

*Let's Get Parents Ready for Their Initial IEP Meeting*

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**Keywords:** parental involvement, IEP meeting, special education, preparing parents for special education, parental perceptions regarding special education

*Abstract*

Parental participation in the initial Individual Education Program (IEP) meeting is a critical component of the process. Even though parents have rights to be equally involved in making decisions at the IEP meetings, frequently parents aren't prepared to be equal members on the team with school personnel. This study focused on a preparation program for parents who were to be attending their child's first IEP meeting. The research was conducted in three phases through an interview and training process with 298 parents. Phase one consisted of asking parents a series of questions on their knowledge and perceptions regarding the meeting. Phase two involved an intervention of preparing the parents for the meeting. Phase three entailed asking the initial set of questions from phase one to determine gains parents had made in knowledge and attitudes about the meeting. Results indicate parents benefited greatly from the preparation prior to the meeting.

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**Preparation of Parents for the Meeting**

Parents are a very important team member at the Individual Education Program (IEP) meeting. The IEP meeting is intended to assure students with disabilities have appropriate educational services and supports. A parent's involvement is especially critical for the initial IEP meeting as this meeting sets the tone for the partnership between the parents and the school personnel. Parents have a great deal of knowledge about their children and thus can provide valuable input on decisions being made about their child's special education program. Not only is parental involvement a vital component of the IEP meeting due to parents' knowledge, it is a parent's right to participate and to be engaged in making decisions about their child's education.

Parental participation and shared decision making are two of the basic principles of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Findings from studies on the IDEA which resulted in The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 emphasized that after 30 years, research has shown that children with disabilities can benefit from the involvement of their parents in their education. The findings from these studies continue to focus on the need to help parents get stronger in their role and

responsibility with school personnel in providing meaningful educational opportunities at school and at home.

Although parental participation at the IEP meeting is a mandated right through the IDEA, parents are often unprepared to participate in the initial IEP meeting. Hammond, Ingalls, and Trussell (2008) studied parental perceptions of their experience at attending the initial IEP meeting for their child who had a disability. Over a four year period, 212 parents were interviewed to determine their reactions to the initial IEP meeting. From these interviews, only 28% of the parents believed they were prepared for the meeting and 72% of parents felt very anxious and overwhelmed at attending the initial IEP meeting. Additionally, only 27% of the parents reported they understood the professional terms used in the meeting and the remaining 73% of parents stated they understood none/some of the terms..

In a follow-up study conducted by Ingalls, Hammond, Paez, and Rodriguez (2016), 323 parents were interviewed to determine parental perceptions regarding the initial IEP meeting. Forty-seven percent of parents indicated they believed they were prepared for the meeting and the remaining 53% of parents revealed they were unprepared. This study also looked at how comfortable parents were in attending this initial meeting. Only 19% of the parents felt comfortable in attending the meeting and 69% of parents stated they were overwhelmed and anxious about attending the meeting. Other studies on family involvement in the IEP process reported other types of issues for families. Bezdek, Summers, & Turnbull (2010) found that many school personnel stated they valued family-centered practices but did not follow these practices with families. They discussed some of the problems family members face when beginning their involvement in the IEP process. As a result of their findings they provided suggestions for teachers to use to help develop and strengthen a relationship with parents. Turnbull et al., 2010 described how many parents are intimidated by the IEP meetings and do not feel adequately prepared for participation. This research provided specific strategies to help prepare families to be equal decision makers and to partner with others in their child's education. Additionally, Wright, Stegelin, and Hartle (2007) and Thatcher (2012) identified many reasons why parents are not as involved as they could be in their child's education and the IEP process. They offered practical solutions to use to try to overcome some of these challenges and to help build a family, school, and community partnerships.

Dabkowski (2004) reported how some elements of the school team culture could actually negatively affect parents and discourage their involvement in their child's education. Lo (2012a) discussed how Chinese immigrant families are very hesitant to ask school personnel for help with their child with a disability. They see the teacher as the expert and that they themselves can contribute very little to their child's education. Lo (2012b) discussed some of the common problems parents from diverse backgrounds, who have a child with a disability, have in developing a partnership with school personnel. The findings from this research offered a variety of suggestions to improve family-teacher relationships. In later research Lo (2014) studied the readability of a number of IEPs. She found the reading level of a majority of IEPs were at the high school/college level. Lo stated this high reading level can be a barrier for some parents at attaining a

partnership with school personnel particularly if English was their second language. Mueller, Milian, & Lopez (2009) studied Latina mothers who had children with severe disabilities. The mothers reported they experienced a gap with school personnel in developing a partnership but felt very positive about the support groups they attended. The groups provided the mothers with effective communication, information, and emotional support.

