

HELP WITH IEP FOR PARENTS WITH CHILDREN
WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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By
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

HELP WITH IEP FOR PARENTS WITH CHILDREN
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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this project to my children, Travis, Courtnie, Rebecca and Aimee Johnson. Without their love and support there would be no way that I would have been able to complete my journey to earn our masters degree in social work; yes this degree is as much yours as it is mine. We have spent many hours studying together, crying together, growing together, and loving and supporting each other. I am so proud of the four of you and I did this for you; my beautiful children!

I would like to further dedicate this project to my mother and father, Marilyn and Norman McCoy, who always taught me that I can do anything as long as I just try. It is through your loving example that I knew I could succeed. With a lot of prayers and swear words anything is possible! Pa, I wish you could have been here for this journey but I know you have been by my side through it all. With every train whistle I knew it was you. Thank you mom and Russ (dad) for always believing in me; I love you to the moon and back! Also to my big sis Evelyn, you are my role model! I love you more than you will ever know! Thank you for being you!

Next, I dedicate this to the educator who told me 32 years ago that my career of choice should be a waitress. You told me I would never be able to make it through college. Well guess what? Dean's list all the way baby! I graduated with my AA with honors, my BA with Magna Cum Laude and my MSW with distinction! I did it in style.

Last, I dedicate this to all the parents who have struggled, who are struggling, and who are about to start the struggle for their child that has special needs and is struggling. It is a tough journey for these kids but they need our love and support. Keep up the fight it is worth it!

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Let's go change the world!

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ABSTRACT

Parents are critical to the IEP process considering they are the expert on their child. They are often not included in the planning of their child's educational needs even though it is required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004. Children with disabilities often need special accommodations and modifications in the classroom in order for them to be successful in school and receive a free and appropriate public education that best suits their special needs. Parents often complain that the educators do not include them in the process, the teachers use jargon that the parents do not understand, and often have everything planned before the parent arrives at the meeting. Considering the barriers parents face in being involved in and participating in their child's IEP, this project created a brochure for parents who are just beginning the IEP process. The project developer took the lead to research the literature and collaborate with a school administrator, an advocate, a parent and a LMFT to help develop this brochure that defines unfamiliar terms that are used by educators, lays out a general agenda of an IEP, provides helpful hints, identifies channels of how to request an IEP meeting, the IEP timeline, and resources to gain access to the parent and child's legal rights. The larger goal is to move towards a paradigm shift where the parent and child can lead the IEP process; however, this is an important interim step towards helping empower parents with information critical to their engagement and voice in the IEP process.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

During the school year 2013-2014, the California Department of Education (2015) reported there were 705,279 students in California who accessed special education services and have some sort of disability. The data were collected on children age birth to 22 by the California Department of Education (2015). All disabilities were included with the highest percentage of occurrence being learning disabilities (LD), at 40%. Children who have disabilities often have special needs that need to be accommodated in school in order for the child to be successful at learning. Some problems that children with disabilities struggle with in school can be low performance on testing, processing difficulty, and/or behavioral issues. Currently, if the child is having difficulty with these issues the parent or teacher can request special education services or an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for the child.

During the school year 2011-2012, there were a total of 49,521,669 students enrolled in public education in the United States. Of the 49.5 million 6,404,630 had disabilities and had IEPs in place, that is 13% of total number of students enrolled. During the same school year 2011-2012, in California, there were 6,220,993 children enrolled in school. Of these students 686,352 had IEPs, 11% of students were eligible for special services in order to receive a Free and Appropriate Public Education or FAPE.

According to Lo (2012), programs have been implemented through legislative action so that children ages 3 to 21 in need of special education can receive a free

public education that is appropriate for their needs. Schools are required by law to hold IEP meetings to determine what the best possible plan would be to help the student be successful in school. This team should consist of the child's teacher, principal, any providers of services, such as counseling or occupational therapy, the student, if age appropriate, and the parent. However, before the school holds this meeting there should have been a Student Study Team or SST meeting to discuss the initial concerns the parent, teacher, child, or principal may have about the child's education. At this SST meeting the team discusses what, if any, testing should be conducted on the child, what type of interventions could possibly help the child be successful with least possible restriction. Everyone comes together to help brainstorm what would work best for the child (Lo, 2012).

The process of school teachers, parents, and other school professionals, such as special education teachers, speech therapists, occupational therapists, or anyone the parent feels might have a good understanding and the best interest of their child at heart, coming together to plan a child's educational needs or IEP is important. The law originated in 1975 and was titled Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, IDEA. This law was put into place to assure that everyone, including children with disabilities have access to a free and appropriate education. There have been several revisions to this law with the last for school age children 4-21 going into effect on July 1, 2005. With this update the title was also changed to The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004. As of 2011, IDEA now has a section that covers infants and toddlers with disabilities as well. Written within this law is recognition of

children with disabilities who in the past were not receiving appropriate education and were denied opportunities to reach their full potential. According to the US Department of Education, there has been 30 years of data collected on children with disabilities and their educational needs and still there were not enough services and help in school for children with disabilities and parents often had to pay for this help on their own. In order to meet these needs, the US Department of Education enacted the current revision of 2004. IDEA of 2004 is divided into four parts and addressed the following: Part A - General Provisions, Part B - Assistance for Education of All Children with Disabilities, Part C - Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities, and Part D - National Activities to Improve Education of Children With Disabilities. Part D addresses parental education and training in order for parents to have an equal partnership with the school so they can successfully help their children get their needs met in school as well as learn their procedural safeguards. With this education and training, parents can actively participate in the IEP process as well as make sure their children are receiving a FAPE education (US Department of Education, 2004).

