IEP Meeting Conversation Stoppers

Source: National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD):
http://www.ncld.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=974&Itemid=0

Some of the statements made to parents at IEP Meetings are "conversation stoppers" -- comments that create barriers and can prevent the IEP Team from working cooperatively to develop effective special education services and supports for students with disabilities.

Here are nine common "conversation stoppers," some information about what may be the real issues of concern and suggestions for how parents can respond in a forceful but respectful way so that planning for their child can move forward.

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Stopper #1:
"The general education teacher could not be here today."

Possible responses:

"Nina is one of Miss Taylor's students and we think she is doing very well. However, I have no idea if the goals, accommodation and other supports we are suggesting are going to be helpful to Miss Taylor in adapting the curriculum and classroom activities so Nina can be successful. We need to schedule another IEP Meeting so that Miss Taylor can attend for at least part of the time."

"This is the first year my child has been spending a lot of time in a general classroom. I do not want to have IEP meetings without my child's general education teacher. We can complete the main parts of the IEP and give a draft to Mr. Jones. But then we will need to schedule another IEP Meeting that includes him so that our team is complete."

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Stopper #2:
"Your child can't participate in academic classes if he can't pass the state assessments."

What are the issues?

Both the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004) and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) encourage schools to have high expectations for all students and require schools to provide equal opportunities for students to receive academic instruction. Students with disabilities have a right to have meaningful access to the general curriculum. Parents and IEP teams should work with general education teachers to identify those areas of the curriculum that can and should be

incorporated into the student's IEP and then provide modifications and accommodations through special education services.

Possible responses:

"It's absolutely essential that Eric be provided with good instruction in a variety of academic classes in order to meet his IEP goals. We want him to have the same opportunities to learn as all other students at this school, whether he is able to pass the end-of-year assessment or not."

"We know that we and Eric's IEP team can determine if Eric will take the regular state assessments or an alternate assessment. Maybe Eric will not reach all the course requirement for this class, but Eric must have the opportunity to learn the same curriculum as the other students."

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Stopper #3:
"We have developed our own reading curriculum for this reading class."

What are the issues?

Unless the curriculum, which is defined as the content and the methodology used to teach that content - has been shown to have produced positive learning outcomes for all students or for students with disabilities, there are legitimate questions that parents and other IEP members must raise. Specifically, IDEA now requires that services provided to students under the IEP must be based on peer-reviewed research. Peer-reviewed research is that which has been reviewed by other education experts and can be applied to other situations, can be tested with other groups of children and can be built upon by other researchers.

Possible responses:

"Our job as an IEP Team is to make sure that the curriculum that is used for Maria's instruction is based upon solid education research. If there is a particular curriculum used at this school or in this program, then I would like to see the research that proves that the curriculum has been successful in meeting the instruction needs of students like Maria before we can agree."

"The research on reading indicates that a reading program needs to contain several essential components - Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Fluency, Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension - to be effective for most children. Can you provide us with independent research which shows that your reading program adequately provides each of the required components?"

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Stopper #4:
"First we'll work on skills and then we'll see if your child is ready for this academic class."

What are the issues?

The purpose of special education is to provide the "specially designed instruction," services and supports that will allow children with disabilities to receive benefit from their public school classes and activities. There is evidence to suggest that children and adults do better when they are instructed in the same educational environment where the skills are to be used. Students who require extra help, or individual attention should receive it. But parents and teachers need to take care when considering how and where that individualized support is provided.

Possible responses:

"I want to make sure that Juan receives the individual instruction and reinforcement that he needs. I also want the IEP team to work with me to make sure that Juan is not held back or that he misses other opportunities to learn the same information as his classmates."

"Juan may not have all the skills the other children have, but he can be a part of his general classroom with support. We can make learning those skills part of his IEP and his special education services. Besides, I am sure that there will be other children in Juan's class who need to learn similar skills as well."

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Stopper #5:
"We'll be using teacher observation to measure progress toward your child's annual IEP goal."

What is the issue?

Reporting of progress toward the achievement of each annual goal is designed to provide parents with interim reports about how their child is doing. To be accurate, such reports must be based on "objective measures." This means that there must be something besides what the teacher thinks or sees to determine progress. An object measure might be counting the number of times your child successfully completes a class assignment, a simple weekly checklist of sight words recognized, or a more formal assessment tied to your child's goals. While a structured observation by the teacher or another member of the school staff can be one way to measure progress, teacher observations cannot serve as the only measure of progress. Another issue that might be causing this conversation stopper is that the

goals may not be written very well. Check to see if the goals in your child's IEP are written so they can actually be measured objectively.

