

Tips for turning difficult conversations with your child's IEP team into productive conversations

Conversations at meetings with your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) team can be difficult. Sometimes, parents hear statements from school staff that make them feel uncomfortable or uncertain. Other times, parents struggle to bring up concerns about what their child needs because they fear they won't be heard. These tips are designed to help you get through difficult conversations at IEP team meetings and advocate effectively for your child.

Before the meeting

If you feel nervous the minute you walk into an IEP meeting, you could ask someone you trust to go with you, such as:

- A family member who can help you feel confident as you advocate for your child
- A friend who can act as an extra set of ears, take notes at the meeting, and help you follow the discussion
- Someone from the community who knows your child, can talk about their strengths, and can help the IEP team understand how to bring out the best in your child

Getting the information you need

If you feel lost or confused at an IEP meeting, you could say:

- "I feel lost. Please slow down and explain again what we're talking about."
- "I'm confused. Can you try sharing that information in a different way to help me understand?"

If you're uncertain about something in your child's IEP, you could ask:

- "What do these services look like in my child's day?"
- "How does this accommodation work?"
- "Can you give me some specific examples of how you're teaching my child to help them reach this goal?"

Sharing your concerns

If school staff suggest a change to your child's IEP services that you aren't sure about, you could ask:

- "Can you share more information about how this will meet my child's needs?"
- "I'm not sure this change will meet my child's needs. Can we try this on a trial basis to see how my child responds before making a change to the IEP?"
- "What will we do if this doesn't work?"

If what the team reports to you about the progress that your child is making doesn't match your view of the progress that your child is making, you could say:

- "I'm worried that we're not seeing my child's needs clearly. What can we do about that?"
- "I'm not convinced by the information you're giving me about my child's progress. What other information can we look at to better understand the progress that my child is making?"
- "I'm concerned that we're seeing my child's progress differently. My child performs higher (or lower) than what it says in the IEP (or progress report or evaluation). Can you explain to me what this data is based on? How did you gather this information about my child?"

If you share a concern about school rules or expectations that your child is struggling to follow and the school administrator says, "That's the policy and we can't change it," or "That's just how we do things at this school," you could say:

- "My child's disability makes it difficult for them to meet these expectations. What supports can we add to their IEP to help them learn the skills they need so they can follow the rules?"
- "I understand it's the policy, but my child has a disability that makes it hard for them to follow it. How can we use my child's IEP to make exceptions to the policy as an accommodation for my child?"
- "Can you share a copy of the policy in writing so we can look at it as a team? Then we can better understand what specific part of it my child is struggling with and decide together what to do about it."

Addressing issues

If you have a problem to bring to your child's IEP team, you could say:

- "I've noticed that my child is struggling with _____. Can you tell me what you're seeing at school?"
- "I know my child is struggling because I notice _____ (provide examples). How can we use the IEP to help them with this?"
- "I've noticed that _____ works well to support my child at home. How can you use this strategy at school?"

If a team member says: "Your child refuses to or won't _____," you could ask:

- "If my child could do it, they would do it. How can we figure out why they can't?"
- "I know it doesn't feel good to my child when they don't succeed at what you're asking them to do, and I know my child wants to be successful. If we can understand why my child is refusing, then we can decide what we need to do to help them. What are your thoughts about why they're refusing?"
- "Does my child have the skills to do what you're expecting them to do? If they don't, then let's talk about how you can teach them those skills."

If a staff member expresses frustration with the struggles your child is having at school, you could say:

- "I know that my child is trying their best and I appreciate your patience with their learning. What do you think we should do differently to help my child?"

- “I keep getting calls during the school day, but there’s nothing I can do to fix what’s happening at school. I’m aware of this situation and I’m talking with my child about it, but I’m relying on you to help my child at school. What ideas do you have?”
- “I share your concern about how my child is struggling. That tells me something in the IEP isn’t working for them. How can we change the IEP to give my child better support?”

Problem solving

If a staff member says: “We don’t know the answer,” you could ask:

- “Who can we call (or invite to a meeting) to help us find out the answer?”
- “Can we pick a date to meet again after the team has had time to find out the answer?”

If a school staff member says: “We don’t have the money or staff to do that,” you could say:

- “If my suggestion won’t work, what do you propose instead to meet my child’s needs?”
- “I understand that the school has budget (or staffing) problems right now. But my child has an IEP and can’t wait for those problems to get fixed. Let’s work together to find a creative way to meet my child’s needs now.”

Working with the team

If a staff member on the team expresses something you think may be an opinion, you could ask:

- “Can you help me understand your reasons for saying that?”
- “Can you share the data you’ve collected that supports what you’re saying? I’d like to review that information with the IEP team. Then we can make decisions together about what steps to take next to help my child.”

If one school staff member seems to be speaking for everyone, you could ask:

- “Does anyone else have an idea or something to share?”
- “I appreciate what you’re saying. I’m also curious about what everyone else thinks about this situation. Can we hear from the rest of the team?”

Planning for next steps

If you reach an agreement about a change to your child’s IEP or if something is promised to you by school staff, you could ask:

- “What are the next steps?”
- “Who will be responsible for making sure that what we agreed on gets done?”
- “Can we agree on a timeline to make this happen?”

If there isn’t enough time in the meeting for everything on the agenda or time runs out before all your questions or concerns can be discussed, you could say:

- “Respectfully, I’m requesting to start this meeting by addressing my concerns.”
- “I understand that we only have five minutes left for our meeting, but we haven’t talked about all my concerns. How soon can we schedule another time to finish this meeting?”
- “We’ve run out of time, but I still have questions. How can I get the rest of my questions answered?”

If you feel pressured to sign paperwork at an IEP meeting or in other situations, you could say:

- “I know this paperwork is important, and that’s why I need time to think about this information before I sign. How much time do I have to get the paperwork back to you?”
- “I’d like to talk about this information with my family before I sign.”
- “I know I’ll have more questions later, so I can’t sign anything now. Who can help me with my questions after this meeting?”
- “I’m not ready to sign this paperwork today. When do I have to return it and who do I return it to?”

Team disagreements

If at the end of a meeting the team says “No” to a change you’re asking the school to make to your child’s IEP, or if the team has not persuaded you about a change to your child’s IEP that the school is proposing, you could say:

- “It seems that we disagree about what my child needs on the IEP. What can we do about this disagreement?”
- “Since you’re refusing my request, please help me understand what happens next. What steps can I take now?”
- “I feel like the school isn’t hearing me and I don’t agree with what you’re proposing for my child. What can we do now?”
- “I understand there’s a system in place for disagreements. How do I use that system?”

If you feel that your relationship with the IEP team has been harmed by disagreements over your child’s IEP, you could say:

- “I know that we’ve had some disagreements. I’m grateful that you’re here today to support my child and I’m hopeful that we can make good decisions for my child together.”
- “We’ve had some hard conversations in the past, but my child is depending on us to be a team. I’m asking that we help each other today to put the past behind us and focus only on what my child needs so that we can move forward together in the best interest of my child.”

For support to prepare for any IEP team meeting, contact a PACER parent advocate at (952) 838-9000 or PACER@PACER.org. If you need assistance in Spanish, Hmong, or Somali, you’ll be connected to a PACER parent advocate who speaks your language.