**A Parent's Role in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) Team**
(or "Excuse me, are you the CEO here?)

by Danielle Underwood, BSW
LEND Parent Trainee
(and, more importantly, parent of a child on an IEP)

If you are taking time to read this article, it is very likely you are the parent of a child with a newly diagnosed disability. The world around you may seem overwhelming and fuzzy right now, especially as you consider what may be entirely new territory: the IEP.

At this point, you may still be asking yourself basic questions; "Why are these three little letters, IEP, so important? How does it affect my child? What is my role in it? And how do I use it to make my child's life and education better?" You also may be experiencing many emotions: fear, self-doubt, dread - or conversely, courage, determination, and gratitude, sometimes even at the very same moment. You are not alone. Many, many parents have gone through these thoughts and feelings just like you, including me.

The topic of the Individualized Education Program is extensive - too vast to completely address in this format. Page upon page has been written to explain the legal specifics of special education law by authors with lengthy legal educations and bustling law practices[1]. My purpose here is not legal explanation.

In the same way, my words are not directed towards technical guidance on appropriate goals for your child or direction to certain interventions and accommodations to request. These are different for each child and will require you to carve your own path for your child's education (notice the word, "individualized" in IEP). My purpose is more basic than these, but the importance of it cannot be overstated. Consider this information foundational to any interaction you have with your child's school, from here to graduation.

My goal in writing this article is to help you define your role and place within the IEP team and to give you the best chance at forming a successful partnership with your school team. I use the term "define" purposely – as the parent, you control the image you portray to the staff at your school. The way you present yourself lets them know how much you value your child's "free and appropriate" education – and how much you value your child. This image involves what you wear, how you speak, what you bring with you, and how you choose to interact with school personnel. It is an image you inevitably create, consciously or subconsciously – it is either decided by you or for you.

Through trial and error (and lots of other parents' trial and error), I've learned to follow a few simple but powerful guidelines:

Rule #1: Learn your stuff.

Most parents begin with little to no formal training in special education or their child's disability. As in almost anything, those with knowledge command respect. Your first and continuing mission is to become knowledgeable about both of these topics. Great sources

[1] For excellent information on legal rights and responsibilities of all parties involved in an Individualized Education Program, visit http://www.wrightslaw.com/info/iep.index.htm

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include numerous specialty books[2] designed for parents, trustworthy internet sites, and information from the US Department of Education[3] .

Other parents and parent groups, especially those with families from within your school district, are vital sources of information. These connections are an invaluable resource for knowing how to navigate your particular school/district and the process as a whole. Save yourself time and energy: meet other parents, and learn from their successes and failures. Most families are eager to share their experiences.

Rule #2: Dress the part.

One of the biggest hurdles for most parents involved in the IEP process is difficulty obtaining respect from the professional members of the team (see rule #1). Add a casual appearance on top of that – wearing workout clothes, shorts, flip-flops – even jeans – makes it more difficult for school staff to see you as a serious, committed, and important member of your IEP team. A good rule of thumb: dress for a business meeting and consider yourself as the **CEO of your child's life**. A formal suit and tie or dress and high heels might not be necessary - follow your school staff's lead on their level of professional dress and dress the same or slightly more dressy. You are communicating (without saying a word) the level of significance you personally give to your child's IEP and the level of professionalism you expect from the rest of the team.

Rule #3: Give respect.

The professionals at your child's school are…people – treat them that way! They worked hard to earn the qualifications to do the job they're doing. Special education can be a draining job, and they have many demands on their time and energy. This doesn't mean you should expect them to not focus many of their resources on your child – they should and they will if you help them make your child a priority. Remember that whining and complaining almost always backfire as methods of getting their attention (more on that below).

Rule #3: Give praise.

When a member of your child's IEP team does something you see is good for your child – THANK THEM. Simply noticing something they've done well can surprise and delight them – it also improves communication in the future. Many parents are critical of the services their child is receiving. If, at some point, you have to address a situation like this at some point in your child's education, you will have more influence for change if you've created a positive working relationship with your team rather than a negative one. Cheerleaders tend to be popular! (No, I was never a cheerleader - until I joined an IEP team.)

Another great way to motivate your team to focus positive energy on your child is to periodically show appreciation. A short thank you note to a paraprofessional, a small gift to

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[2] One highly recommended resource: Wright, P.W. and Darr Wright, P. (2002). *From Emotions to Advocacy – The Special Education Survival Guide.* Hartfield, VA: Harbor House Law Press, Inc.
[3] U.S. Department of Education website, "Parent" section, http://www.ed.gov/parents/landing.jhtml

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each team member at the holidays (these can be homemade), a letter of praise for their employee file – they all work wonders.

My personal favorite: I never go to a team meeting empty-handed. (I like bringing a plate of ooey-gooey chocolate brownies.) When our speech language pathologist recently commented that it really wasn't necessary to always bring something to our meetings (as she enthusiastically inhaled her second one), it was the perfect opportunity for me to tell her, "I know that, but this is a small way I can show you how much we appreciate what you do for (my son)." I scored some big "brownie points" that day!

Especially at long, drawn out meetings, hunger can contribute to crankiness – very detrimental to IEP proceedings. So I do my part to keep everyone's blood sugar elevated and spirits happy. It always makes for great ice-breaker material as well. ("Why yes, my mother is Betty Crocker, how did you know?!")

Rule #4: Keep emotions in check.

It is far too easy to get emotional when talking about your child's difficulties and shortcomings. Emotions, once heated, tend to flow over to everyone else in a room. Negative emotional energy is the enemy of collaboration. Smart parents treat the team as a team, as much as possible - a team formed to solve problems together. Sometimes this means holding back what you really want to say in favor of a gentler form of communication. Stating things in the positive can be very helpful. (e.g. instead of "We want Jimmy to spend less time in the Special Ed classroom with those other special ed kids", try "We'd like to see Jimmy spend more time in the regular ed classroom with his typically developing peers." CEO's get the most accomplished when they're cool, calm, and collected. If you need a break to regain your emotional balance, take one. Need an excuse? Everyone needs to use the bathroom sometimes!

Rule #5: Have a plan

An excellent way to make sure you stay focused on what you'd like to see happen for your child is to bring an agenda. Creating an agenda before the meeting will help you think through your priorities regarding issues that need to be discussed and/or resolved. If you walk into a meeting with 20 demands, you will most likely walk away having addressed nothing in depth or, if you're lucky, one or two items the school staff feel are priorities. Instead, write out your concerns, and then choose your top 2-3 critical issues. Share these with the other team members before the meeting in a friendly but firm manner, so they are prepared to discuss them.

Remember that you are the CEO of your child's life, but not the ruler of the IEP team. Ideally, the team should be a gathering of equals created to brainstorm and problem solve together. You are important. They are important. But most of all, your child is

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important. Always steer the conversation back to what is best for your child in the context of his/her whole life.

Rule #6: Don't let the politics get you!

We live in a political world, and distressing as it can be, the situation is no different in the school setting. The best way to know the territory is to spend time there. The more involved you are in your child's school, the more you know the teachers to avoid, the sticky points in relationships between the principal, teachers, support staff, and parents, and the things that make everyone happy. You also learn which peers to encourage your child to befriend. Be helpful and supportive. Most of all…be present.

Hopefully these guidelines have given you insight into your relationship with the other members of the IEP team, as well as how to foster positive working relationships with these important people in your child's life. Be patient with yourself as you learn the ins and outs of your new role. It takes time and practice. With this information to help you lay a solid foundation to build upon, you will (one day) become a champion advocate.