



Your Kids Have Grown this Summer? Has Their IEP Grown With Them?

Steps for Updating Your Child's Individualized Education Plan

By Carla K. Binswanger

Is it just me, or does every parent with a child on an Individualized Education Plan secretly dread the end of summer? While the rest of the (neurotypical) parenting world breathlessly awaits the first day of school, parents like me are hauling out 62 lbs. of IEP paperwork—and wondering what to do with it this year.

The progress reports. The evaluations. The standardized tests. The work samples. And finally, the 18-page, single-spaced, tiny-pica tome that is my 4th grader's IEP.

It just seems wrong that it all weighs more than he does.

But haul it out I do. Because I know that, in the five months since I last looked at all these documents, my little guy has grown up—and so, too, must his IEP.

"One of the biggest mistakes I see parents make is thinking of the IEP as a static document," says Kathleen Bach, a child and family advocate based in Ashland, Mass., and a member of the Special Education Advocacy Network (SPAN). www.spanmass.org "Any new school year is a transition of sorts, whether you're moving to a new school or moving up a grade. No matter what the expiration date is on the IEP, the new school year is a key time to re-evaluate a child's needs." She's right, of course. It's just that we'd all rather have one more week of summer vacation.

"When you think about it, if you're the one person out of 23 kids in a class who writes a note like that, who do you think is the parent who'll get great communication from the teacher all year?" You.

Step 1: Read it

Okay. So, I think we can all agree that no kid's IEP is riveting reading. (How'd you like to pore through 80 of them? That was the average caseload for our school's team leader last year.) But if you can force yourself to sit down this month and just read your child's existing IEP, you'll be way ahead of the game.

Pick up a pencil. Put up your feet. Crack open a beer. Whatever you need to do. And, as you read through each section, ask yourself: Does this document still accurately reflect my child's needs? Does the "Family Vision Statement" still sound relevant? Do the "Goals and Benchmarks" still make sense? Does the "Service Delivery" grid still seem like a good mix? If the answer to any of these questions is "No," mark it with a pencil. Then pick a date in your calendar (preferably within the next three weeks) to do something about it.

"We realized over the course of last summer that Sam was capable of being much more independent than he had been up until then," says Francine Rothkopf, founder of the Yahoo group Down Syndrome Mommies of Metro West and the mother of three children, including 10-year-old Samuel. "And we realized that if he continued having a one-to-one assistant in the classroom, it would keep him from growing and challenging himself." So, instead of waiting until, say, January, Francine and her husband reached out to the school before classes even began that fall. They amended his IEP to reduce the time Sam spent with the classroom aide. The result: a smooth transition from summer to the school year, and a major boost for Sam's independence in the classroom.

"I wish more parents understood that they can amend an IEP without reconvening the team," says Bach. Parents can do this now because of amendments made in 2004 to the federal IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, www.idea.ed.gov).

"My IEP ToolKit" - One Product: Three Perspectives

"My IEP ToolKit: The Complete Organizer for Your Child's Individualized Education Plan" is a specialized binder system that helps organize all your child's most important IEP-related papers. It gives you a way to make sense of them, an easy way to carry them, and—most importantly—a fast way to find them when you need them most. The kit includes Tips, Write-on Charts, Step-by-Step Instructions, and Strategies for Success, all on 12 high-quality pre-printed dividers. It also includes an interior pocket and a 3-hole puncher for easy addition of new material. "My IEP ToolKit" is designed for parents and guardians with children of all ages, all disabilities, in all 50 states. It has been endorsed by the Federation for Children with Special Needs (www.fcsn.org).

The product was also recently named a 2009 Outstanding Product by Disney's iParenting Media Awards (www.iparentingmediaawards.com). "My IEP ToolKit" was judged by a panel of iParenting Media Awards reviewers, who undergo a pre-qualification process to ensure that they are unbiased toward any juvenile and children's media manufacturers. The three reviews below, from a parent, an "expert," and a licensed childcare facility/school, all contributed to "My IEP ToolKit" being named a 2009 Outstanding Product by the iParenting Media Awards.

Parent Reviewer: When I saw this item in my box of products to review, I was thrilled! But now I'm more thrilled because I have it, needed it, and use it. Having a 3-hole punch in the binder is brilliant. The pockets on the front cover are also helpful. I like that they made the tabs out of heavier paper so they will be more durable. The letter from the creator at the beginning of the binder is a nice touch. It reminds me that we are not alone in this process and that the person who made this product understands what we



are dealing with. The printed information on each tab is helpful, especially the "What to put here" and "What not to put here" information. The binder is the right size. It is deep enough to hold a lot of paperwork but it will still fit nicely on a shelf and is not cumbersome to carry to a meeting. The font they chose for the information is a good choice. It gives a visually clean appearance that is easy to read and to look at, but it looks attractive at the same time. I also like that the binder has pages that are only printed in one language. I hope that they make other versions in different languages too, but I find it confusing when I look at a document or instructions that are written in all the major languages and the user has to scan the information to find the one that he or she can understand. Having the information printed in only one language on each card makes it easier to process the information quickly.

Expert Reviewer: The IEP Toolkit is well thought out and organized. It provides the parent the ability to keep everything together and for those parents that are new to the world of IEP's it helps them prepare for what is ahead and what to expect. Thank you on behalf of those parents and myself.

Licensed Childcare Facility/School Reviewer: After tending to numerous IEPs as a school staff member for over 14 years, this is the first organizational tool for parents that I have seen! This is a great concept for all parents of children with Special Needs. An IEP can be very overwhelming with all of the staff members, the paperwork and the decisions that need to be made. This "tool" can truly guide parents through the school year, keeping their paperwork, contacts and any other key information in an easily accessible location. I am truly impressed and grateful.