In order for the IEP process to start, the parent must be involved and is expected to have an active role in helping to plan their child's educational needs. An IEP is one way to meet those needs. An IEP is a written document that is required for every student that has been determined to have a disability and will require special education services because of the disability. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the IEP process has 10 steps. The first step is identifying that the child might need disability services or other help in school. This step requires either an

educator or the parent requesting the evaluation. The parent must, however, give permission for the evaluation to take place. Step two is assessing and evaluating the child in all areas requested. In step three, a team decision is made as to whether the child qualifies for services. The team consists of a parent/guardian or educational rights holder, general education teacher, special education teacher, administrator, program specialist, nurse, advocate, psychologist, and whoever the parent or school wants to be present. Step four states that if the child qualifies for services the IEP team has 30 days to meet and set up the child's IEP. Next, during step five, the IEP meeting is scheduled by the school with all parties being notified of time, date, and place. In step six, the meeting is held and all members of the team collaboratively decide upon the best services for the child. For step seven, all services are to be put into action. Step eight requires the child to be assessed to make sure there is progress being made. The assessment is conducted by the special education teacher to make sure goals are being met or by the person or educator that is providing the special services for the child. This will occur once a year for the annual IEP and a full assessment will be conducted tri-annual to determine continued eligibility. In step nine, the team reconvenes and receives the results of the progress assessment. Reviewing of the IEP must take place once a year; however, the parent or teacher can require a meeting at any time. Step 10 takes place every three years to reevaluate the child to see if they still qualify for services.

Although parents' participation is imperative to the IEP process, according to Fish (2008), parents do not feel as if they have a part in their child's educational

needs. They feel that the educator makes all the decisions. The parents are just given information about their child but their input is not considered. Their suggestions are just pushed aside or denied as not needed by the child. Often parents do not understand the lingo that the educators are using and often feel uncomfortable to ask questions. This leads to parents not wanting to have an active role in their child's learning.

The family is the primary educator in a child's life. According to Plevyak (2003), the number of parents who do participate in their child's education decreases every year that the child progresses in school. Research shows that a child who has parents/guardians actively participating in the child's education performs better in school than kids who do not. Plevyak identifies many reasons that contribute to the low involvement of parents in planning their children's education, in particular, children who are not performing well in school. The reasons included cultural differences, education levels, family problems, job-related problems, and parents not experiencing a good relationship with the child's teacher.

According to the US Department of Education, some of the common problems with IEPs are that parents often do not attend these meetings, do not understand the importance of the meeting, do not feel they have a say in their child's education, or do attend but do not participate. In 2007, the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) was altered to include the part that required schools to allow parents to participate in their child's education planning. This change was meant to allow parents an equal part and say in the meetings determining their child's education. However, the

questions remain, do parents understand what an IEP meeting is, do the parents truly have a say, and what do the terms and acronyms mean that the educators use in these meetings? It makes one wonder, are they really wanted there. Kemp (2012) conducted a longitudinal study to explore answers to some of these questions. The researcher used a random sample of parents with varying ethnicity, income, education level and marital status with children in special education classes in K-12th grade. Before the IEP meeting parents were mailed a survey that they were to complete after the meeting had taken place. The researcher found that parents did not feel they had an equal say, many had negative experiences during the meetings, and many had very low or no understanding of the terms that were being used during the meeting with no explanation given. Negative experiences included parents feeling overwhelmed, ganged up on by school staff, and not adequate as a parent. Although it is required for the parent to be there, as the research showed, there was definitely a lack of help for the parents in order for them truly feel a part of the process (Kemp 2012).

Landmark, Roberts, and Zang (2012) conducted a study to determine the educators' view of parental involvement and understanding of their child's IEP meetings. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected from several schools, including public and private, in order to get a broad picture of how the educators felt about the parents' participation. They wanted to assess the beliefs of the educators around parent involvement as well as the amount of time they saw the parent involved. The researchers reviewed over 200 IEPs to find ones that contained the defined level of parental involvement according to the educators. Researchers had

the educators define parental involvement. This working definition included type of parental involvement, whose job it was to involve parents, and legal issues around involving parents. The educators also placed heavy emphasis on the success of the child and parental involvement. Next, they interviewed 18 educators, who had been a part of the IEP process in order to explore their perception of parental involvement. The first major finding was related to what the educators considered to be parental involvement. They found that educators understood the legal importance of the parent being involved. However, the teachers felt that most of the parents' involvement in the child's education as well as the IEP was done before the meeting in filling out assessments or after in educating the child on life skills. In the meeting, parents were likely to agree with or just repeat what the educator said with asking very few questions. Second, they found there were barriers that prevented the parent from being involved. The educators saw these barriers as only applying to the parent's side and not the educator's side or role. They felt that parents were too busy and did not have time, or and culturally did not understand what was involved, and felt that the parents thought it was the job of the educators to decide what was best for the child. Lastly, how parental involvement was promoted was also discussed. The educators identified three areas they felt were important that included making the parents feel comfortable so they were more likely to attend, having a good relationship with the parent before the meetings thereby making them more apt to be involved, and the need for training for parents in order to be a vital part of the process (Landmark, Roberts, & Zang 2012). Therefore, considering the barriers parents

experience and their limited understanding of the IEP language and process, coupled with the lack of training and help provided by the school system, the goal of this project was to create a brochure that would provide parents with this needed information to aid in their participation in the IEP process.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The objective of the project was to create a pamphlet that would help provide resource for parents who were dealing with Individual Education Plans (IEP) or Student Study Team (SST) meetings for children who required special help and accommodations in school. The goal was to work with a panel of advisors to come up with a list of definitions for the language used during the IEPs, easier to understand explanation of the child and parents' rights and responsibilities, and resources for parents to access to help them navigate the process of IEPs and SSTs. In 2007, the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) was altered to include the part that required schools to allow parents to participate in their child's education planning. This change was meant to allow parents to have an equal part and say in the meetings determining their child's education according to the U.S. Department of Education. However, the question remains, did parents understand what an IEP meeting was, did they truly have a say, and what was everyone talking about in those meetings they were required to attend? This pamphlet hoped to address these concerns and provide parents the needed information to be more actively involved in their child's IEP planning process.