The intent of the IDEA was to lay a foundation for parents of students with disabilities to have an opportunity to participate with school personnel in planning an appropriate program for their child who has a disability (“Questions and Answer about IDEA: Parent Participation.” 2016). In order for parents to actively participate on the team at the meeting, they need to be prepared for the meeting. Applequist (2009) and Kayama (2010) stated in order for parents to be active and equal members on the team, they need to have an understanding of special education law and their options regarding services. Included in the preparation process, parents must understand the purpose of the initial IEP meeting, who will be attending the meeting, the roles of the people who will be in attendance, jargon and professional terminology that will be used at the meeting, and the agenda of the meeting. Most importantly parents should realize their importance on the team and that they will be encouraged to ask questions, make comments, and provide suggestions of/to team members. This preparation must be very direct and meet the needs of the parent prior to attending the first IEP meeting.

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this research was to determine if parents would benefit from an intervention training program to prepare them for the upcoming initial IEP meeting for his or her child. The focus of this study was to prepare parents for various aspects of the initial IEP meeting so that each of them would be more familiar with terminology, roles, the meeting’s agenda, and participants who would be attending. An additional purpose of this study was to obtain parental suggestions for other parents and to school personnel on ways to improve the IEP process. The research was designed and based on the theoretical foundation that supports the importance of parental involvement in a child’s education and the importance of empowering parents with knowledge and skills to increase and improve their involvement. The results of this study can be compared to two previous similar studies by Hammond et al. (2008) and Ingalls, Hammond, Paez, and Rodriguez (2016) which also looked at parental perceptions of the IEP process, their knowledge of the process, and their attitudes about attending the initial IEP meeting.

### *Method*

#### **Participants and Setting**

The participants of this study involved 298 parents who had been notified to participate in an upcoming initial IEP meeting for their son or daughter. All parents agreed to volunteer their participation in this study. The parents consisted of individuals who resided in a southwestern community in the United States. This region borders the United States and Mexico and consists of a population of approximately 85% of individuals coming from a Hispanic background. The individuals involved in this research mirrored the region’s

population with 85% of participants identifying themselves as being Hispanic. The parents came from one urban and six rural school districts within the region. The participants had varying levels of education that ranged from less than a high school degree to a master's degree. Their knowledge of the IEP meeting was limited for a majority of participants as approximately 73% of participants indicated they had very little knowledge as to what the IEP meeting entailed.

### **Procedure**

Data were collected over a 3 year period through a semi-structured interview process (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006). The sample size included 298 parents who met the following criteria: (a) parents of children from early childhood and elementary school programs, (b) parents with children who had recently been referred for the initial special education evaluation, and (c) parents who were scheduled to attend the initial IEP meeting. The criteria and selection process assured a strong representative sample of parents would be involved in the study and provide the data needed to determine if an intervention training phase would be beneficial to parents attending their initial IEP meeting. Parents were selected for the study based on the sampling criteria.

To minimize selection bias, the interviewers identified parents with whom they had limited professional or personal interactions. The steps utilized to complete the semi-structured interviews were predetermined by the researchers of this study. The individuals completing the interviews with the parents were graduate students in a master's degree program within the Department of Educational Psychology and Special Services. Each of the individuals was seeking a degree in either special education or educational diagnostician. The interviewers, who also became the data collectors, were trained in using a semi-structured interview process which included both structured and unstructured questions. This type of interview process increases validity and reduces bias (Gay et al., 2006).

