

Parent Advocacy: What you Should Do...and Not Do

By Leslie Seid Margolis, Esq.
Reprinted from Wrightslaw Newsletter

What Parents Should Do

1. Prepare for Meetings

You should treat the IEP meeting as if it is the first step towards a due process hearing by preparing for the meeting and building a record. If you do this, you make it less likely that you will end up at a due process hearing. If you do end up at a hearing, you will be in a stronger position.

2. Prioritize Your Child's Needs

Everything you want for your child is not equally important. Make a list of what your child really **needs**, what you **want** for your child (but may be willing to compromise on), and what would be nice to have but that you would definitely be willing to give up.

Think about the evidence you have to support each requested item (i.e., reports, assessments, experts, other documents). If you prioritize your issues and have facts and evidence that support what you want, it is more likely that you will be taken seriously.

3. Build Good Relationships

Develop positive relationships with school personnel, to the greatest extent possible. Ask questions. Ask your child's team to explain things you do not understand. Take the high road. As hard as this may be to do, being polite and courteous is always better than being rude and nasty. If a meeting is deteriorating with nasty comments or behavior from any team member, ask for a break or ask that the meeting be continued to a later date and time. Good relationships with school personnel and central office staff to the extent possible, will generally ensure that issues you bring up will be taken seriously.

4. Document Issues and Concerns

Ask that items and issues you feel strongly about be documented in the meeting summary or notes. Review the summary before you leave the meeting. Know your rights about amending your child's records.

5. Use Advocacy Strategies

Use advocacy strategies. Meetings do not have to be drawn out to the point of battle. For example, if the team cannot reach an agreement about the type or amount of service, suggest that the issue be tables in order to obtain additional information from consultation or conversations(s) between your child's private therapist (if there is one) and the school therapist. Rather than immediately asking for an independent assessment, disputes can sometimes be resolved by

asking that an assessment be conducted by a school district evaluator who does not know your child.

What Parents Should Not Do

1. Complain Loudly and Often

Parents should not complain about every issue that comes up over the course of their child's school life. This is the equivalent of crying wolf, and ensures that when a serious issue does arise, you will not be taken seriously. This is because you are expending the same amount of complaint energy on the serious issues as you expended on trivial issue.

2. Assume the Worst

Parents should not assume the school district is out to get their child and deny services. While the reality is that the school district is a bureaucracy with its own interests to protect, most individuals in the district enter the field because they care about children. While you need to enter the special education process with knowledge to protect your child's rights, you should treat the professionals with whom you deal as if those professionals have your child's best interests at heart.

3. Have a Closed Mind

You need to have an open mind at IEP meetings. If your child's team proposes a placement with which you disagree, do not dismiss it, or refuse to observe it, or refuse to consider it. This is especially true if you may challenge the appropriateness of the proposed placement. Again, the IEP meeting is important for record-building purposes. If the case goes to a due process hearing, it is important that you present as a cooperative person who thoughtfully considered the team's program, personally observed the program, and can explain why you believe the program does not meet your child's needs.

4. Stint on Experts

Do not try to save money by stinting on experts. You need to find experts who can provide sound professional opinions and evidence. Experts are critical to successful cases, especially if parents are unrepresented. If you truly cannot find experts, either through your children's medical providers or otherwise, you need to think about how to use supportive (or even hostile) school personnel to your advantage.

About the Author

Leslie Seid Margolis, Esq. is a managing attorney with the [Maryland Disability Law Center](#) (MDLC), a private, non-profit organization staffed by attorneys and paralegals. MDLC is the Protection and Advocacy organization for Maryland.

