



Practical Steps to Writing Individualized Education Program (IEP) Goals: And Writing Them Well

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For children on the autism spectrum, the most critical aspect of their educational program is their individualized education program (IEP). The IEP is the document that provides a blueprint for a child's instructional program and lays the framework for how his time is spent. Because the IEP plays such a critical role, it is essential for parents to identify both long-term and short-term objectives for their child, and that the document is well written.

The following are six guidelines for the development of well-written goals and objectives.

1. **Identify and acknowledge long-term outcomes.** The ultimate success of a child's educational program is that it enables him or her to leave school prepared for life in the community. Regardless of the child's age, this process should begin as early as possible. Person-centered planning provides a tool for helping the family and the individual to have a long-term vision for his or her life. While this vision may shift and change as the child matures and learns new skills, it is important to maintain a focus on the future. In some states, person-centered planning is embedded in the IEP document. In places where that is not the case, it may be important to begin the case conference meeting by asking the family and/or the individual about their long-term goals and vision, and to incorporate person-centered planning into the development of both the IEP and the individual transition plan (ITP).
2. **Make goals meaningful and important.** In most situations, goals and objectives must be tied to state standards. At the same time, it is important to develop goals and objectives that have both immediate and future utility, and that address present levels of performance. Objectives that focus on teaching middle school students to put pegs in peg boards, count pennies to 100, or recognize pictures of farm animals may not be the most important focus if these students are unable to eat at a table, follow simple directions, or if they do not understand the value of money. Because of the amount of time required to teach some students, it is critical that this time is used in a manner that will have the greatest benefit. It may be more critical for a given student to be taught skills such as the "next dollar" strategy, using a communication system to request food items in the cafeteria line, playing with others, or responding to another using various appropriate sentences.
3. **Short term instructional objectives should be observable and measurable.** Objectives are observable and measurable if they are concretely written and can be quantified by all involved in the student's life. In other words, multiple professionals and family members should be able to reach consensus regarding whether the student has reached the goal or not. If all involved truly understand desired outcomes, it will be much easier to maintain consistency in expectations. By better understanding the expectations through consistency, the students will have a greater chance of being successful. Objectives such as the following are subjective and impossible to observe:

Poorly Written Objective: "Jill will comprehend a story." How can you definitely know that she comprehends a story? Instead, write the objective as:

Well Written Objective: "Jill will answer three questions related to a story twice a week."

Poorly Written Objective: "Bobby will use appropriate social skills." What are appropriate social skills? This is a subjective statement that might be interpreted differently by various people in this student's life. Instead, write the objective as:

Well Written Objective: "Bobby will stand two feet from his communication partner during three conversations daily."

Poorly Written Objective: "Jake will listen to directions." How do we know he is listening? Instead write the objective as:

Well Written Objective: "Jake will follow three directions upon arrival each morning."

4. **Objectives should be context specific.** Different contexts require different behaviors. For example, the type of social skills and behaviors allowed at recess would be different from those allowed in the classroom. For example, playing tag with two classmates is appropriate on the playground but probably not in the middle of science class. Because children on the autism spectrum often have difficulty shifting their behavior to suit the context, it becomes important to clarify expectations by relating objectives to specific contexts.
5. **Criteria must be written in a manner that is possible to measure.** In order to document progress on objectives, criteria must be stated for each objective. At times, criteria are written in a manner that is impossible to measure and to collect data on. Stating criteria in a reasonable manner insures that we are getting a true picture of the child's performance. Criteria such as the following are impossible to reasonably measure:

Poorly Written Criteria: "Susan will spell words correctly 100% of the time." This would require those involved in Susan's life to collect data on every single piece of written material she ever produces. This would be cumbersome and simply impossible to do. Instead write the criteria as:

Well Written Objective: "On her weekly spelling test, Susan will correctly spell 8 out of 10 words." For this objective, it would be possible to document progress by keeping a portfolio of her work.

Poorly Written Objective: "Joshua will speak in complete sentences throughout the day." This goal would require someone to continually follow Joshua to ensure that every utterance out of his mouth is in a complete sentence. Instead write the criteria as:

Well Written Objective: "At lunch time, Joshua will use three complete sentences to speak to classmates." Or: "During class, Joshua will answer three questions daily using complete sentences." This would be feasible and reasonable to collect data on.

6. **Behavioral objectives should be stated in the positive.** The IEP document provides us guidance in what we want students to learn. One area that many teachers focus on for students on the autism spectrum relates to behavior. While family members and staff may be focused on eliminating or decreasing the behavior, the desired outcome of a good behavior support plan is that students learn alternative and appropriate ways of responding. Objectives such as the following do not tell students what they are to do: "Maggie will quit hitting." "Jeff will quit throwing items."

Remember that these students have a restricted repertoire of skills, and experience challenges in the areas of communication and social skills. If you take away a behavior and do not replace it with an alternative behavior, then the student may exhibit an even more challenging one. The alternative skill that you teach the student should be linked to the information that you gather about the behavior via the functional behavioral assessment. If for

example, you determine that Maggie hits because she has no means of communicating frustration, then the alternative skill should be: "Maggie will use her communication card to signal frustration in 3 out of 4 situations."

If it is determined that Jeff throws items because he has no better coping skills, then we may need to focus on teaching self-management skills over time. So, the alternative skills would be: "When anxious, Jeff will utilize his self-management strategy in 4 out of 5 situations."

These are a few specific ideas that can lead to a more effective IEP. Below are some general guidelines to follow when developing the IEP:

- Consider the number of goals/objectives that is reasonable to address within a year. Remember that goals/objectives reflect areas of need for the student. It is better to have fewer goals that can be intensely addressed than 30 that can only be briefly covered.
- Goals and objectives should not be unobtainable, but should push the student to "the edge." In other words, write goals/objectives in a manner so that success is obtainable for the student. Because of self-esteem issues experienced by many of our students, continual failure may thwart future learning efforts.
- The IEP document will not cover everything the student is working on, but should focus on those things that require our intense focus. During the course of the day, professionals will cover many topics and skills not identified in the IEP document.
- The IEP should be a living document and not simply visited once a year. If documentation shows us that goals are being easily achieved, or that no progress is being made despite our best efforts, it is best to reconsider objectives. The IEP should be a dynamic product that is continually revisited.
- The focus of the IEP document should be on outcomes and not on processes to achieve those outcomes. There may be many different ways to teach a student a specific skill. The outcome of an IEP is not that a student will receive a specific program, but that they will demonstrate a certain set of skills.
- For parents, the IEP process and documentation can be overwhelming. It is important to send a copy of the IEP document in advance of the meeting. School districts note that when parents have a copy of the IEP prior to the meeting, that the process is smoother. Parents report, that they feel less pressured and defensive when they are given the opportunity to preview the IEP outside the context of a stressful case conference meeting.
- Once the IEP is developed, it is time to establish a user-friendly data collection system. Some data collection systems are burdensome and detract from the instructional momentum of the day. However, for each objective, data collection must be developed both for the purposes of accountability and for making ongoing instructional decisions.

The IEP document is critical because it steers the educational program for any given student. Because of the importance of this document, the task of writing an effective IEP can be daunting. **When the case conference committee follows the recommendations provided above, school staff and families increase the likelihood of success for the student, and ensure that the student's time is well spent.**

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