

Your IEP Meeting: A Great Place to Practice Self-Advocacy Skills

Self-advocacy is a key step in becoming an adult. It means looking out for yourself, telling others what you need, and knowing how to take responsibility. No one is born knowing these skills. Self-advocacy skills are needed over a lifetime, and everyone has to learn them. Here is some great information that can start you on your way!

What is self-advocacy?

Self-advocacy means taking the responsibility for telling others what you want and need in a straightforward way. It is knowing how to:

- Speak up for yourself
- Describe your strengths, disability, needs, and wishes
- Take responsibility for yourself
- Recognize your rights
- Identify who to ask if you have a question or need help

Where can I practice self-advocacy skills?

A great place to practice self-advocacy skills is in your Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. With the support of your team members, you can learn ways to:

- Explain your disability to others
- Set goals for yourself
- Build teamwork skills
- Share with teachers what works and does not work for you
- Ask for accommodations
- Accept help from others
- Lead all or part of the IEP meeting

But I don't like going to these meetings!

Sometimes students are uncomfortable in IEP meetings. However, there are many ways you can be involved in team decisions and learn self-advocacy skills. Some of these ideas might work for you:

- Come to the meeting for just a few minutes and share what is working and not working for you
- Write down your ideas, questions, and concerns ahead of time

- Practice or role-play what you want to say
- Introduce yourself
- Tell team members about your interests, strengths, and desires for the future
- Explain to the team what it is like to have your disability
- Help your special education teacher write the agenda
- Help the team develop IEP goal areas
- Ask for explanations if you do not understand something
- At the end of the meeting, review what the team decided
- If you choose not to attend the meeting, share your input with your parent(s) or special education teacher before the meeting and then review the results afterward

Be prepared!

Most people are more comfortable at meetings if they have had some time to think about what they want to say. Before your IEP meeting, you might think about these questions:

- What are my strengths?
- What do I want to learn or work on improving this year?
- What are my special concerns?
- How do I learn best?
- What do I need to be successful?
- What would make learning easier for me?
- What positive information about myself can I share at the meeting?

What does the law say about me attending IEP meetings?

The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) says that you must automatically be invited to all of your IEP meetings once you are age 16. (You don't have to go, but it's a good idea. You can be very helpful at the meeting.) Minnesota law says that your IEP team needs to invite you beginning at age 14 or when you are in 9th grade to talk about transition services. You may want to discuss attending your IEP meeting with your parents.

Transition is about planning for your future. You will look at your skills in three areas:

- Employment
- Postsecondary education
- Independent living

Planning and self-advocacy will help you succeed after high school. When you turn 18, you will be considered an adult and will need to make decisions on your own, including signing your own IEP. This is why it is a great idea to practice self-advocacy skills as much as possible.

Learning good self-advocacy skills is cool. It will help you while you are in school and when you become an adult. Knowing and exercising your rights are important steps in becoming a strong self-advocate.