

Developing the IEP: The Five W's

Understanding the IEP process can be overwhelming to parents, but it doesn't have to be. Let's simplify by taking a look at the five "W's" - who, what, when, where and why. Understanding the basics of IEP development will increase your confidence and help you become an effective member of your child's IEP team.

Who develops the IEP?

The IDEA requires the following individuals to participate in the development of your child's IEP:

- You (the parent).
- The student (when appropriate). The student *must* be invited if the meeting will cover any discussion about transition services, goals after high school, or other transition issues.
- At least one regular education teacher who is or will be working with your child (if your child will be in regular education for any part of the day).
- At least one special education teacher.
- A representative of the school district (often a principal). This person must be knowledgeable about the general education curriculum, qualified to supervise or provide special education services, and knowledgeable about the availability of district resources.
- A person, such as a diagnostician, who can interpret the results of your child's evaluations and explain how they apply to your child's education.
- Other persons who have knowledge or expertise specific to your child. This might include related services personnel (physical therapist, speech therapist or psychologist for example), professionals who work with your child outside of the school, or an [Early Childhood Intervention](#) representative (if your child is entering school from an ECI program).
 - **A matter of etiquette:** Remember, the most effective ARD committees are built on open communication and respect, which works both ways. Be sure to let the school know if you have invited someone to attend the meeting with you, and expect the school to do the same for you.
 - **Should you invite an advocate?** Before hiring a special education advocate, you might consider bringing a family member or friend to support you at the ARD meeting. However, parents have the right to bring a professional advocate. As a common courtesy, be sure to notify the school if you are bringing either a support person or a paid advocate.
 - **What about an attorney?** IDEA regulations (34 CFR 300.322) require the school district to notify you in writing of who will attend an IEP meeting. However there is no requirement for you to do so. In the "spirit of cooperation", you should notify the district ahead of time if you

plan to bring an attorney as they may want to invite their own attorney. See the OSEP letter in the resource section below.

There are certain circumstances in which team members may be excused from all or part of the ARD meeting.

A member of the ARD committee is not required to attend all or part of the meeting if everyone (school and parent) agrees in writing that this person's attendance is not required because their area of expertise will **not** be modified or discussed in the meeting.

A member of the team may be excused from all or part of the meeting, *even if the meeting will involve modification to or discussion of that person's area of expertise*, but only if:

- Everyone (parent and school) agrees in writing, **and**
- The member provides written input to both the parent and the ARD committee prior to the meeting. (Note: The law does not define what is meant by "prior to the meeting." Be sure to request the team member's written input well in advance of the meeting so that you have sufficient time to review it and ask questions.)

The ARD meeting notice will include a list of everyone invited to the meeting. It won't have the individuals' names, only their titles or areas of expertise. You can call or email your school and ask for specific names if you would like to know who to expect at the meeting.

What is an IEP? And what an IEP is NOT!

An IEP is the written document that is completed by an ARD committee for every child receiving special education services. The IDEA has a clear list of requirements that the IEP must address. To learn "what" is addressed in the IEP, see the [Simple ARD Agenda](#).

It is also important for parents to understand what an IEP is NOT:

- An IEP is **NOT a shopping cart** to push down the aisle of education goals, services and supports and throw in whatever looks good. Ask yourself "what does my child need?" rather than "what do I want for my child?"
- An IEP is **NOT a guarantee** of your child's success. However, there are safeguards built into the IEP process to help ensure that your child has every opportunity to succeed.
- An IEP is **NOT the parents' decision alone**. The decisions must be made collaboratively, with collective agreement.
- An IEP is **NOT the school professionals' decision alone**. The decisions must be made collaboratively, with collective agreement...including you, the parent.
- An IEP is **NOT intended to replace our duties as parents**. What would we be teaching our children at home if there was no disability? Keep in mind that goals

addressing self-care skills, for example, are sure to lead to more segregated classroom settings and less focus on the general education curriculum. Carefully consider what goals should be addressed at school (IEP) and what goals should be addressed at home (You).

- An IEP is **NOT written in stone**. You can always go back and make changes as necessary if the members of the ARD committee agree.

When Is the IEP Developed?

Ideally, the IEP should be developed by the ARD committee during an ARD meeting. The meeting should be at a time and place that is mutually agreeable.

Often schools create draft IEP goals prior to the ARD meeting. There's nothing wrong with drafting IEP goals ahead of time as long as everyone – including you – knows that the goals are only a draft and that they can be changed and even deleted. Make sure to request a copy of the draft present levels and goals prior to the meeting so that you will have a chance to review them.

Some parents request an ARD Planning Conference, or a “pre-ARD” meeting. This informal meeting allows parents to participate in the development of draft IEP goals in a setting that is not bound to tight timelines and regulations. This often helps build parent-school relationships and shortens the time required for the actual ARD meeting. Many schools will be receptive to the idea, but you will have to make the request.

A Word of Caution: Anything agreed upon in a pre-ARD meeting is just that – an agreement. There is nothing legally binding about those agreements. Be sure you get everything your child needs written into the IEP document.

One more thing about the “when” of IEPs. Typically, IEPs are developed every year. However, that doesn't mean they cannot be changed or revised. Changes can be made at any time. The [IDEA](#) requires the ARD committee to address revisions at any time:

- The student demonstrates a lack of expected progress
- New reevaluation results are available
- The parents provide new information
- The student has (or will have) new needs

Minor revisions (a schedule change for example) to the IEP can be made by agreement without having to reconvene the ARD Committee. The revised IEP must contain a statement about how the IEP was revised and that it was revised by mutual agreement without a meeting.

The “Where” of the IEP

The “where” of the IEP is not the location of the ARD meeting, which usually takes place at the school. In this case, “where” refers to the *placement decision* – where your child

will spend the majority of his or her day at school learning. [Placement](#) is the final decision of the ARD meeting, after goals and objectives and [related services](#) have been discussed.

Too often children with disabilities are placed in educational settings that are determined by their “label” rather than their strengths, needs and specific IEP goals. It’s easy to fall into the thinking that a specialized classroom for children with autism, intellectual disabilities, or multiple disabilities (for example) makes more sense than trying to place that same child in a regular education classroom with non-disabled peers. However, we strongly encourage you to challenge that thinking – both your own and that of the school professionals working with your child. See [Placement Decisions](#) for more on the continuum of placements for students with disabilities.

The Big Why

Here’s the BIG reason why you must become an IEP expert - your child’s future depends on it! It is up to us to give our children a shot at a life that includes personal choice and opportunities to the greatest extent possible. And the bottom line is this: the day will come when you cannot be there for your child. We have no guarantees of time. We owe it to our children to do everything in our power to prepare them for the day we can’t be there anymore.

You are expected (by federal law) to be an *equal participant* in your child’s IEP development. Equal participation is more than just showing up and signing your name. Parents are empowered when they take an active role in the IEP process to prepare their child for *further education, employment and independent living*.

Next Steps:

- Present Levels of Academic and Functional Performance
- Writing Goals and Objectives
- [Placement Decisions](#)

Go Back to:

- What’s An IEP? - Overview

Additional Resources

[OSEP letter](#) 2016 Letter regarding IEP Team & attorney participation