Significance of the Project

After contacting several agencies in the area, I found that there was no brochure available to parents to give them the general education they need about the IEP process or the terminology used by the team during the meeting. When their

child was struggling in school, they often struggled along with them. As shown by past research when parents did make it to the IEP process they often felt overwhelmed and did not know how or what they can participate in. With the IDEA, money had been set aside specifically for schools to encourage them to have more parent involvement. However, no education was given to the parents on how to be involved and nor was any training provided to help increase their comfort or confidence. The goal of the brochure was significant in its endeavor to be a start to help fill this gap. The brochure intended to increase their knowledge and understandings of the terminology used during the meeting so they could understand the discussion and have a voice. The brochure also purported to briefly describe the steps of an IEP so parents were better prepared for the meeting and know what to expect ahead of time. According to Plevyak (2003), parents are the main educators of their child, therefore, they need to have greater input and involvement with their child's education. As several of the researchers have pointed out children were more successful in school when their parent were involved.

LITERATURE REVIEW

With the passing of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the No Child Left Behind Act, there is a growing emphasis on increased push for schools to facilitate parental involvement and encouraging them to play an active role in planning their child's educational needs. When the US implemented the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 as a program to offer financial aid to schools that have disadvantaged students attending, they included section 1118 that requires educational agencies to facilitate parent involvement in order to receive Title I funding. Title I funding provides revenue for schools that serve low-income families (U.S. Department of Education). According to Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Javitz, and Valdes (2012), the legislation has driven the educational system to increase the amount of interaction they have with the parents when it comes to planning the special educational needs of children with disabilities. Multiple researchers have conducted studies from many different angles to help determine why there seems to be a problem with parental involvement.

Educators' Perspectives

Is parental involvement affected by where you are living? Williams-Diehm et al. (2014) conducted a research study to determine whether there was significantly less involvement of parents in collaboration and development of IEPs in rural areas versus suburban and urban areas. A current myth that they discovered in the education world is that rural school children have fewer opportunities for success in

life and subpar education than students in urban and suburban areas. Research shows that people who live in rural areas tend to have a stronger sense of community and pride in their local schools than people who live in urban and suburban areas. Furthermore teachers and students have a stronger bond and when needed everyone comes together in times of need. Rural areas also have lower socio-economic status as well as have lower parental education levels. There also tended to be a stronger bond between school boards, community members and administrators, which led to the success of smaller rural schools. Lower income students also performed better on American College Test (ACT) when they came from a rural school compared to urban schools. The participants were 159 educators in rural, suburban and urban areas who had students with disabilities and had IEP's at school. They were given a survey where they were asked what their level of participation on the IEP was, the level of responsibility of applying the IEP in class, importance of parents' participation and actual parent participation. Results showed that 87.3% of parents in rural areas sometimes/always collaborated in the IEP process compared to urban and suburban area that reported 70% participation. Parents from all areas were reported to have participated at least 94% of the time by direct service provider teachers, noting that the parent must be present at the IEP meeting in order for changes to be made. The educators were also asked what the major barriers and benefits of collaboration were. The benefits of collaboration were that there were many voices in planning and the IEP, which led to a well rounded and student focused IEP. The major barriers identified were that the teachers felt they did not have enough time to hold these

meetings and they had difficulty in scheduling meetings. Other themes that emerged from the study were that parents had unrealistic expectations of their children and regular education teachers did not want special education students being taught in their main stream classes. The researchers point out it is optimum to involve all parties in planning and carrying out these educational plans, but this does not always happen (Williams et al., 2014).

Parents' Perspectives

Extensive research shows that parents do attend IEP meetings and typically do speak up (Wagner et al., 2012). However, they found that parents would not be involved in choosing programs and which assessments would be given to their child; this was left up to the teachers or already decided before the meeting started. The researchers analyzed existing data from two longitudinal studies that examined samples that were a nationwide representation of students age 6-19 with disabilities. They asked several questions about parents' attendance, involvement in decision making regarding their child with disabilities' educational needs and factors that were related to parent participation. The majority of parents reported that they had attended an IEP that year. Out of those parents, 70% said they were happy with the level of involvement they had in the process. Parents with an income greater than \$25,000 were more likely to participate in the meetings and report satisfaction than parents of lower income. Parents who were active at their child's school and liked their child's teacher reported greater satisfaction in their participation in the IEP meeting. The parents who were not involved in school but supported their education

at home reported lower levels of satisfaction. In addition, parents who belonged to a support group for parents of special needs children reported greater overall satisfaction. Single parents were also more likely to be less satisfied. This research identified specific groups whose concerns or experiences need to be addressed in order for parents to be an equal partner in the education process as laid out by the special education legislation (Wagner et al., 2012).

