

Words of Wisdom Regarding IEPs

by Jennifer Paige Casteel

Because questions and concerns about Individual Educational Plans (IEP) frequently arise, I wanted to share a resource list that I use for work during IEP's. Below are nine types of curriculum adaptations and/or modifications that can be implemented during an IEP. A parent can take a particular issue of struggle for their child and think through each of the nine options to prepare suggestions for the IEP team.

It is important to note that an *accommodation* may change course content, teaching, test presentation, expectations, environment, etc. but will still have the end goal of the child learning the same course content/standard and does not fundamentally alter the expectations of the standard. A *modification* may change the above factors but also fundamentally alters the course content/standard/test. It is a good idea to be aware on an IEP of which goals are accommodations and which are modifications because at the high school level, modifications may affect the ability to meet district graduation requirements.

The Nine Options

1. **Time:** More time for tests or task completion, pace learning differently - increases or decreases.
2. **Level of Support:** Increase of personal assistance to keep student on task. Example, peer buddies, cross age tutors, child being tutored and being the tutor, targeted time with teaching assistant.
3. **Input:** Use of different visual aids, enlarged text, increase concrete examples, hands-on manipulatives, pre-teach key concepts prior to the class lesson, etc.
4. **Difficulty:** Adapt the skill level or rule on how the learner may approach the work, i.e., use of a calculator, use of a chart for math problems, simplify task directions by pulling apart multi-step directions prior to the child starting a task, etc.
5. **Output:** Allow multiple responses to any given task such as verbal answers vs. written, explanations through hands-on material demonstrations.
6. **Participation:** Add appropriate ways for the child to actively participate in the classroom if the common approaches are not well suited to the child. Example, if a child is not able to present an academic topic to the class due to anxiety or lack of academic readiness, have the child create a presentation on classroom rules, school recycling program, etc. to ensure that the child is still getting opportunities to participate in important ways in the classroom.
7. **Alternate Goals:** This is almost always a modification. Use the same classroom materials but adjust the outcome goal. Example, in Social Studies a child will learn to locate each state on a map while the rest of the class learns to memorize the state and capital.

8. **Substitute Curriculum:** This is almost always a modification. Provide different instruction and materials to meet individual learning goals. Example, during a reading lesson, a student may work with an aide to identify common safety signs seen in the community if pre-reading/reading skills are premature at this time.

9. **Quantity:** Adapt the number of items that the learner needs to perform or the number of activities the student will complete prior to their assessment. Example, reduce the number of addition problems on nightly math homework; increase the number of practice worksheets if the child responds well to repetition; break up an overwhelming task into smaller steps like a five word spelling test on Wednesday and a five word spelling test on Friday if the list of ten words is causing overwhelm, confusion or lock down.

When considering discussion with the IEP team regarding learning differences, prepare the issues of concern into themes that can be addressed. I see over and over again that citing 'learning differences' in an IEP does not lead to many targeted strategies. Instead, prepare your concerns as they relate to categories such as:

- *Speed of information processing
- *Memory (divided into encoding, storage and retrieval)
- *Automatization of rote facts
- *Ability to generalize or make abstractions (my personal opinion is that this goal is really good to start working on in small steps with our children with PWS because the ability seems to present difficulty to a large number of our kids)
- *Organization
- *Listening Skills
- *Attention
- *Planning and Executive function

When writing social goals, a large target goal may work for your child. For a more specific plan, give forethought to your child's strength and weaknesses with regard to:

- *rigidity/flexibility
- *irritability
- *placidity
- *social awareness
- *desire for familiar vs. novel
- *anxiety

I find parents asking 'what can we ask for in the IEP to help our child?' I think that good advice is really to look at these specifics when possible. A general social goal like "child will successfully initiate conversation with peers on 3 out of 5 attempts" is a great goal but it may not be sufficient on its own. A goal that also addresses rigidity and a goal for practicing social awareness skills may really be needed simultaneously before real progress in social skills are made.

This cannot all be addressed at the same time but there are many years ahead for IEP's and, working off these pointers, I have found success in refining a lot of IEP's in ways that parents feel are more targeted for their child's progress.