

Be a Key Member of Your Child's Educational Planning Team

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Introduction

Studies have shown that children do better in school when their parents are involved with their education. It is even more important when our child is receiving special education services.

Parents, guardians and surrogate or foster parents play a key role in developing the Individualized Education Program (IEP). It is the IEP that outlines the special education and related services that will be provided at no cost to our family. As involved parents our ideas must always be considered in any decisions the IEP team makes.

The IEP is a written record of decisions made at IEP meetings. It's no wonder that the IEP planning meetings are so important to our child's school experiences. That's also why it's important for us to understand our child's IEP and take an active part in developing it. **As parents, we know our child better than anyone. And no matter how old our child becomes, we will always be his parents.**

Some Rights & Responsibilities of Parents

Our rights as parents are really important! But along with rights, come responsibilities. By balancing our rights and responsibilities we are more likely to improve our child's success and enhance our relationships with those who serve our children and families.

My Rights as a Parent:

- To ask questions
- To make decisions
- To be angry
- Not to give up
- Not to be intimidated
- To understand and to be understood
- Not to be blamed
- To accept help
- Not to feel guilty

- Not to be exploited
- To be with their child
- To be away from their child
- To survive
- The right to a quality life!

My Responsibilities as a Parent:

- Provide information that is appropriate and truthful.
- Find out what I need to know to take an active part in decision-making.
- Ask questions to help me understand and to make certain I am being understood.
- Handle my anger in constructive ways and apologize if I don't.
- Suggest solutions rather than look for someone to blame.
- Do not take on more than I can really handle.
- Cancel an appointment if I cannot make it.
- Speak up if I do not agree or have serious concerns or reservations.
- Ask for time to think about proposal.
- Stay focused on my child or family's needs rather than my need "to be right."
- Express appreciation for the efforts of others even if they aren't what I wanted.
- Show respect for others' points of view.
- Act in the best interests of my child and family.

Understand and Prepare for Team Meetings

Individuals with **Disabilities Education Act—IDEA**—is a federal law that provides some funding to public schools for the education of children and youth with disabilities. IDEA requires public schools to provide **Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)** in the **Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)**. IDEA contains six principles that guide state education agencies and school districts in developing special education and related services.

The Six Principles of IDEA:

1) Procedural Safeguards—describe the child's right to *due process* of law. They are steps that must be followed to ensure that the child and parents are treated fairly. (The child "owns" the right to due process, and parents exercise the rights on behalf of our child.) The child has due process *rights* under the law, and the parents or surrogates have those same rights as the minor child's advocate.

Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) has a prepared "*Notice of Procedural Safeguards*" that is available to every parent at required times. Unfortunately, most parents do not read nor understand it. It contains our child's rights that MDE and school districts are required to share with us in order to be in compliance. Some of the points covered are:

- Prior Written Notice
- Informed Consent
- Independent educational evaluations

- Education records
- Private school placement
- Dispute resolution

2) Parent and Student Participation—means that parents, and the student when it is appropriate, have a reasonable chance to participate fully. It also means that parents deserve full knowledge of the team’s actions and rationale for any decisions that affect our child.

3) Appropriate Evaluation—a parent must give *informed consent* before any individual evaluation activity is done with our child under the age of majority. (Informed consent means *full knowledge and understanding*.) *Appropriate evaluation instruments, testing environments and the expertise of evaluation personnel* are very important parts of this third principle.

4) Individualized Education Program (IEP/IFSP/IIIP)—is the “blueprint” for designing a program based on the evaluation of his needs. It will provide our child with educational benefits that are measurable. It specifies what environment(s) is appropriate for his education.

5) Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)—is based on the legal concept that “separation is not equal.” Separation from the regular education classroom *must be justified* on the basis of individual need.

6) Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)—requires public schools to provide appropriate special education and related services. These services are *reasonably determined to provide educational benefit* to eligible children without additional cost to the parents because of the child’s disability.

A school district’s form may be worded somewhat differently from the state form, and its components might be in a different order. Yet all of the required components must be included in your child’s IEP or discussed at the IEP meeting. For some sections of the IEP discussion is required, but documenting the discussion may be optional. Some districts and parents will find it beneficial to document the discussion of a particular requirement in some way.

More Information:

Federal law and its corresponding Regulations along with Minnesota State Special Education Rules call for the development of the IEP. The federal regulations explain how IDEA will be carried out. Parents who wish to read the regulations may access them at www.fape.org, a PACER affiliated Web site. Parents may request a free copy of *A Guide for Minnesota Parents to the Individualized Education Program (IEP)* from PACER Center, Inc.

1-800-53PACER
(1-800-537-2237)

Toll-free for parents in Minnesota
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Improve Your Skills as a Member of the Team

Since the IEP planning meetings are so important to our child's education, it makes sense to find ways to be more effective team members. Here are some things that might be helpful.

- Take time to think things over ahead of time.
- Focus in on two or three greatest concerns.
- Strive for *mutual respect* by giving it and expecting it of other team members; if you are giving it, you are in the position to ask for it in return.
- Clarify goals and priorities.
- Build partnerships that recognize the parent's duty to advocate for the child.
- Be willing to negotiate and come up with ideas that help the child benefit from his education.
- Work for a healthy balance of rights and responsibilities.
- Treat others the way you want to be treated.
- Become more knowledgeable.
- Attend workshops or study resources to understand the special education process better.
- Talk with other parents and professionals to learn what has worked for them.
- Contact and join disability and/or advocacy organizations.
- Consider serving on parent boards or committees to build connections and utilize your experiences to help others.

Remember: *as parents, we know our child better than anyone. And no matter how old our child becomes, we will always be his parents.*