Possible responses:

"It's not going to be possible for me to know if Natasha is making progress unless we have some objective measures written into her IEP. What other measures can we use to track her progress toward reaching these annual goals?"

"We need to think about some more formal ways of measuring Natasha's progress. Sometimes it takes quite a while for Natasha to learn new material. I need to know what assessments we are going to use to ensure that she is mastering the really important skills on this IEP."

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Stopper #6:
"Your child's behaviors are disrupting the classroom."

What are the issues?

Concerns about your child's behavior should not be introduced for the first time at the IEP meeting. Students benefit most when teachers and parents communicate frequently and share concerns or problems when they happen. Students with disabilities, such as learning disabilities, may have difficulty communicating their wants and needs, may not like "letting go" of an activity they enjoy, or may challenge adults when "beginning" an activity they don't like or have failed at in the past. Many students need help preparing for transitions throughout the day or in learning how to get positive attention from friends or teachers. Some children with significant learning or emotional needs can engage in challenging behavior when they are upset or angry. It is very important for the IEP Team to respond to problem behaviors immediately, and to bring additional professional help to the school to do functional behavior assessments so that positive goals, interventions and support strategies can be developed for school and home.

Possible responses:

"Kevin's behavior can be disruptive at home, too. But we know that when Kevin feels like he is communicating his wants and needs and when he is not frustrated, his behavior is much better and is not disruptive. I need the IEP Team to help everyone understand why Kevin has hard days sometimes and what we can do to help Kevin improve his communication, his response to instruction and his social skills."

"Kevin has a lot of strengths. He loves music, he is funny and enjoys humor, and he really tries hard to do what his teachers and we expect him to do. He wants very much to be with other boys his age and socialize. Why can't we use Kevin's strong

skills and the things he really likes to do to help him get better at handling the things that frustrate or upset him?"

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Stopper #7:
"Our district doesn't put technology into the IEP."

What are the issues?

This statement is incorrect. IDEA provides for technology services as part of students' special education programs. What this kind of statement may communicate is that the IEP team members are not certain what type of technology is available, how to get it, or how to use it. For students with significant learning, communication, sensory, cognitive, or physical disabilities, the use of technology to assist teaching and learning can make the difference between accessing genuine opportunities for literacy and higher-level academics and a school day that is limited to low level functional, redundant activities.

Possible responses:

"I am sorry, but Marc needs to have word prediction software to improve his written language skills. My concern is that if we do not write this into the IEP he will not get it. If you would like information on where you can find this type of software for Marc, I have it at home and can send it in or call you with the information."

"We did a trial run using the computer at his former school last year and Marc's writing skills improved significantly when using this software. If we don't write this into the IEP, then my concern is that Marc will not be provided with the supports he needs to learn the skill. Learning how to use software that can help him improve his writing skills is essential to achieving the goal."

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Stopper #8:
"We just don't have the money for technology."

What is the issue?

It's true that school districts are often struggling with budget concerns. However, making sure that the public schools get the money they need is a shared responsibility for the entire community. This is your child's IEP meeting and you have a right to focus the meeting on developing an effective special education program that will meet your child's needs. Services must not be based on available resources but on the needs of the student.

Possible responses:

"I appreciate the fact that providing Lee with a computer and software could be expensive. However, learning to use these devices and gaining access to curriculum using software is critical to Lee's learning and to his future. We will work with you to identify possible sources of assistance, but our responsibility is to make sure that Lee's IEP accurately reflects what he needs. We can't end the conversation because of money."

"There are many sources of possible funding for both hardware and software. But this meeting is not about money. This meeting is about Lee's ability to benefit from school and about preparing him for the future."

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Stopper #9:
"We can't give your child special education services if you don't sign this IEP."

What is the issue?

IDEA is very clear about when parents have to give written consent (or permission) for special education services. You must give written permission for your child to be evaluated to determine if your child is eligible for special education. You also must give written permission for your child to receive special education services in the first or "initial" IEP team meeting. However, your signature on IEP documents after that "initial" IEP signifies that you participated in developing the IEP. (If you and the team disagree about some part of the IEP, it's best to either schedule another meeting to continue to discuss the issues and concerns or simply sign your name and add a sentence stating that you participated in the IEP meeting. Provide the school with a written report stating your objections to the proposed IEP and ask that it be attached to the proposed IEP.)

Possible responses:

"I am not ready to accept the entire IEP as written. I will sign that I participated in this meeting, but we will need to meet again to see if we can come up with a program that meets my child's needs."

"Actually, it is not necessary for me to sign the IEP document. If the school district has a policy about parents signing their child's IEP or losing services, I would like to see a copy of that policy."

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