Standardization across interviews was assured by providing the interviewers with a set of nine predetermined interview questions. Seven questions were structured with a closed-ended design and two questions were unstructured with an open-ended design. Additionally, each parent was asked to provide the interviewers with two suggestions for other parents and school personnel to help improve the IEP process with parents. The interviewers were trained to use a particular sequence and wording of the questions during the administration of the interview questions. They were instructed to write down the parents' responses verbatim. Each of the nine questions was written on a paper with adequate space in between each question for the interviewer to write the parents' exact responses. The additional two items for parental comments were also included on the interview sheet with ample space to write comments. The researchers of the study reviewed each of these questions/items with the interviewers to assure they were familiar with the interview sheet and that they understood the interview process (following the sequence, using the exact wording each interview item, and writing down the parents' answers verbatim).

The researchers of this project were university faculty within the Department of Educational Psychology and Special Services. Each researcher was very familiar of parental involvement in the IEP process and were instructors of both the graduate special education and educational diagnostician programs. Additionally, both researchers were familiar with the semi-structured interview process and the system of data analysis.

The parents' responses were analyzed by the researchers using a system of organizing, categorizing, and interpreting the data. The organization of the data involved tallying the data from closed-ended questions and assigning percentages of similar responses. The data from open-ended questions were compiled according to verbal responses and then were categorized according to themes. Initially, the data were analyzed by the two researchers independently. In the final phase of analysis, the researchers reviewed and revised the categories/themes of parental responses to achieve agreement. Data were then interpreted to determine the parents' readiness for the upcoming initial IEP meeting both prior and after the intervention.

### **Phases of the Study**

In an attempt to address the need for preparation of parents prior to the initial IEP meeting and to determine the success of the preparation activity, parents involved in this study participated in three phases of study. All phases of this study were completed prior to the parent's attendance at the initial IEP meeting. Phases one and three were approximately 30 minutes each in length and phase two was approximately 2 hours in length. All three phases occurred on the same day at one meeting and individually with the parent.

Each parent was interviewed asking him or her questions and each parent verbally responded to the interviewer's questions. Each of the parent's responses was written down verbatim. The questions addressed such issues as the parent's comfort level of attending the meeting, the parent's knowledge of special education terms and the law, what the parent believed the IEP meeting would entail, who would be attending the meeting, and the parent's understanding of people's roles at the meeting including their own role. Additionally, parents were asked if they had been prepared in any way by school personnel to attend and to be actively involved in the initial IEP meeting. This stage of the study was referred to as phase one.

Following this interview activity with the parents, the interviewer provided the parent with an informal training on each of the issues discussed in the interview. This stage of the study was referred to as phase two. An example of this training would be teaching the parent specific terms that may be used during the IEP meeting and their meanings. Another example of training was to inform parents on who will be at the meeting and the person's role. Many topics were discussed with the parents, questions were answered, and handouts were given to provide additional information.

The training was intended to prepare the parent for the upcoming IEP meeting. With this preparation, it was believed the parent would be more comfortable, knowledgeable, and involved in his/her participation with the school personnel. Additionally, the preparation

was intended to assist the parent in developing a positive attitude and perception of the upcoming initial IEP meeting. The training program remained consistent all three years. Each interviewer, who completed the training, was told to have the training session be thorough to cover topics that parents had questions on and also cover the basics of the IEP meeting. The basics included helping the parent to understand what an IEP meeting was, the purpose of the meeting, who would attend the meeting, each person's role at the meeting, the meaning of terms and vocabulary that may be used, the purpose of the child's assessment, what special education services are, and the importance of the parent's participation and involvement in the meeting.

Following the training session, the trainer completed a post interview with the parents asking the same questions of the parent but from a different reference point as questions focused on their knowledge and perceptions following the training session. Figure one provides a listing of these follow-up questions. This stage of the study was referred to as phase three. For example in the initial interview (phase one), the parent was asked "What are your feelings about attending the initial IEP meeting that is coming up?" In the post-interview phase, parents were asked the same question but from the reference point that followed the training, i.e. "We have spent a lot of time talking about your upcoming IEP meeting. How do you now feel about attending the IEP meeting?" A listing of the nine questions initially asked of the parents are included in table one.

*Figure 1*

Questions Asked of Parents After the Training

Q1: Since we have had a chance to talk and prepare you for the IEP meeting, what are your reactions now regarding your child's referral for assessment?

Q2: We have spent time talking about what a special education evaluation entails. Do you now feel like you know what the evaluation will involve?

