



AUTISM CLASSROOM RESOURCES PODCAST EPISODE 36: ENABLING IEP GOALS

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Welcome back to The Autism Classroom Resources Podcast. I am Chris Reeve. I'm your host and today I want to talk about IEPs and I'm actually going to talk about it for a few episodes, I think. In [episode 34](#), I actually talked about running meaningful virtual IEP meetings, so I know that many of us have moved to distance learning at the time that this is being recorded. The one thing that I will tell you that is pretty consistent, across the board, whether you are teaching virtually or whether you are teaching in a classroom for special education is the IEP. The IEP, that lives on in many different ways because it should guide our instruction.

The Focus on Writing IEP Goals

Now, given that, I think it's important to recognize that the way that we write IEPs has changed over the years. If you have been in this field for a while, you have encountered quite a few interesting changes over the years. We used to not have a lot of guidance at all about how to write IEP goals, other than they needed to be measurable and meaningful. Now we have to tie them to standards and things like that. I want to talk today about one of the elements that I think is one of the most important components of choosing your IEP goals. Because clearly, there are many different steps to writing good IEPs and even to writing good IEP goals.

And goals are going to be my focus for the next few episodes. We know that we have to have them clearly defined. They have to be objective. They have to be measurable. We have to have benchmarks that tell us when the student is going to master them. We have specific criteria that we have to follow. And I'll tell you, from spending 30 years going around a lot of different school districts, that everyone does them just a little bit differently. If you've changed jobs, you've experienced that too.



In This Episode

I want to talk about the thing that I think is the most lasting element to get right within an IEP goal and that is that it is an enabling goal. An enabling goal is a door opener. It is something that allows the student, enables the student, to access the curriculum. Now that sounds like a whole lot of buzzwords thrown together. We're going to start by talking about what enabling goals are. I'll give you some examples and then I'm going to talk a little bit about how to decide whether a goal is enabling or not, and what enabling goals you should write. Stay with me. Let's get started.

Problems with Curriculum-based IEP Goals

Let me start with the fact that enabling goals are important, whether you are working with students who are on or approaching grade level or if you're working with students with more severe disabilities. When I first started in this field, we created IEPs and IEP goals based on just the individual needs of the students. There was not as much emphasis on connecting it to the general ed curriculum, particularly for students with severe disabilities. And we saw all that change probably about 10 years ago. It became very, very important to connect your goals to the general ed curriculum, which became a little bit harder for our teachers of students with severe or complicated disabilities.

It also, I think, made it a little harder for our students who are more on grade level. Or some people call them higher functioning individuals, on the autism spectrum or with behavioral issues, or really severe learning disabilities. Because it meant that we sometimes didn't focus on the things that were really relevant for them being successful. We tended to focus a lot on the curriculum and not as much on the other areas that they needed.



The Struggle with Content Standard IEP Goals

During that time, as we started to make a shift to including content standards in our IEPs, there were a lot of different ways that people did it.

Some people tried to include the core standard in the IEP. You can't do that, it's not measurable. It's not individualized; that can't be your goal.

In addition, some people tried to really reference them. And one of the things that would happen was, in trying to figure out what to do for our most severe students, I would go to conferences and sit in training. They talked about goals that were way above my kids who are in high school, who are reading on the second grade level. They were talking about goals that were just unmeaningful for them and not really where I wanted to spend our time.

And so at some point during this training I would get frustrated and I would ask the presenter, what do you do about these students? Because they were never in their examples. And a lot of times they would just say to me, "Well, what do you do now?" Because I'm like, if we wrote curriculum goals for them, their whole IEP would be curriculum. And they would say, well, what do you do now? I'm like, well, I choose reading goals that I think are most functional and meaningful for them to move them forward. I choose math goals in the same way. And they would say, "Well, I would just do that."

Even the Experts Were Confused at Times

And the the long and short of it is the experts didn't know the answers to these questions, because these are hard questions. They're hard questions for families; they're hard questions for teachers. And they're a good example of how we have these great overarching ideas about what we do. But bringing it down to the level of the people who have to actually implement it is sometimes a different story.



What Are Enabling IEP Goals?

One of the things that we used to do, before we referenced curriculum goals, was we used to only write what we called enabling goals. And enabling goals are goals that when they are mastered, they open the door for more opportunities for the students. And they enable the individual to access the curriculum, which is the point of the IEP, so that they can learn from it. Also, they focus on teaching skills that allow the individual to adapt, to learn in that environment, to get the information that they need to be successful, to advocate for themselves, for accommodations that they might need and lots of other things like that.

Examples of Enabling IEP Goals

Just to give you some examples of what I'm talking about and make it a little bit more concrete. Think about enabling goals for individuals with autism.

Following a group direction

For young students and for some of our older students, it might be following a group direction. You know what? If you can't follow a group direction, you can't learn in a larger group and that prohibits how much learning you have because when you can learn in a larger group, you are engaged more in instruction throughout the day.

Ability to work independently

Their ability to work independently. Much of the practice that students use to master curriculum goals are practicing on their own. Think about kindergarten centers. Students move around, they have some time with the teacher. And they move around, and they use other skills and practice other skills independently. If you can't work independently, that option is not really learning for you.



Following classroom procedures

Following classroom procedures, knowing how to navigate the environment. If I have to spend all my time figuring out where I'm supposed to be and what I'm supposed to do, I can't even focus on the curriculum.

