support team, you can be prepared accordingly. When developing your questions, keep in mind who will be present.
- If you are unfamiliar with the procedures for the meeting, whether it be an Identification Placement Review Committee meeting (IPRC), an IEP meeting, or a team meeting, check your board website for a "Parents Guide to Special Education," as it clearly outlines the purpose and general contents of such a meeting
- Prepare an agenda to share with the others at the meeting. This will help to keep them on track and ensure that you cover off all your points. Be sure to prioritize this list and put your most pressing points at the top.

- Know the relevant educational legislation as it pertains to what you are discussing with the school. Much of this information can be found on the Ministry of Education website, or on your school board's website in the Special Education Section

Take Someone to the Meeting with You

- If possible, both parents should attend the meeting
- It can also be helpful to have an advocate or support person present (family case worker, respite worker, educational advocate, etc.)
- Many parents find it intimidating to “walk into a room of suits,” so try to bring someone along to the meeting so you are not alone. Also, a second pair of ears can be helpful later when reviewing the meeting with your partner or support workers for your child
- Be sure to meet with the person who is attending with you before the meeting to ensure you both are “on the same page.” Also, they should make notes of the meeting. In the event that one gets emotional or muddled, the other can step in and clarify
- Review your agenda (if you choose to make one) with the person or people you bring along to the meeting so they are familiar with your goals
- As a parent, you have the right to bring individuals to the meeting that have knowledge and expertise that could assist you
- If you have asked a professional to attend the meeting with you, be sure you know what their role will be before you get into the meeting. You want to be able to introduce them to the school team with a purpose of having them there. At the time when you invite them, discuss with them what their role will look like, and be sure you both have a clear understanding of those expectations
- Also, think about seating arrangements in the meeting; if you want to make eye contact, sit across from one another; or if you want a gentle nudge or hand squeeze, have the person sit beside you

Meeting Scheduling

- Be sure it is scheduled at a time that is convenient for everyone (both the school team and your team)
- You have a right to have a meeting rescheduled if the time the school initially suggests is not convenient for you
- Be sure there is sufficient time scheduled for the things you want to cover with them, if there isn't, request a longer meeting. You may even have to schedule it at a different time, or arrange a follow-up meeting to discuss the less pressing issues

During the Meeting

- Ask all of the questions you prepared. It might be helpful to prepare an agenda to share with the others at the meeting to help them keep on track and ensure you are able to cover off all your points.
- Identify your “allies” in the room, (they may be the people giving a gentle smile, or nodding along with your point). Identify these people, make eye contact with them, and ask them questions to get their opinion. Don't be afraid to ask a question you know the answer to, but you do it for the benefit of others at the table (i.e. around restraint policy, so the proper answer can be documented in meeting notes).
- Educational professionals often speak their own language (using acronyms etc.). If you don't understand something that is being said, ask for clarification, or make a note to look it up later
- You do not have to agree with suggestions other members of the team recommend, nor do you have to sign any documentation if you are not comfortable with what it says (i.e. at the IPRC, and you disagree with the placement for next year), you are allowed time to go home and think about it
- Reinforce good ideas. If someone at the meeting shares a good idea (your team or the school team), acknowledge what a great idea it is, and be sure it is captured and explored

- Be sure the meeting remains focused on benefiting your child. Sometimes issues around staffing, budget restrictions, etc. can overshadow the key point that the meeting is about your child and their success at school. If you feel the meeting is getting off track, always bring it back to your child and reinforce your child's well-being as the focus
- Keep notes of "next steps" agreed upon, or have someone you brought with you to the meeting, record them. This will ensure that you have a record. It is also permissible to ask for a photocopy of the notes the school staff has taken, so you have a record of what they recorded and what you recorded.
- Know when to call it a day and don't be afraid to do so. Often when we are frustrated at the end of a meeting, we can make rash decisions as a way of "getting out of there." Most regret that decision later. If you and your team, or the school team is visibly frustrated, then likely nothing productive will be accomplished. Suggest a date to continue the discussion and help to facilitate a few next steps that everyone can agree on, and work on in preparation for a solution-focused meeting next time

Keep Your Cool

- Try not to take comments about your child personally, and if you do, try to keep those emotions as controlled as possible
- It is permissible for you to ask for a washroom break if you notice you are getting too emotional and need to step back and regroup for a moment
- Look back to your notes if you are getting off track, or getting muddled in your thinking, you prepared all those notes for a reason. Use them.

- It is very important to keep the focus of the meeting on positive outcomes for your child. Don't let your emotions, or reactions to things the school says, take away from the focus of the meeting. Emotional reactions can be damaging to school and/or parent relationships

Re-examine Documents

- When you get home review the notes you have taken from the meeting, and follow up with an e-mail or letter if there is anything from your agenda that you feel you didn't get to clarify or explain properly
- Ask any lingering questions either by scheduling another meeting or through writing (e-mail or letter)
- When the documentation from the meeting comes out (i.e. the IEP or BSP), compare it with your notes from the meeting and be sure that all points agreed upon are included, and clearly outlined
- You have the right to request revisions to such documents, and these revisions need to be done in a timely fashion
- Should any revisions be required, be sure to make your request in writing

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