

## Taking Your Place at the Table: The IEP for Parents New to the Process



If you are new to the process of the individualized education plan, or IEP, for your child with hearing loss, this article is for you. While the process can be overwhelming, there is help available to learn the ropes.

Your child will go through an eligibility process to determine if he or she is eligible for an IEP. This is a two-part test that requires a child to have both an educationally significant degree of hearing loss, and experience difficulty in the classroom requiring specialized education supports and services. Colorado has specific guidelines on eligibility, as do all states. You can find Colorado's regulation on the Exceptional Child's Education Act Rules (ECEA Rules) on the Colorado Department of Education website. (See references.)

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA), the purpose of special education is to *“ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free and appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living.”* Parents play a crucial part on the IEP team as the experts in knowing their own child's skills, talents, and needs. You likely don't feel much like an expert ahead of this meeting, but a child's family adds so much to the discussion of strengths and needs at the IEP meeting. While you may have heard stories about difficult IEP meetings, the majority of meetings are positive and proceed without much difficulty. There is always a natural tension between parents, who are interested in the needs of only one child, and schools and districts, who must serve all students. Parents help balance out the IEP team process, and that is why the law places so much emphasis on parent involvement.

Successful deaf and hard of hearing adults often say: “I wouldn't be where I am without the support of my parents.” Your child will say the same about you.

### **IEP Meeting Preparation**

You will get a notice about the IEP meeting. The meeting time should be scheduled at a time when parents can attend, so if the time set won't work for you, quickly let the contact person know and suggest a few other possible times. The notice will also let you know who is attending the meeting. There will be a representative who can make decisions, called the “representative of the Lead Educational Agency” or LEA, a special education teacher or teacher of the deaf/hard of hearing (TOD/hh), a regular education teacher (who may not attend if your child is in a separate school and has no instructional time with general education students, but this is an important role who should be invited). Also attending: any related services staff such as a speech and language pathologist, audiologist, a sign language interpreter or captioner, a school psychologist, and you, the parent or guardian, and whenever possible, the student. Sometimes a special education teacher or teacher of the deaf/hh is also represents the LEA. Parents may invite anyone who has special knowledge about your child, about hearing loss and education, including private therapists, and even a friend to help you listen or take notes. You may bring private clinic reports to share, also.

Invite your child to talk with you about the meeting beforehand (and regularly about access at school). Getting your child's view on likes, dislikes, struggles and victories can give you a better idea what to ask about in the meeting. Bring any stories he or she tells you to help illustrate your child's unique strengths and needs. If your child is very young and has particular communication or other needs, a video might be very helpful to show. (While the school will evaluate the child, what you see in your home surroundings may be quite different.)

IEPs are scheduled as initial, review, or triennial meetings. At initial and triennial meetings, *eligibility* will be discussed and evaluations carried out in each area of need. These areas might include a variety of hearing tests both in quiet and in noise, academic skills, psychological/social skills, needs for technology, and an update on progress for any past goals. Initial and triennial IEPs are longer meetings for this reason. It may serve the family well to ask for the assessment data in advance, and meet with staff who can interpret assessments. (If a child is not found eligible, you can ask for further assessment. A 504 Plan to include possible placement, access services, education for staff and accommodations should be offered if a child is not found eligible for specialized education.)

For future meetings, parents who check in with individual teachers and/or therapists ahead of time to discuss progress or share concerns can find that meetings are more productive and focused on future planning. Neither parents nor educators like to be surprised at an IEP meeting with a new issue, so this kind of preparation is good practice for parents and schools alike.

A "draft" IEP is often prepared before the meeting. Families can ask for this document to review. A draft does not mean that a parent can't add to or suggest alterations for any item on the draft, as a parent is considered an equal member of the IEP team. A draft should be clearly marked as a "draft" to avoid any misconception that it serves as a final document.

Most school districts in Colorado use a computerized IEP form. The form is available for view on the Colorado Department of Education site (see references). Parents can review this form and make notes about what they observe in their child. Is he exhausted at the end of a school day? Does homework take twice as long as expected? Does she sail through mathematics but struggle with story problems? Pay attention to what your child says about school, friendships, feeling included, being able to understand teachers and classmates, and jot down notes to bring to the meeting.

### **The Communication Plan: Part of the "What Does My Child Need" Discussion**

The purpose of the IEP meeting is to determine current needs, set goals for the next year, and decide if the current services and placement is meeting the unique needs of your child. Be ready with your own list of needs to contribute to the meeting, and what worked well in the past year as well as what didn't work for your child. The federal law stipulates that certain areas called Special Factors must be addressed in the IEP for a deaf or hard of hearing student, and Colorado made this list into the Deaf Child's Bill of Rights law, which is incorporated in a form called the Communication Plan. This plan is attached to every deaf/hard of hearing student's IEP. These items are:

1. a) *Student's primary language* (generally the language used in the home from birth.)

