

# It's How You Play The Game

## Parent Suggestions for Individualized Education Plan Meetings

By Sheila Cottingham

I have come across three types of parents when it comes to the education of any child with special needs. First, there are the ones that unfortunately the teachers never see sitting in a meeting. Next you have those that feel as though they can show up for the meeting, but give the school system let's say "Carte Blanche" assuming the so called professionals know what is best and never question them. Lastly, there are those like myself and a few others that take the role of being an equal participant seriously. This means we come to the table with suggestions if things are not working, objectives that may appear to be far-reaching, but only because we know if our children do not sometimes have something that may seem to be out-of-reach, we then question whether they will succeed.

Here are a few suggestions for parents when it comes to ANY meeting at school, regardless of the term IEP attached to it:

1. If your child is in preschool or elementary grades, don't find yourself sitting in a chair 6 inches off the floor. I'm sure some of you are laughing because you have found yourself in that exact situation. You ask, "What can I do about that?" Do what I did, show up fifteen minutes early and grab a full-sized chair from somewhere close and then make all the other attendees sit in those itty-bitty chairs. This is an example of the art of intimidation without talking.
2. Ask yourself "Do I perceive myself as an active participant of the IEP team?" The word active by Webster's definition states having an effect, while participant means to take part and to share. In other words, I don't want you to go, sit there, listen to both good and bad comments, and simply sign on the line at the end.
3. Try to dress as close to the way the school officials dress, in other words, if they dress-up, then going in Sunday clothes would carry the appearance that you are on the same team. This is extremely important if you want to be taken seriously.
4. One of the best ways to make yourself appear to be equal to the other players is to call them by their first names, even if they call you Mr. or Mrs. This will force them to see everyone in attendance as people, not whatever initials and periods they have behind their names.

5. Do your homework in advance of the meeting because that's what the school system IEP members do, so why shouldn't you? Review not just the current school year objectives and the percentages, but previous years as well to determine if there has been any areas where the performance has stalled out in a certain area.
6. The most time consuming for me is when I work 20-30 hours on an end of the year IEP meeting to make sure I have read everything, done graphs when necessary, and even a comparison between first year in pre-school to early intervention goals.
7. The most important thing I feel I have accomplished in the last 4 years, was when I presented (9) realistic goals for my son, Ken, to achieve by the time he graduates or turns 21 years old. In essence, I was providing the school system with a road map and in doing so was setting the course for my son's education for years to come.
8. Another helpful hint is to show those involved in your child's education that you appreciate them by giving them Christmas presents and end of the year presents. This can be accomplished inexpensively by doing handmade presents with your child's assistance. Remember that everyone needs a pat of the back from time to time and teachers are no different. I have also sent letters to administrative officials giving them praise for encouraging me to continue to be active in Ken's education.
9. Most importantly, never go into an IEP meeting unprepared, because your child may pay the ultimate sacrifice by receiving inadequate amounts of time for related services or inappropriate curriculum or adaptations. The sooner you show the school system that you are "involved" the better, otherwise, they may assume that you are one of those parents that simply show up, say nothing, and sign your name without comment.
10. If you really want to know what you are talking about, as well as, the school officials you may want to go to your public library and for a fee they will copy your State Regulations for Special Education. If you want to go further, go to the closest university library and look up the Code of Federal Regulations on Special Education. They will copy it for a fee of approximately \$65.00, however, these regulations change at least every five years and from my experience it is money well worth spending.

Try to remember that if you want to come away from a meeting with the feeling that you have indeed accomplished either part or most of your goals, the only way to insure this is for you to strategize yourself. You do not have to have a college degree or ten credentials behind your name to do it successfully. You may want to elicit a few hours with a friend who also has a special needs child to give you suggestions. Sometimes another pair of eyes reviewing documents can make a world of difference. I hope these suggestions have been helpful in some way and don't forget to always "keep the faith"