According to Bonner (2008), school teams are required by law to include parents in the planning of their child's education. However, according to school psychologists, inadequate participation by parents is one of the top three problems of these team meetings. Even though educators report that parents' participation is low, parents report back that they are satisfied with their participation. Some parents mentioned that their child's IEP had been prepared prior to the meeting and the results and goals were being presented to them instead of the parent having a part in the planning process. Bonner conducted a research study on parents who have had extensive experience in the team planning meeting process to see how they perceived their experiences. The researcher studied seven suburbs in a large Midwestern metropolitan area with 12% students who had an IEP. All participants were members of the special education advisory committee. Seventeen parents in all were emailed a survey that inquired about their experiences such as positive and negative aspects of the meetings they attended.

Bonner's results identified five thematic categories that ran through the surveys. First was general meeting context and organization of the actual IEP

meeting and process and the involvement of the parent before and after the meeting. The parents wanted smaller meetings; they felt more comfortable when there were six or less people present. As a whole, the experiences were that regular education teachers just attend the meeting briefly and do not help in planning the education plan, cost seemed to play a part when choosing services, and the biggest complaint was when educators failed to implement the actions that were added to the educational plan. One suggestion made by the parents that they felt might be helpful was for the parents to have the agenda the day before so they could have time to process the results and to come up with suggestions. The second theme related to relationships that were affected by parents' past and present with professionals as well as the relationships that the educational professionals have with each other. A few of the negative results were education staff not getting along, a negative relationship between the child and their teacher, and the importance of knowing the child. One parent stated; "We didn't really talk about my son here, just the image of those kinds of kids" (p.243). The third theme included communication between educators, professionals, and the parents. The educational plan seems to have input from all contributors at the meeting. However, only five parents reported positive experiences when their ideas and contributions were acknowledged and included in the educational plan. Parents need to feel as if they are listened to and understood. They need to feel they are an important part of the team and not just mandated to be there to sign the paperwork. The fourth factor was problem solving that includes the parents as well as the educators. Parents wanted there to be open dialogue to discuss

the problem at hand in order to come up with a solution agreed upon by all and not just the educators. They also wanted the staff to be ready to problem solve, be open to suggestions, and be willing to be creative when needed. One of the biggest complaints was that the interventions that were supposed to be implemented the following academic year had not even been addressed, even by the time the planning team came together again, a year later. The fifth and final theme was parent emotions; Bonner identifies this as a very difficult area to cover because even with the positive information that is presented to the parents, it still deals with some negative aspects of their child. According to Bonner, most parents come to the meetings nervous and anxious. They can often face a varied range of emotions from happy to rage depending on the meeting, all the while knowing that the meeting is not a safe place to discuss any of their emotions. The IEP process can be a very emotionally laden meeting where parents are often given bad news about their child or told that their child was difficult to handle in class. When parents were given negative information about their child they often reported being dissatisfied with the IEP meeting and had a negative experience. There were also reports of positive meeting interactions when the parent was told that their child was progressing and making significant strides.

According to Bonner (2008), one parent stated:

The intensity of feelings and the range of emotions experienced by a parent of a child with a disability cannot truly be understood unless one experiences it firsthand. However, a gracious sense of empathy, understanding, and patience can go a long way to making parents feel that their range of emotions is not only accepted, it is expected and understood. (p. 250)

Bonner's study provided good suggestions as to how to improve the whole IEP process and how to make it better for all parties involved. Professionals can improve the team meetings for the parents just by recognizing that they are the experts on their own child. Professionals would do better if they spoke about the child as an individual and not as a diagnosis.

Factors that Influence Participation

Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, and Apostoleris (1997) explored what variables might prevent or predict whether a parent has any involvement in planning their child's education during the IEP meetings. Participants included 209 mothers of 209 third, fourth, and fifth grade students, who were interviewed individually for the study. The boy/girl ratio was 111 girls and 98 boys. They also interviewed 28 teachers. The families were of varying social classes, twenty-two percent received government assistance, and education levels varied from some high school all the way up to masters degrees. Other factors studied were whether the parent was married, single, or a step parent and whether the children's parents were employed or not. The children and teachers were given a questionnaire in their classrooms to rate the parents' involvement as they saw it. The variables questioning what might have effected parental participation consisted of the parent/child relationship, family context, attitudes of teachers towards their perception of parents being involved, family configuration and child gender. The three areas that were rated were behavior involvement, personal involvement and cognitive-intellectual involvement of the parents. Behavior involvement was defined as being active in school activities and

helping with homework, personal involvement was defined as knowing what is going on with the child at school, and cognitive-intellectual involvement was defined as providing the child with educational activities such as going to the library or having discussion about what is current in the news.

The results of the behavior involvement factor showed that mothers of higher SES and two parent families tend to be more involved than single parent families. There were no effects of child gender or work status on this factor. Cognitive-intellectual involvement was revealing in that if the parent thought they needed to be active in their child's education they were more likely to be involved. However, teachers' attitudes did not contribute to this factor. With personal involvement, the only significant result was that if the child was a boy the parent was more apt to pull resources from that child, meaning that boys received less social support from their parent in knowing what was going on in their daily school activities. Although, the study did show some significant results, it does not totally cover the difficulty in determining what predictors indicate parental involvement or lack of involvement in their child's education. Overall, the main findings were that parents who are single, children with behavior issues, and lower SES are the greatest predictors of why a parent might limit their involvement and would be a good area to target to research how to increase involvement (Grolnick et al., 1997).

Optimal IEP Planning

Dilberto and Brewer (2012) discussed how the IEP should play a major role in the lesson plan for children with special needs in their education. Not all IEPs are

done correctly, however, an IEP should be detailed enough so anyone who uses it could plan the best learning plan for the child even without knowing the child. In order for this to happen there needs to be open communication and planning among all parties on the IEP team. The team consists of the general education teacher, special education teacher, parents, administrator, and other professionals such as the speech therapist, when this fits the well being of the child. The IEP team should be asking who would be beneficial in helping highlight the child's strengths and addressing the needs. Many parents invite advocates to assist them in the process. The advocate should be included in the whole process including the pre-meeting discussion.