- b) *Student's receptive and expressive communication modes* with an explanation of how a student receives communication and how they express themselves, with action plans as needed.
- c) Needs for Parent Counseling and Training: parents may benefit from additional training in understanding the special needs of their child, development, or acquiring skills needed to allow them to better support the child's IEP.
2. *Role models*: The IEP team has considered the availability of deaf/hard of hearing adult role models and peer group of the student's communication mode or language and any action plans to increase interaction with adult role models and peers.
  3. *Educational Placement Options*: A statement documenting that an explanation was given of all educational options provided by the school district and available to the child. This is *not* the point in the IEP discussion where placement is decided; this lets a family know what is available, and what impact the placement would have on the child's communication access and educational progress.
  4. *Proficiency of Staff*: Teachers, interpreters, and other specialists delivering the communication plan to the student must have demonstrated proficiency in, and be able to accommodate for, the child's/student's primary communication mode or language. This is a point in the IEP where a parent may ask about experience with other deaf/hard of hearing students, qualifications of interpreters, and any staff training needs in a particular aspect of educating your deaf or hard of hearing student or managing technology.
  5. The communication-accessible academic instruction, school services, and extracurricular activities the student will receive have been identified. The team is asked to consider the entire school day, transition times, and what the child needs for communication access in all activities, and any action plans needed.

The Communication Plan form can be located at the Colorado Department of Education site (see references). Again, fill out the items yourself before the meeting. Teams sometimes start with the Communication Plan discussion in order to ensure that the entire IEP begins with strong communication access. A substantial discussion of the plan makes for an effective IEP geared for educational progress.

### **Accommodations/Modifications – What are They?**

The IEP meeting will also feature a discussion of accommodations and modifications. Many students require changes to the classroom environment to take advantage of learning. These changes can be simple or complex, ranging from “flexible seating” (being able to sit where a child can best hear and see the teacher and classmates), the use of captions, sign language interpreting, gaining a child's visual attention before speaking, to the reduction of background noise. These changes, or *accommodations*, do not change what a child is expected to learn, but rather give the child access to the information presented in the regular classroom.

*Modifications* are actual changes to what the child learns, instructional methods, or assessments based on a child's unique needs. While accommodations can be thought of as minor changes that provide access to the general curriculum used with all students, modifications are specific alterations in teaching and/or the curriculum itself when a child can't access the general curriculum at this time. Common accommodations and modifications are included in the “IEP/504 Plan Checklist” and may assist parents and the entire IEP team in developing specific strategies for the student.

## **Needs before Placement**

Deciding where to send a child with hearing loss to school can be a tough decision. In some cases, there is no local option but the neighborhood school with few professionals available who know about hearing loss. In other areas of the state, several choices might be available. The IDEA provides that the child's educational plan includes addressing that child's particular needs, and that a continuum of services be available to students. A parent should always hear at the meeting that a statewide school for the deaf is an option, or about the existence of various regional programs, and this should be discussed whether or not the school district would support tuition to the regional or out of district program. In Colorado, the Colorado School for the Deaf and the Blind should always be discussed as an option for day students, preschool through high school and in transition, and for first grade through high school and transition students who can live in the residential program during the week, for example.

One basic tenet of IDEA is that public agencies must ensure that to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities should be educated where their typical peers would attend school and be included with children who do not have disabilities. This tenet is called "*Least Restrictive Environment*" or LRE. However, our kids with hearing loss sometimes find this kind of setting to be most restrictive, in that they may have NO fellow students or adults who know how best to communicate with them in that classroom. Discussing needs, goals, and the communication plan before deciding on placement helps focus the IEP on the unique needs of the child in a "*language rich environment*," which is a definition of the acronym "LRE" to consider for parents of children who are deaf or hard of hearing.

### **Goals: Specific, Measurable, More to Learn**

Finally, goals written in the IEP should address the child's needs and be geared toward helping the child gain a year's growth within the time frame of the school year. For this reason, the more meaningful and measurable the goals are, the more effective the plan. Goals will be written for each service provider, such as the speech language pathologist or the deaf educator. A goal, service, accommodation, modification or the communication plan should address any area needing improvement or support, whether that includes academics, self-advocacy skills, social skills, managing equipment, and connecting with peers and adult role models who use similar communication methods for a well-rounded educational plan.