"Let's say you're in there meeting with the O.T. at the beginning of the school year, and you learn something new about your child that you want to include in the IEP," says Bach. "You can amend the IEP to reflect that, and not have to reconvene the team at all. It's those one-on-one meetings where you can really share the most information. That's where you build a relationship with the people who are teaching your child."

2. Flag new Developments

So. Still got that pencil? Reading your child's current IEP, look for sections where you can add any new information you've gathered about him/her this summer. Has your child discovered a passion for computers? Developed a new phobia or tic? Started new medication? If so, then make a note of it.

When you're done, write a note or email summarizing those new developments, and send it to the team members. "Keep it positive, and keep it brief," says Bach. "This should not be four pages, single-spaced, on the child's diagnostic disability. There's no bigger turnoff than parents who smother the school either

with their questions or with their information and minutiae. There is that balance." Done right, the payoff can be huge. "When you think about it, if you're the one person out of 23 kids in a class who writes a note like that, who do you think is the parent who'll get great communication from the teacher all year?" You.

If you know that transitions are a challenge for your child, consider using the note as an opportunity to communicate with teachers about ways to map out a smooth transition for your child's first day back in September. Does she need to see her new classrooms, or actually practice walking from one classroom to the next? Will the lunchroom be too loud for her? Does she need to see, or actually open, her new locker? Let the team know, and articulate the strategies you think will work best.

"All of these things can happen before the first day of school if you just plan for it," says Bach. "Although most school staff are off for the summer, they're always in the building a week or two before school starts." The better the information you give them,

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the more they can help your child get off to a good start this year.

This is particularly true when your child's teachers are unfamiliar with a particular diagnosis. "When you have a diagnosis everyone's heard of, that label can really help teachers understand and empathize with your child," says Gina Gallagher, author of *Shut Up About Your Perfect Child*, and mother of two girls, ages 10 and 14. "But when your child has no formal diagnosis, or something as frequently misunderstood as ADD/ADHD, very often teachers just don't know what to do with them." That's why, Gallagher says, each year she reconvenes her daughter's IEP team the minute school starts in the fall. "You need to get in front of them, show them her picture, and explain your child. It humanizes the child instantly. It tells the team that this parent is involved and watching. And it lets you fill them in on things you may have noticed over the summer."

Just as good as hearing it from you (maybe better) is hearing it from a fellow educator. If a counselor or consultant has been working with your child during the summer months, ask them to write a report detailing their goals and methodology, as well as your child's progress. And if they're willing, then get them talking to your child's teacher. "We were able to set up direct communication between Sam's summer tutor and his new teacher at school," says Rothkopf. "With the two of them speaking directly to each other, it created some real continuity for Sam going into the new school year."

Even when you don't have particularly positive news to share about your child's summer, communicating that news to the school is extremely important. Maybe even more so. "If there haven't been any summer services given to your child [through the IEP], then fall is the time to document any regression," says Bach. "You'll need that documentation to support your request for summer services." There are many kinds of regression, she notes, including regression of academic skills, social skills, and even transitioning-back-to-school-after-summer skills. Parents who document regression of skills as the child shifts back into school in the fall have a far better chance, she says, of getting summer services for their children the following year.

3. Keep your ear to the ground

Sometimes, though, it's not the student who changes over the summer. Sometimes it's the school.

When the staff and families of Dr. Philip O. Coakley Middle School in Norwood, Mass., learned that Coakley would be shifting to a "full inclusion" model this fall, there was a mix of excitement and anxiety. Full inclusion would mean many changes, some subtle and some structural. Among those changes: rooms like the Learning Center, where many students on IEPs used to receive extra help during the school day, would be shuttered. "It's going to be a major change in how these kids learn," says Coakley language arts teacher Michele Mullen, who has attended countless IEP meetings during her more than 25 years in education. In response to the shift to full inclusion, Mullen has found herself fielding questions from parents, particularly those

with children on IEPs.

Her advice: reconvene your child's team early this fall. Start by letting the team know that you have questions about how the school's organizational shift will change your child's learning environment. The resulting IEP should spell out exactly how, when, and even where, special education support will be provided, if not at a Learning Center. As well, she recommends that IEP amendments spell out how coursework will be graded and corrected; how progress reports will be completed; how data will be collected—in short, how the child will be supported in this new system. "I also recommend that parents ask for a weekly evaluation about how it's going in the classroom, especially those first few months in the fall," says Mullen. "You need to know who's providing support for your child (a special ed or homeroom teacher), in what format (solo or small group). It all impacts how your child learns."

4. Stay on it

Okay, pencils down. You've read through your child's IEP. You've noted the changes that need to be made. And you're ready to bring both the teachers, and the IEP, up to date for the new school year. Good work.

Now, here's the catch: "IEPs need a certain degree of oversight all year round," says Bach. "You need to be asking if the child is really getting the services and record keeping that the IEP calls for." Also, she says, keep your eyes open for what she calls "inconsistencies". If, for example, report cards say your child is exceeding in English, but you know that he's failed six spelling tests, then it's probably time to ask some questions.

"IEPs are about skills. If your child is gaining new skills you'll be able to see that when you measure their progress," says Robin Foley, director of special education projects for the Federation for Children with Special Needs, based in Boston (www.fcsn.org). Her advice for updating an IEP for a new school year: "If your first progress report of the year doesn't show adequate progress toward a goal, then I'd call a meeting to reconvene."

Oh. And when you reconvene that meeting? Don't bring all 62 lbs. of IEP paperwork with you. Just bring what's current and relevant to the meeting. And, no matter where your team stands on the issues, try to be as respectful and cooperative as possible. Like Mom always said, "You get more bees with honey."

Especially at the end of summer.

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