Parents who are actively involved are often able to help the teacher determine the best needs of the child. In order for this to be successful, Dilberto and Brewer state that it would be beneficial for the teacher to contact the parents before the school year begins, extend an open door policy to the parents while encouraging visits and participation, and provide several forms of contact for the parents to stay connected with the teacher. In order for parents to be a successful partner in the IEP process they need to understand the process, their rights, and the laws governing their child's education. The IDEA states that all parents and guardians must receive a copy of procedural safeguards (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Although this document is often written above the educational level of the parents, it would be beneficial for the school to have a class to help parents learn the IEP process. The teacher also has the responsibility to explain these rights to the parents when they do

not understand them. When planning the IEP, general education teachers should be included. Research shows that when the IEP is written without the general education teacher students are often denied FAPE; therefore, there needs to be open communication between the general education and special education teachers. Also, in order for the IEP goals to be useful, they need to be developed by the whole team to meet all the needs of the child. Instead of presenting parents with predetermined goals educators should get input from the parents as well.

Diliberto and Brewer (2014) identified six tips for a successful IEP meeting. Step one is a pre-meeting planning that allows all parents to brainstorm ideas about the student's strengths, needs, and goals before sitting down for the IEP meeting. All members need to receive the information that will be shared at the meeting ahead of time as that will give people time to process the information. This meeting should also include the parent and advocate. Step two states that the meeting should have a facilitator as well as a recorder. The facilitator's job is to ensure that all parties are following the agenda and ground rules and not recording the information from the meeting. Their role is not to hurry through the agenda but to make sure that everyone has an equal voice in communicating their ideas. Step three includes the meeting agenda that allows the team to have direction to follow for creating the IEP. It is recommended that the agenda be created several days prior to the meeting, but it should be known that this document is fluid. The agenda should include the following: welcome and introduction of all team members, review of ground rules, summary of any assessments conducted on the child, reviewing the student's

strengths and needs, the IEP development, and closure of the meeting. This includes setting the date for the next meeting. Step four focuses on ground rules that help drive positive communication and promote person-centered planning. This type of planning puts the emphasis on the goals and individual plans of the person while having a positive respectful relationship with the rest of the team. Step 5 is essential knowledge and all the members of the team, including the parents, should have this for completing an appropriate IEP. This can include information such as the student's strengths and weaknesses, educational requirements, laws, available services and how to read and interpret assessment data. All team members have different areas of knowledge to present at the meeting. The family is the expert on the student's background and knowledge, strengths, successes, challenges and unsuccessful strategies. The school administrator knows the laws and regulations for the IDEA and also what resources can be committed to the student. The service personnel, such as the psychologist, are knowledgeable on the assessments on the child and the data that they report. The general education and special education teachers know the curriculum that needs to be taught to the different grade levels. Step six is the last, but is very important; it recommends limiting the jargon used. Educators and administrators are used to using acronyms when speaking about different services and terms at school. It is important that these are either left out of the meeting or the parents are explained the meaning of the different terms in order to prevent the alienating of the parent. Open and effective communication can be very helpful in the IEP process and also allows all members of the team share vital information in

order to meet the best needs of the child which in turn produces a highly effective IEP (Diliberto & Brewer, 2014).

The objective of this project was to help eliminate or alleviate barriers that researchers have determined to be factors that influence parental involvement, especially the lack thereof, in their child's IEP. The goal was also to educate parents on the basic IEP process so they have a basic understanding, feel more successful, and play an important role in planning the goals and learning objectives for their child.

PROJECT DESIGN

Overview

The project I chose to create was a brochure for parents who have children with special needs who have difficulty in school and need to be placed on an IEP in order for the child to be successful in gaining their education or FAPE. The brochure contains definitions that the educators use during the meetings, basic parental and children's rights, and references for parents to find other help when needed.

Stakeholders

For the development and creation of the project, a team collaboratively worked to create the brochure. I selected a school administrator, a county advocacy representative for parents and children with special needs, a parent who has extensive experience in the IEP and SST process, and a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist service director for an insurance company to be a part of the collaborative team that worked on developing this project, as well as myself. The administrator helped with the structure and references in order for the pamphlet to have enough information in order for the school to want to distribute the brochure to their parents. This contribution focused on including the appropriate guidelines for requesting IEP help from schools and not giving the parents inaccurate information. The county advocate is often the first person to offer help to parents who are struggling with the IEP process. This role ensured that the clients' needs were being addressed as far as the reading level of the user, understanding of the language used in the brochure, and

inclusion of specific information on helpful hints. A parent was included because of experience as a parent of a child with special needs for many years. This person has experienced the IEP process from the beginning, when their child first started struggling with school, to current grade level, thus gaining several years of experience in the process. The parent's role was to address the emotional piece as well as parents reaching out for help from strangers at a time of need. We discussed what each representative felt would be important to include in the pamphlet as well as definitions of vocabulary such as resource or behavior plans. In addition, we reviewed the Parents Rights handout to discuss the most important items in this book that needed to be broken down into a more understandable format. I met with each member of the team several times for planning of the brochure and then had one final meeting to go over the final product.

We met as a team to discuss the literature about what was needed in the brochure. As a team, we brainstormed ideas on what to put into the brochure. According to the research, a glossary is needed, so as a team we decided what words to include in this section. We also decided where to distribute the brochure and who the target audience will be.

