

Chart Your Own Future: How Your Individualized Education Program (IEP) Can Help

What will you be doing after high school? Where will you be working, going to school, or living? What kind of life do you want? Your transition IEP can help you answer these questions and help you live your life to the fullest.

What is an IEP? An IEP is an education program written just for you. That is why it is called “individualized.” It is based on your strengths, interests, and goals regarding education, employment, and daily living skills.

Taking an active role in developing your IEP is important. Doing so will help you:

- Gain the information, skills, and support you need to reach your future goals
- Begin turning your hopes into reality
- Discover what really matters to you
- Have more control over your time and activities at school

Although you cannot control every aspect of your school education, you do have the power to make changes in your education program. As you influence major parts of your IEP, you gain more control over what happens to you. You have more ability to make changes than you might think.

Three Easy Steps to Becoming Involved in Your IEP

Here are a few ideas to help you take ownership of your IEP. You may want to discuss them with a friend or family member.

1. Start thinking about what you want in life. Planning for the future is exciting. You can begin to think about what skills and interests you have now and what ones you would like to develop. As you start planning, you might consider:

- What you like to do now
- What you think you would like to be doing five years from now
- What you are good at now
- What you would like to be good at in five years
- What excites you now
- What you think will excite you five years from now

As your dreams and visions become clearer to you, talk with your family or friends about your plans. Listen to their ideas.

You might want to add some of their thoughts to your plan.

2. Set one goal at a time. To make the planning process more manageable, pick one goal that is important to you. Discuss it with a relative or friend and then with your special education teacher. Have them help you break your goal into small, practical steps that you can start taking now. For example, if your goal is to continue your education, you might want to visit some colleges, technical schools, or certificate programs to see how they fit into your future dreams.

Don't worry if you feel confused while you are making decisions about your future education, employment, and housing. Everyone feels that way. It takes time to figure it out. If you are like most people, your plans will change many times as you learn more about yourself.

3. Know who can help you. Everybody needs someone who will listen to their future plans, offer suggestions, help sort through options, and find creative solutions to possible barriers. Who in your life can do that for you?

Make a list of their names, addresses, phone numbers, e-mail addresses, and descriptions of how they might be able to help you reach your goals.

For example:

- A cousin could be visited at a college you are thinking of attending.
- A neighbor might allow you to volunteer at her daycare.
- Your older brother or sister might invite you to go apartment hunting with them.
- A family friend could show you how he runs a small lawn care business.

At your next IEP meeting, you could show your team and supporters what you've learned about your future options. You could:

- Invite everyone on your IEP team and your list of important people to the IEP meeting.
- Show pictures, a video, or a PowerPoint presentation summarizing what you did to explore possibilities.
- Invite your employer, volunteer supervisor, or friend to give his or her views at the meeting.

Learn More about Planning for Your Future

You can find out more about using your IEP to help you plan for your future by checking out these helpful resources for teens and families.

For Teens:

youthhood.org

This site for teens was developed by the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (NCSET), headquartered at the University of Minnesota.

efoliominnnesota.com

This multimedia electronic portfolio helps you create a showcase of your education, career, and personal achievements. It's provided by the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities in partnership with state workforce and education organizations.

Wishcraft: How to Get What You Really Want by B. Sher & A. Gottlieb (2003). Ballentine Books and Random House, Inc., NY

This book is an excellent resource on planning for the future. Available at amazon.com.

For Families:

How Can My Child be Involved in the IEP Process?

This helpful PACER Center handout can be downloaded for free. Available online at pacer.org/parent/php/PHP-c77.pdf

Creating Your High School Portfolio: An Interactive School, Career, and Life Planning

Editors of JIST. (2003). JIST Publishing Inc., Indianapolis, IN

Through interactive activities, students learn to state, clarify, and explore their values, interests, abilities, and goals. The workbook helps students make informed decisions about their educational and career goals after high school. Available at Amazon.com.

Making it Happen: Student Involvement in Education Planning, Decision Making, & Instruction by D. J. Sands & M.L. Wehmeyer, (Eds.). (1998). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

While mainly for educators, this book outlines the steps that families and teachers can take to ensure active student participation in education planning and decision making. Available at Amazon.com.