Q3: We have discussed what the IEP meeting is and the purpose of the meeting. Do you now feel like you are more familiar with what this meeting is?

Q4: After our discussion regarding the IEP meeting, do you now know who will attend the meeting and what the people's roles are?

Q5: Do you also have a better understanding of what will happen at the IEP meeting?

Q6: We have spent a lot of time talking about your upcoming IEP meeting. How do you now feel about attending the meeting?

Q7: Do you have a good understanding of what your role will be at the meeting?

Q8: If you are given the opportunity, do you now feel more comfortable asking questions, disagreeing with suggestions, and making comments at the IEP meeting?

Q9: Do you feel prepared to attend and to participate in the upcoming IEP meeting?

Data were gathered over a three year period on parents' responses to each of the questions asked in phases one and three. Training also occurred with each of the parents (phase two) to cover any types of information parents needed to know to better prepare them for the initial IEP meeting. Parental preparation was thought to be a key to empowering parents with knowledge and thus increasing positive participation in the IEP process. Table one shows the results of data collected for each of the two interview phases, i.e. initial interview prior to attending the IEP meeting (phase one) and the post interview following the parents' involvement in a training session regarding the IEP meeting (phase three). An average score for each of the nine questions for the three years was calculated and displayed in table one. The table shows the percentage of responses prior to training (phase one) and following the training (phase three).

Table 1  
*Parental Responses Regarding IEP Meeting*

Questions	Scores Before Training (N=298)	Scores After Training (N=298)
Q1: Your child was referred for a special education assessment. Please tell me what your initial reaction to this referral was.		
Ready/Prepared	31%	70%
Shocked	68%	29%
Q2: Your child is scheduled to be evaluated. Do you know what the evaluation will involve?		
Yes	13%	46%
No	86%	54%
Q3: You have been asked to attend an IEP meeting. Do you know what the IEP meeting is?		
Yes	21%	64%
No	78%	35%
Q4: Do you know who will attend the IEP meeting?		
Yes	15%	60%
No	84%	40%
Q5: Do you know what will happen at the IEP meeting?		
Yes	29%	66%



No	71%	34%
Q6: What are your feelings about attending the IEP meeting?		
Positive Feelings	18%	65%
Negative Feelings	81%	28%
Q7: Do you know what your role will be at the IEP meeting?		
Yes	50%	97%
No	50%	3%
Q8: If given the opportunity, would you be comfortable asking questions, disagreeing with suggestions, and making comments at the meeting?		
Yes	62%	89%
No	38%	10%
Q10: Has anyone prepared you for the upcoming IEP meeting?		
Yes	23%	83%
No	73%	17%

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As an additional component of this study, the interviewers asked the parents to provide two suggestions that could be given to other parents or school personnel regarding ways to improve the IEP process. It is very useful to have parents provide feedback based on their personal experiences regarding the process and especially on their attendance at the initial IEP meeting. Their ideas and comments can be vital in structuring or restructuring the IEP process from beginning to end. Figure two “Let’s Hear It from the Parents” contains specific feedback.

## *Figure 2*

### Let's Hear it from the Parents

- ❖ Parents need to TALK to someone. Reading about the IEP process was not helpful.  
I couldn't seem to keep the terms straight and it was tedious sifting through mounds of information. Having someone explain it in plain English, without the lingo, during back and forth conversations made a huge difference.
- ❖ I think school personnel should talk to parents more about what the tests are and why they are being tested. This would make it a lot easier to get ready for the IEP meeting. Teachers should really explain to parents what the IEP process is from beginning to end. It sure would have taken a lot of stress off of me.
- ❖ Well I think it would be nice for all of the parents to receive a pamphlet for what to expect of the meeting because it can be very overwhelming for parents. It was definitely overwhelming for me at first because I was not sure what to exactly expect. Parents need the information because they are so worried about what is going to happen to their child. Learning about the IEP meeting will ease some of the tension for parents. Parents should be informed of what they can do prior to the meeting so they can prepare.
- ❖ It is important for school staff to understand where the parents are coming from. They deal with this all the time plus the children they are talking about are not their children. Therefore they should be caring and patient with parents. Many times parents are not educated so explaining the process in detail is crucial so they understand the IEP process. Also letting them feel like the parent is part of the team and the team is working together for the best interest of the child.
- ❖ I think it is so important for parents to meet with someone prior to the meeting because I didn't know what was going to go on. I was really scared. If I had not met with you to talk about the IEP meeting, I probably wouldn't have asked any questions. It's uncomfortable for me to be in a room with people who know so much but I finally realized that nobody knows my son more than I do and I need to be his voice.