Creation of the Brochure

I used the Community Tool Box (2014) as a resource, along with feedback from the group, to assist me in compiling the brochure so it fits the purpose and the target audience. The Community Tool Box provided recommendations in terms of the design of a brochure as well as how information should be presented. In term of

the design, it is recommended that a brochure is typically one sheet that is folded into three sections, which contains facts about the topic the brochure is targeted to educate people on, giving them step by step instructions, or even a call to action. A brochure can be directed to a specific audience or address a very broad group of people, which in this case was focused on a specific audience. The audience was parents who were embarking on the IEP process for the first time. Brochures are meant to be fluid or ever changing with the information that it contains. According to the Community Tool Box, in order to have a well planned, effective brochure it is best to have a well laid out plan.

For the creation of this brochure, first, other brochures were collected for examples of what brochures should look like. Next, the producers of the brochure brainstormed for what information they would like to have included within the document. I explored samples of other brochures and shared that information with all parties of my group and brought them together to discuss what information will be most helpful. Considering that brochures are so small, the group needed to make the best use of the space and not try to include too much information as to overwhelm the reader. At our initial meeting, we came up with a general outline for detail and content.

Keeping it concise and simple is the general rule that the Community Tool Box suggests. For general guidelines, they recommended to keep sentences short, avoid saying the same thing over again in different parts of the brochure, and making sure that correct spelling and active voice is used. This step will help the parents to

recognize themselves as advocates for their child and more a part of the team. They suggested something similar to “When you are in an IEP meeting always ask questions when you do not understand” instead of “Parents should ask a question when they do not understand”. After the team brainstormed on what would be most helpful in the brochure I as the team leader made a rough draft of the brochure. When I completed the rough draft I met with each member individually to gather feedback on the brochure about possible additions or changes.

Massachusetts Consortium created a brochure entitled *Is your Child Different* for parents of children with special needs and they discovered that their brochure needed to educate parents on the need to ask for help. The greatest piece of advice they received from their advisory board was for the parents in need to ask other parents who have experienced similar issues or concerns within the school system for support. They stated that although it would be easier to just look at a website it can be more beneficial to ask someone who has had similar experiences. They acknowledged that it can be difficult to talk with strangers and they might not know what questions to ask; however, the person whom they would be talking to has been in the same position as them and can share their experienced knowledge. In the current project we have a section that deals with the small statistic that states that the parent is not alone and that according to the California Department of Education (2015) 11% of students that attend school have an IEP. It also addresses the importance of reaching out for help to advocate for their child.

A budget also needs to be discussed to find out how much money is available to spend on compiling and producing the brochure and how much time is needed to put the brochure together. For this project I initially shared a few copies with each agency and also gave them the electronic copy so they can reproduce and change the document as needed. As the primary project developer, I oversaw all the activities of the team and the final product.

Dissemination of the Product

As a group we decided that the final product will be presented to the different school boards in Modesto to give them the opportunity to share the pamphlet with parents whom they feel would benefit as well as the Special Education Board of Modesto City schools. The IEP advocacy group that assisted in the project development will share the brochure with their clients. The LMFT will be sending her clients a copy when the need arises for help with their child's educational needs. The brochure, in an electronic format, will be sent to the Family Resource Network, one of the resources that are listed on the brochure. They will evaluate the final product and see if it fits the needs of their agency, or make changes as needed, and then pass the final product out to their clients in need. Hopefully, the brochure will be distributed by word of mouth through parents involved in the IEP process.

Evaluation of the Product

The evaluation was created to determine the importance and helpfulness of the information included in the brochure. The evaluation instrument was created in a way that it provides some quantitative assessments on the different content areas of the

brochure along with providing qualitative open-ended feedback on changes needed. The evaluation form consists of several Likert scale questions and a few fill in the blank questions; (see Appendix B). The evaluation can be given to parents and or guardians one month after the initial IEP/SST meeting is held in order for the agency using the brochure to examine whether it is effective for their agency or needs to be adjusted. Each organization will be provided with the brochure and the evaluation tool for them to collect data to determine whether the brochure is helpful or not in meeting the needs of its targeted audience. This data will be collected by individual organizations/schools so that they can make customized changes to better adapt the brochure for their specific clientele needs.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

During the process of conducting the literature review and the research into the local community for resources to help with the development of the brochure, I was not able to find any basic help that parents can access or need in order to play a meaningful role in their child's education. I looked for possible classes, brochures, or other help for parents that would aid in their understanding of the IEP, their role, responsibilities, or rights and could not find anything. According to the US Department of Education (2004), the IEP process was implemented with parents in mind with the consideration that the parent is the expert in the child's life in order for the child's needs to be met or receive a Free Appropriate Public Education. The research presented showed that there is a great need for something such as the brochure that is created to address this issue. When reviewing the research I was not surprised to find that there is a need for such an item. Having gone through the IEP process myself for my children and facing many of the same issues and factors that affected my involvement, I knew there was a great need for more resources that would be of help to parents and children.

The implications of the project for clients is that they will have a better understanding of the IEP process, be more confident and play a more influential role in determining the best plan for their child's education. They will be able to play the essential role in the Individual Education Plan process as was set forth in the Individuals with Educational Disabilities Act (US Department of Education, 2004).

This brochure breaks down the terms used in the IEP meetings (and pre meetings), it lays out the process or the steps of the IEP, along with agenda followed during a typical meeting and some easy tips to help increase their involvement and voice in this process of advocating for themselves and their child.

