

The ABCs of IEPs

Irlene Schwartz: Good morning. Our topic today is "ABCs of IEP". Our purpose today is to introduce participants to an IEP, and "IEP" stands for "Individualized Education Program". We're also going to talk about the relationship between an IEP and instruction in an inclusive classroom, and finally we're going to talk about how an IEP can really be a road map to providing a high quality educational program to students with disabilities.

So, first let's talk about some alphabet soup. You know in special education we love our alphabet soup, and so first let's describe -- define some of these acronyms that we'll be using throughout the presentation. As I said earlier, "IEP" stands for "Individualized Education Program". Children who qualify for special education ages three and above have an IEP. An "ILP" stands for "Individual Learning Plan". This is not required by Head Start but is used in some regions, so we're not going to talk about it very much today.

The important thing to take home from this presentation is that it's NOT required by Head Start. "IFSP" is an Individual Family Service Plan. This is for children who rec.. who qualify for special education services up to age three, so it's birth through age three, so on your third birthday, you graduate to an IEP. We're not going to really talk about IFSPs today either, although they're very... many similarities between those and IEPs.

And then finally, "IDEA" is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, IDEA, and that's the federal law that entitles children with disabilities to receive special education. That's an important thing for us to remember, that every child with a disability in the United States, three and above, is entitled to a free and appropriate public education. Children under two -- under three, I'm sorry -- under three are also entitled to early intervention services.

So, what is an IEP? It's a legally binding document that describes what special education services we're going to provide to a child. It's really important to remember that an IEP, although it's initiated by the school district, is a document that's developed by the team -- all members of the team (parents, Head Start teachers, speech language pathologists, special education teachers) give input. Everyone's input is valued.

An IEP has many parts that are required by the law. They include the child's present level of performance -- and in that present level of performance, we want to get a snapshot of the child. "What can they do, what areas do they need help in, which areas do they excel in?" So it's important to note children's strengths as well as the areas of need. We also want to talk about the kinds of services they'll receive, so, for example, does the child need speech services? Do they need occupational or physical therapy that is motor support?

Do they need special education services? Will they receive transportation? All the kinds of services that the child will receive need to be outlined in the IEP. The educational team, including the parents and the Head Start teacher, write the IEP. As a group, they up come with the idea... with the strategies that they'll be using and the topics that they'll be covering in this IEP. Again, Head Start teachers are an important part of the IEP team.

Parent input is essential, and in fact parents have the final say in approving the IEP. We also need to remember that assessment data is very important when we develop an IEP. We use assessment data to.. not just to demonstrate that a child needs special education services, but we also use assessment data in order to determine which areas need to be worked on, and within an area, which skills and behaviors need to be addressed.

So, for example, if we determine that a child needs special education services in the area of communication, we also need to know, "Where in that communication domain does a child need extra services? Do they need services in learning how to answer 'wh' questions? Do they need services in understanding, listening to, and answering questions about a story? Do they need services in building their vocabulary?" All those things are different, and the... and the way we know how and where to intervene with a child is based on assessment data.

So there're different parts of an IEP: present level of performance, and in that area, we describe what the child can do, and also areas in which the child needs extra help. Some people call that a plop (p-l-o-p). There's also a part of the IEP where we talk about... where we talk about different kinds of accommodations and modifications that are required, so, for example, if we know a child needs to have a lot of visual supports in a classroom, we would put that there.

If the child needs extra time to complete assignments or complete activities, we'd put that there. Whatever kinds of support and modifications to the ongoing curriculum that are required go in that area. We also have something called the service matrix, and in that we talk about the types and amounts of services provided. So, for example, we might say that the child receives special education for 200 minutes a week, and that means for 200 minutes, they receive specially designed instruction.

Now it's important to remember that those 200 minutes can be... can.. this child can receive services in a Head Start classroom, and it could be that the Head Start teacher or staff in the Head Start program are providing those services. They may develop those services in consultation with a special educator.