### *Final Thoughts*

It is interesting to view the changes in averages across the three years from phase one to phase three. In question one, data shows an increase in parents' rating of feeling prepared for the meeting. This increase went from 31% to 70% (39% increase). Likewise in question one, parents decreased their feelings of being nervous or feeling shocked about their child's referral for the special education assessment. This decrease went from 68% to 29% (39% decrease).

Similar patterns across the rest of the questions showed a positive increase or decrease with each question item. The findings for question six were very critical as parental perceptions about attending the meeting could set the tone for the parents for future meetings and involvement. When parents were asked about their feelings of attending the initial IEP meeting, a majority of parents, 81% stated they were experiencing negative

feelings about attending the meeting. But after receiving the training, their feelings regarding their attendance changed in a positive direction. The negative feelings regarding their participation in the meeting decreased from 81% to 28% which is a decrease of 53%.

Another interesting finding in this study was how parents began to see they had a right to be actively involved in the discussion with school personnel regarding their child's education program. When asked during phase one if they would be comfortable to ask questions, disagree with suggestions, and make comments at the IEP meeting, 62% believed it was appropriate for them to have this type of involvement. After the training in phase three, the percentage increased to 89% (an increase of 27%) believing they had a right to participate in the discussions at the IEP meeting.

A critical question asked of the parents at phase one and three involved the preparation of the parent for the initial IEP meeting. Parents were asked if school personnel had prepared him or her for the IEP meeting. Prior to the training session, only 23% of family members responded positively regarding their preparation for the meeting. In contrast, following the training in phase three, parents' ratings made a dramatic increase. The positive responses jumped to 83% feeling prepared (60% increase).

Although one of the purposes of this study was to determine if parents would benefit from attending a training session to learn about the IEP process, it would have been beneficial to have interviewed parents after the initial IEP meeting. This would have given data on the long term benefits of the training and the actual success parents had in the initial IEP meeting. Another consideration that may have strengthened the results of this study would be the use of a one or two week delay in implementing phase three. This delay would allow parents time to reflect on the training information and perhaps have the needed time to digest their newly acquired knowledge. Consequently data may have been different in the post interview, i.e. parents may have reported a higher level of being prepared for the meeting and having less anxiety. A third point of consideration was whether or not the interviewers should have probed the parents on their responses to the questions in phase three. The interviewers were instructed by the researchers to maintain the process of asking each of the identified questions in a particular order and wording. If the interviewers had strayed away from this research design, the standardization of the procedures used in this study would have been compromised.

Overall the specific training the parents received appeared to have positively impacted the parents' attitudes and perceptions of the initial IEP meeting. Parents revealed they were more accepting of their child's referral for the special education assessment. They stated they had more knowledge about the meeting's agenda, who would be at the meeting and the details of their roles, what their child's evaluation involved, and what the IEP meeting was. It appears these types of information successfully opened the door for the parents to begin their collaboration and to become equal partners with the school personnel.

This research is very important to the field of special education and early intervention. For years, school personnel, family members, and various other professionals in the field have discussed the value of empowering parents and family members to become more involved in the IEP process (Bezdek, et al., 2010; Ingalls, et al., 2016; Questions and Answers about IDEA, 2016). As noted earlier in the literature, individuals have suggested reasons why parents are not as involved in the process and included suggestions to increase parents' and family members' involvement.

A study of this type provides both parents and school personnel with an example of an intervention program that appeared to increase the parents' knowledge and consequently their involvement in their child's initial IEP meeting. From the findings, individuals can begin to take the model used in this study and expand on it with possible more trainings with the parents prior to the meeting, follow-up sessions with the parents to monitor their knowledge and answer questions, and additional meetings with the school personnel to assure they are preparing parents adequately for the initial IEP meeting. This parental preparation model is a beginning step for parents and school personnel to use to improve their partnership.

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