Social workers will be able to use this instrument to help empower their clients to play an active role in their child's educational needs. When providing their clients with this brochure they will be providing psycho education that is needed in the field. Professionals and educators will benefit from this brochure by parents having a better understanding of the process and thereby, allowing them to be a vital member of the team. They can be seen and heard as the expert on their child and not just be there because they are required by law to take part in the process. The schools can provide FAPE to students with disabilities and be successful when choosing which services are being implemented instead of the trial and error method.

Lessons Learned

However, with having completed this project, there are some lessons learned that I would like to share with the field and future project developers, or anyone who wants to further revise and strengthen this product. After reviewing all the research and learning about the educators' perspective, I think it might be beneficial to include more educators in the planning process such as a general education teacher, a special education representative from the school district, and a school psychologist. I feel that they would have a different perspective as to what they feel the parents would need in a brochure and how they would be most helpful in an IEP. I also believe, a

youth, who as a child with special needs went through an IEP, would bring some deep insight into the process and what they think might be helpful for a parent to know and understand.

Also, in terms of logistics, it was hard to get the entire team to meet collectively as many times as I would have liked. So, even though, I did manage to get them together a couple of time, I needed to do more work individually with them, resulting in not all of them hearing each other's perspectives directly, resulting in mixed feedback. It would have been helpful if the entire team could meet together more. Understanding the time and life constraints of all the stakeholders, I started the process with them almost 4-5 months back. So, may be planning for even more time for the development of the brochure might be helpful.

Next Steps

In terms of what needs to happen next with the brochure, my goal is to circulate it to all the local schools and districts in my area. I will be sharing the research on this topic with the agencies via email so they can see the importance of what is included in the brochure. I will also include a copy of the brochure electronically so the agency can make any changes or add their information for resources they see needed. I recognize that this brochure will not fix the problem and will only be a small help to a large crisis. Other solutions need to be created in order for struggling parents and children to get the needed help.

When I was reading the current research and engaging in the development of this brochure with the team of stakeholders, and discovered the true extent of the

problem, I turned to other parents with children with special needs in other states to explore how their child's educational needs are addressed. I was surprised to find out about other more creative and liberating ways in which IEPs were being planned and implemented. For example, a parent in Utah told me of a class that she and her child were required to attend before attending their first IEP. This class taught them all about the IEP process and the terms and their rights etc. Through this process, her son learned how to be in charge and present his concerns at his IEP meetings and choose what services he feels would be most beneficial to him. He got to lead his IEP meeting, instead of the school personnel or other team members.

Another parent shared how her son is in charge of leading the team for his IEP meeting. Each meeting has an agenda that he prepares, which the team members are provided with at least five days before the meeting so they can have their questions and concerns added and not missed or forgotten at the time of the meeting. The student also creates a power point with his strengths, concerns and assessment results. This process gives the parent and student more voice and decision making power over their child's education making their participation meaningful versus just being a signatory member, required by law, without any say or rights.

The next steps I feel would be helpful in finding a solution for this problem are education, training, mentorship, working relationships and mostly, a paradigm shift. Education in the form of classes that inform the parents about the IEP process so they can feel confident and ready to be a helping partner in their child's education, will be helpful as a first step in engaging the parents. Ongoing trainings for parents

on the laws and more complex areas of the IEP process would be beneficial so experienced parents can continue to help their child. I believe the most important piece would be to create mentorships with parents who have experienced this process. Experienced parents can help parents who are just getting started in the process so the new parent would not be scared or feel alone. Experienced parents can serve as advocates, if needed and desired by the parent and child team. The working relationship piece that really needs additional attention and work is one between the school personnel and the parents. Both sides need to learn to collaborate to have the best needs of the child at heart and not let money, time, or pride get in the way.

However, these are interim steps to help reach the ultimate goal. Somehow, the IEP process has gotten away from the parents and the child being the expert and key player in their own lives to the education system dictating what they feel would be best for the child. We need a paradigm shift where we bring the whole team back together to work together and not against each other with the parent and child, as the experts on their lives and experiences, taking the lead. The process has also shifted to being viewed negatively, in terms of the focus being on what is wrong with the child versus how to best support the needs of the child. With parents and children having a voice and leading the process, the focus is more likely to shift back to what is was intended to be, to begin with, which is to help a child get a free appropriate public education. I know it will take micro steps to create this change. By creating this brochure I hope to empower parents to raise questions, challenge the school, if needed, and advocate for their child's rights through increasing their awareness about

why we have the IEP process. They are the true leaders in their child's education and have a right to have the opportunity and the voice to be as such.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

IEP BROCHURE



Academic Assessment-measures academic achievement and progress

Accommodation -environment/equipment change - changes are made to help student succeed in the classroom, changes how student learns material.

Advocate-provides support, direction, encouragement and comfort for families and work together with you and the school district to secure the best possible education for your child. They are usually current on State and Federal legislation.

Assessment-testing to look at possible deficits, processing disorders, or disability in a child

Discrepancy-the difference between test results and academic performance

FAPE- Free and Appropriate Public Education- the right all students in the US have to educational supports and services appropriate for them to achieve academic success at no cost to the parent

IEP-Individual Education Program- a plan created for a student who has a disability and needs special education services due to disability.

IQ Assessment- measures intellectual/mental ability

LRE-Least Restrictive Environment- a student who has a disability has the opportunity to be educated with non-disabled peers, to the greatest extent possible

Modification-Academic changes-changing/modifying work assignments so students can be successful. Changes what student is taught or expected to learn

Psychoeducational Testing-an assessment of psychological aspects of learning and of academic skills

SELPA-Special Education Local Planning Agency- assists school districts in their county to provide special education services

Special Education-specially designed instruction at no cost to the parent to meet the unique needs of the child with disabilities

Continued on back.