Finally, we have goals and objectives, and the goals and objectives outline very specifically exactly what behaviors and skills we'll be working on, and... and how we will know when the child has achieved -- that is, has learned -- the target behavior. So, for example, we might write an objective that sounds like, "Jamie will listen to a story and answer three 'wh' questions with 100% accuracy." That would be the language of an IEP objective.

The important.. the most important thing about an IEP is to remember that "I" means "Individualized". The IEP needs to be tailored to the specific child and the priorities and requests of that family. "I" means "Individualized", and that's the take-home message about IEPs. So, how do you use these IEPs that come to your classroom with the children who need them?

IEPs can be used to develop classroom plans, so for example if you know that you have children who are learning to listen to stories and to answer "wh" questions, you know that you're going to need more than one opportunity a day to listen to a story. There.. so what that might mean is that you develop a plan where, in addition to your large group, where you read a story and ask questions, you might have two or three other opportunities during the day where you have someone reading a story to a very small group of children...

...and answering and asking questions about one page or two pages of the story at a time, so that would be one way you would do it. If you have a child who's learning to follow a process chart, to follow a schedule, to do an activity, you might want to have an activity that has multiple steps in them across the classroom. An IEP is used to develop an activity matrix. An activity matrix is then used to communicate with team members and to plan instruction, and I'm going to show you what an activity matrix looks like.

So we will do another workshop on activity matrices and how to use them, but this is really just a preview of coming attractions. So when we think about an activity matrix, what you can see here is that down the side, we have the schedule of the classroom: Opening Circle, Small Group, et cetera. Across the top, we have the domain areas of the IEP -- Communication, Motor, Social Emotional -- and in the boxes of the activity matrix, what we've done is plugged in the different objectives in the child's IEP.

So you can see that for this child, who -- he or she is working on using an appropriate pencil grasp -- and we're going to work on that during small group. In addition, during small group we're going to be working with this child to get her to answer questions, and also to get her to manage behavior -- her behavior -- during group activities. Now you can see if you go down to outdoor play, we're also working on an objective there, and we're working on climbing stairs with alternating feet.

So the "trick" of using the activity matrix is to be able to plug in when a specific objective is going to be addressed. Now, this is just a picture to give you an idea of what instruction looks like and how using an activity matrix in an IEP can influence that. So, if you look at this picture, you can say... see that this is basically what instruction looks like in a typical Head Start classroom.

We have a classroom goal that... that we know everyone in the classroom is working on, and an activity, and we say, "Okay, within that activity, how are we going to make sure that we address this goal that we believe is important for ALL of the children in our classroom?" When you have a child with a disability who's receiving special education services, you have another layer that goes on top of that.

So basically you can see that you still have the classroom goal, and you still have the activity, but in addition, you have the individual child goal, and that individual child goal has been broken down to "objectives", which are smaller pieces, and into instructional programs. An instructional program kind of tells us how to teach. It says, "We're going to give this kind of instruction, we're going to give this kind of feedback, we're going to give this kind of encouragement when the child is successful.

If a child is not successful, this is how we're going to correct their errors." So, an instructional program is a... is... tells us HOW we're going to teach. An objective tells us what we're going to teach, and the activity pr.. provides the context in which we're going to teach. Now, we've just talked about all this teaching that we're going to do, but it's important to know how a child is learning. And how do we know that? Well, we need to monitor progress.

An IEP requires that we monitor progress and report progress quarterly, but in order to do that it's important to collect information regularly, to make sure that children are making progress on the important goals and objectives that, as a team, we've agreed needs to be on their IEP. We can do that by looking at -- watching a child perform a skill or a behavior and see how independent they are and then comparing that to where they were a week ago and a month ago.

By collecting this kind of child progress information, we know that the child is learning the skills that the team says are important for that child to learn. So, that's what we have to say today about IEPs; have fun and help your students have fun! Thanks a lot!

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