

Effective and Positive Communication For Families and Students

High-quality educational services for students with disabilities depend upon collaboration and planning. Both require frequent, effective communication between all team members, including the student, family, educators, and others. Communication is particularly important as the team is planning and implementing Transition Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Students and families must be equal partners in this process.

Knowledge is Power

Service systems are often complex and confusing. Students and families need clear information and resources regarding the myriads of adult services, how to access them, and their legal rights. When school personnel and disability rights/advocacy organizations provide early and ongoing information about those systems, students and families are better positioned to advocate for their goals and needs. Achieving their best life requires students to develop the skills to identify their life goals, understand their support needs, work toward independent living, community employment, and self-determination.

Skills That Enhance Communication

Positive communication is important because it fosters trust, builds strong relationships, improves morale, increases collaboration, and creates a healthier environment for teams. By promoting respect, empathy, and a sense of belonging, teams can achieve more. In conflict-rising situations, effective communication is key to ensure the situation is resolved respectfully. This is no different for students, educators, families, and the entire transition planning team. How everyone communicates can be a make-or-break factor in designing an IEP that works for the student. The following skills can be used to ensure effective and positive communication among all team members.

1. Communicate early and often.

Effective teams establish a regular flow of information and identify how to share it in a way that works for each member. Some people prefer email, voice communication, texting, or snail mail. Some prefer face-to-face meetings for some topics. This should be a topic early on so everyone can express their preferences.

2. Encourage two-way communication.

The team should foster a culture where everyone feels comfortable sharing their thoughts and perspectives freely. To encourage two-way communication, actively listen to others, ask clarifying questions, provide feedback, create open spaces for dialogue, be transparent, and make it clear that you value their input by responding to their concerns and ideas. Be more curious than certain.

3. Be an active listener.

Active listening is the practice of concentrating on what someone is saying, not just hearing the words, but also understanding the meaning behind them. Team members should pay attention to both what someone is saying and how they act, seeking to understand the speaker's perspective rather than just waiting to respond. Continue to listen even when the urge is to start a debate. This can be difficult, especially during tense conversations. It helps to maintain eye contact, avoid interruption, paraphrase what the speaker says, ask open-ended questions to encourage further elaboration, and listen with the intent to comprehend rather than formulate a response.

4. Avoid jargon.

Jargon refers to specialized language used by a particular group or profession, a set of words and phrases that are only readily understood by people within that field. Sometimes, educators and professionals use those terms without thinking about how they are understood. Students and families have the right to ask educators and professionals to avoid using jargon to improve communication.

5. Be open to feedback.

The team should regularly evaluate how they are working together. Being open to that feedback can only improve outcomes and communication.

6. Ask clarifying questions.

Whenever unclear about what is being said, it is always appropriate to ask questions or to ask for restatements. That helps everyone because if you are not sure, it is likely others would benefit from the clarification.

7. Follow through.

The best evaluation of a team's effectiveness is what they achieve. Often, teams make commitments but do not revisit them or hold each other accountable for completion. Beginning meetings with a review of previous tasks reassures everyone that actions will be taken.

8. Use problem-solving strategies.

When presented with issues/concerns/problems, it is important to spend time looking at them and focus on solutions. There are many techniques, but it boils down to defining the problem, figuring out what may have caused it, identifying solutions, implementing them, and then evaluating success. Teams that take a positive approach to problem solving are much more likely to get results.

Student Led and Collaborative Transition IEPs

All team members need to hold high expectations for students. During meetings and with all communication, the team must honor and respect everyone, including families and students. Throughout their lives, youth and young adults with disabilities should develop an understanding of their skills, talents, interests, and support needs and develop their self-determination and self-advocacy skills. By age 14, students should be an active participant in their own Transition IEP meetings with the idea of leading their own meetings as soon as possible. Families and educators must prepare students to lead their Transition IEP meetings to the maximum possible from early on. This means providing them with the skills and strategies for leadership and promoting self-determination.

The Transition IEP team members do not have to consist only of school staff, families, and the student. An effective team can add others who can support and provide more information, such as a Medicaid Waiver case manager, other caregivers, or behavioral support providers. As the student approaches age 18, adult services agencies, such as VR (Vocational Rehabilitation) or employment service providers can help put supports in place to promote independent living, post-secondary education, and competitive, integrated employment.

Resources from IN*SOURCE

- ✓ [Effective Communication and Collaboration](#)
- ✓ [Student Led IEP Checklist](#)

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