Supports—not a direct service, provides help with modification/accommodation

Transitional Planning- transition from one school to another, usually grade 8&9 and/or grade 12&life or college

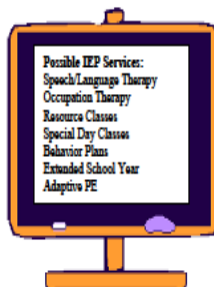
Resources:

California Dept. of Education (CDE)
Procedural Safeguards & Referral Services
 (800) 926-0648
 Fax (916) 327-3704
 E-mail: speceducation@cde.ca.gov
www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/fo

Family Resource Network
 (209) 472-3674
 (800) 847-3030 Toll Free
 E-mail: frmfamilies@aol.com
www.frn.org

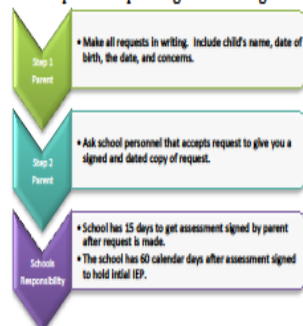
U.S. Department of Education
 IDEA Website
www.idea.ed.gov

Disability Rights California
 (800) 776-5746
www.disabilityrightsca.org



Individual Education Program, IEP- a written plan for a child with a disability that is created by a team in a meeting with measurable academic and functional goals which addresses the child's needs that result from the disability.

Steps for Requesting IEP Meeting:



Typical IEP Agenda:

- **Introductions**—introduction of all team members.
- **Review rights & Procedural Safeguards**—this is a document that explains the rights of children with IEPs and their parents. You will be asked if you have any questions about this document. You will sign a paper that states you received it and whether it was discussed.
- **Strengths**—discussion of areas that your child is doing well in.
- **Parent Concerns**—be prepared to share your concerns with team.
- **General/ Special Ed Teacher reports**—current teachers will discuss how child is doing in class. If student has goals, progress toward goals will be discussed as well.
- **Assessment results**—Results of any testing completed on your child will be shared.
- **Eligibility**—All team members will decide if student is eligible for services depending on disability.
- **Goals & Objective**—Develop SMART Goals: Specific, Measurable, Action words, Realistic/ relevant, and Time-limited.
- **Transition Plan**—If child is progressing to a new school, a transition plan is developed.
- **Placement & Services**—discussion of what services are needed and if child needs new placement with child still receiving FAPE & LRE.
- **Sign Documents**—all parties sign documents. Ask questions before you sign. If notes do not match what was said in meeting request change of notes.

If your child does not qualify for an IEP you can ask for a 504 Plan. This is a plan for a child who has disabilities and needs accommodations that will ensure their academic success and access to the learning environment.

“Ask for help not because you’re weak, but because you want to remain strong”
- Les Brown

General Ed Teacher—Administrator
Program Specialist—Nurse—SELPA
Advocate—Special Ed Teacher
Psychologist—Parent Support Person
Student when age appropriate
Parent—the expert on the child

An Effective IEP Team



“Approximately 11% of all students in California have an IEP in order to be successful in school. You and your child are not alone.”
California Department of Education (2015)

IEP Timeline:

Initial IEP	• First IEP meeting held only once
Annual IEP	• Every year around same date as Initial IEP annual IEP meeting will be held
Tri-annual IEP	• Every three years student will be re-assessed to see if they still meet criteria in order to receive services
Any Time IEP	• Any time parent or teachers feels meeting needs to be called



- You're in charge. You have final say; it's your child.
- Child and Parent both have rights.
- Make a list of your concerns for the meeting. It is common to feel stressed during meetings and have a hard time focusing.
- Be prepared, rehearse your concerns, and process emotions before if possible.
- Parent may request an independent evaluation at district expense if they disagree. Parents may also seek an independent evaluation at their own expense.
- Bring someone with you that is not emotionally attached.
- If parent's support person cannot attend, parent may request meeting date change.
- Request all meetings in writing.
- Sign documents in a timely manner so services can proceed.
- If you don't understand what is being said, ask questions. Ask until you get an answer you understand.
- Know what you're signing before you sign and always get a copy.
- Read IEP minutes or have them read to you before you sign; if incorrect ask for changes.
- Retention is not an intervention.
- You can request additional time to understand the proposed IEP plan before signing.

APPENDIX B
EVALUATION OF IEP BROCHURE

1

Evaluation of IEP Brochure

Please fill out the following survey to assist the producer of this pamphlet to ensure that it is helpful and fulfills the needs of parents.

Please check the box that best fits your answer:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. This pamphlet was helpful with the process for my child's IEP.					
2. I understood all terms and words that were used during the meeting.					
3. I received the pamphlet before the IEP meeting was held.					
4. I felt prepared to participate and understand the process when I went to my child's meeting.					
5. I found the glossary of terms to be helpful.					
6. I had an understanding of the IEP process based on the information on the brochure.					
7. I understood the goals of the IEP, based on the information on the brochure.					
8. I felt more comfortable in my child's IEP because of the information I received in the brochure.					
9. I felt more confident about participating in the planning of my child's education after reading the brochure.					

Please answer the following questions.

10. I was given this pamphlet by _____ . ie office? which office?, county, teacher

11. How long before the IEP did you receive the IEP? _____

12. Was that sufficient time for you to review the brochure and get familiar with the information? _____

13. I had an advocate with me during the meeting. Yes _____ No _____

14. This is my _____ child that I attend IEP meetings for. ie: 1st, 2nd,.....

15. Please list any changes or additions that would help to make this pamphlet more complete and better able to help other parents dealing with IEP's and SSTs.