If you prepare for the meeting and bring in the information that you know about your child, you will take your place at the meeting as the law intends: "Parents are considered equal partners with school personnel in making these decisions, and the IEP team must consider the parents' concerns and the information that they provide about their child in developing and implementing the IEP." IDEA 2004 Sections 300.324 (a)(1)(ii) and 300.501 (b)(1)(i)(ii). Take a picture of your child to bring with you to the meeting to help you remember what the purpose of the IEP meeting is all about. Your child will also learn to take his or her place at the IEP table, so invite your child to attend even part of a meeting with you when you think it is appropriate (or at least by age 16, when their attendance is required for transition services to get students ready for post-

high school plans). This helps a child see how the team works together and sets the stage for future self-advocacy.

Successful deaf and hard of hearing adults often say: “I wouldn’t be where I am without the support of my parents.” Your child will say the same about you. Our ASTra\* advocates are here to help you talk through preparation and attend a meeting with you, if needed! Here’s to positive collaboration with parents and teams at the table together.

References:

**Forms:** Colorado Department of Education <http://www.cde.state.co.us/>

See links for Exceptional Student Leadership Unit, for IEP and Communication Plan Forms

### **Understanding the IEP for New Parents**

The Bridge to Preschool booklet downloadable as a pdf file

Understanding the Law, Part C versus school age services in Part B, eligibility, the Communication Plan, Placement, Least Restrictive/Language Rich Environment

<http://www.cohandsandvoices.org/resources/bridge.html>

Transition to Preschool (Shorter Article summarizing Preschool Transition)

[http://www.handsandvoices.org/articles/early\\_intervention/V13-3\\_transition.htm](http://www.handsandvoices.org/articles/early_intervention/V13-3_transition.htm)

### **IEP articles, Handouts and Apps**

See many resources on the home page for the Advocacy Support and Training program for Hands & Voices (Headquarters) and Colorado Hands & Voices

<http://www.handsandvoices.org/astra/index.html>

<http://www.cohandsandvoices.org/newsite/astra-finding-support-for-educational-advocacy-questions/>

\*Colorado Hands & Voices has Advocacy Support and Training (ASTra) advocates available on request for parent-to-parent coaching and meeting attendance.

The IEP Survival Kit

[http://www.handsandvoices.org/articles/education/advocacy/V12-3\\_iepsurvivalkit.htm](http://www.handsandvoices.org/articles/education/advocacy/V12-3_iepsurvivalkit.htm)

Chapter in Book: Special Education Law: New IDEA for Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Leeanne Seaver and Janet DesGeorges (pdf file)

<http://www.handsandvoices.org/pdf/SpecEdLaw.pdf>

The Pop Up IEP (or... IEP Lingo Bingo: advocacy strategies and IDEA in response to commonly encountered “hurdle talk” at the IEP meeting.

[http://www.handsandvoices.org/articles/education/popup/pop\\_index.html](http://www.handsandvoices.org/articles/education/popup/pop_index.html)

The Eligibility Survival Guide: Discussing Eligibility with the IEP team

[http://www.handsandvoices.org/articles/education/advocacy/V11-2\\_eligibSurvKit.html](http://www.handsandvoices.org/articles/education/advocacy/V11-2_eligibSurvKit.html)

Self-Advocacy Skills Inventory for Deaf/HH Students

<http://www.handsandvoices.org/articles/docs/SCSelfAdvocacyInv2010.pdf>

iPhone IEP Application

[http://www.handsandvoices.org/articles/GoOn/V13-3\\_appforthat.htm](http://www.handsandvoices.org/articles/GoOn/V13-3_appforthat.htm)

The IEP/504 Checklist (common Accommodations and Modifications)

[http://www.cohandsandvoices.org/resources/coGuide/17\\_iepChecklist.htm](http://www.cohandsandvoices.org/resources/coGuide/17_iepChecklist.htm)

What Kind of (High School) Diploma is your child going to receive?

[http://www.handsandvoices.org/articles/education/deaf\\_ed\\_reform/diploma.html](http://www.handsandvoices.org/articles/education/deaf_ed_reform/diploma.html)

FAPE vs. Best: Oops, someone said the word “Best”

On advocacy under the new IDEA regulations by Janet DesGeorges

[http://www.handsandvoices.org/articles/education/deaf\\_ed\\_reform/fape\\_best.html](http://www.handsandvoices.org/articles/education/deaf_ed_reform/fape_best.html)

### **What Parents Need to Know Series**

See School Placement, Self-Advocacy, Transition from High School to Post-Secondary Education

<http://www.handsandvoices.org/needs/main.htm>

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