Initiating with others

The ability to initiate with other people, which then means that I'm learning by acting on my environment rather than waiting for somebody to come and teach me. Initiation is a huge enabling goal.

Interacting with and modeling peers

Interacting with peers, modeling peers, another huge place that opens doors. It's a pivotal response in order to learn from the people around you. As our students get older, working collaboratively with a group, is an example. Learning to take a role, not always be the leader because that's a skill that opens up more doors for collaborative group projects and the type of collaborative learning that we have in a lot of our general ed classroom.

Executive functioning skills

Executive functioning skills. If I don't get my homework done, if I don't know when to turn it in, my grades aren't going to be too good. If I don't know how to make sure that I'm on the right page when the teacher is talking about something in my book, if I don't have the book, I'm going to have a problem. Doing that, making requests for accommodations, makes me more independent at being able to get what I need to be able to use the information.

Why We Need Enabling Goals

Those are all examples of enabling goals and those are all really strong goals for our students to learn. Examples that enable students to be able to move into a less restrictive environment and be successful to move forward to different life challenges (e.g., moving up in a grade, moving into different types of learning, going out on a job site or going to college). And they're goals that



allow them to be independent at taking care of themselves, working independently and needing less support. And when you need less support, it's a door opener to having more opportunities for learning interaction, social interaction, community integration.

Questions to Determine if It's an Enabling IEP Goal

What does the student need to do independently in the environment to either reduce staff support or allow them to access more of what's going on?

It might be using a visual schedule to be able to go through kindergarten centers. It might be knowing which materials I need to bring to class in high school so that I can actually implement the learning activities for the day because I have the needed materials. Working on executive functioning skills may be that type of enabling goal.

What keeps the student from being able to function in a new environment?

What is it that's holding this student back from being able to learn higher math skills, from being able to go into different environments to learn, from being able to access the curriculum that's available to them? Do they need to learn how to use graphic organizers because their weakness is in reading comprehension? And they need to learn how to extract that comprehension in a specialized way so that they can then participate in the conversation in their classroom.

What helps a student be able to interact with larger groups of people in their environment?

Increasing interaction with larger groups opens doors for learning from others rather than only from teacher directed instruction.



What do they need to be able to do in the next environment?

And in general, I would say, this is a question that we need to be asking all the time. For instance, if you're working with a preschooler, what does that student need to be able to do to be successful in kindergarten? That's what we need to be teaching in preschool. What does an elementary student need to know and be able to do to be successful in middle school; middle school to high school, high school to adulthood?

What do our high school students who are on grade level need to be able to master in order to be able to be successful in a college program? Not because they shouldn't be included if they are not independent, they should be. But they will not access the learning opportunities in those settings as easily or effectively without those skills.

Again, if I don't have to focus on what's happening every minute of the day, I can focus on learning. If I'm moving from elementary to middle school and my middle school probably has more collaborative project learning. I need to know how to do that, if collaboration is not a strength for me because I have autism.

How can the student communicate more effectively?

How can he initiate more effectively, advocate more effectively for his or her needs with a wider variety of people? Because that is going to majorly open doors. If I can do that, I can get my needs met more efficiently. Then I have more time to learn from the curriculum.

Why Do We Need to Write Enabling Goals Instead of Strictly Curriculum Goals?

Every program should have a curriculum

Whether you teach in a general education classroom, or a special ed resource classroom, or a self contained classroom, every program should have a curriculum that's used. It needs to be aligned with the state standards. But regardless of what that curriculum is, it could be [STAR, Strategies for Teaching Based on Autism Research](#). It could be the [Unique Learning System](#).



Or it could be Teach Town's system. It could be a lot of different curriculums now are aligned with the state standards. So we need to make sure that we are accessing those state standards by adapting them to what our students need. The IEP, though, is about individual needs.

Now, I say that it's important that we have a curriculum because we need to be teaching more just the IEP. The IEP are his most significant needs. But for most of our students, if we wrote down everything they needed to learn in the IEP, we would spend all of our time just writing that IEP.

We actually wouldn't get to teaching it. We need our IEP to be about our individual important needs. But we still need to be teaching the curriculum. The IEP needs to be the needs, not the goals of the whole program.

We must teach the curriculum in addition to the IEP

Two, the students should master many curriculum goals throughout the school year, depending on how specific they are. To write everything that a student should master within a year of learning, would again, make our IEP prohibitively long. Whether it's the general education curriculum, state standards, you've got a curriculum that aligns with them. You have some sort of assessment to track their progress on that curriculum. And we need to make sure that we're teaching those goals outside of the IEP.

Enabling goals span across time

Three, enabling goals arch across the year as the student learns all the curriculum goals and improves his or her independence and ability to learn. If we're writing enabling goals, we can access lots of different curriculum skills by those enabling goals.

If I'm learning how to use a graphic organizer for reading comprehension, I can do that in science when we're reading science materials. I can do that in social studies when we're reading social studies materials. Or, I can do it in language arts when we're reading for reading. I can do it in a lot of different places. I can do it in a lot of different areas of the curriculum. It's enabling me to access those.



Enabling IEP goals teach students how to learn

And finally, enabling goals teach the student how to learn. So they open doors for them for opportunities, beyond where they are now because they increase their independence in learning.

Working with District Rules and Enabling Goals

Now, I know that your districts will still require a specific curriculum base aligned to the standards for key skills like reading, math, sometimes science, sometimes social studies. And I can't change that. But we can think about how to write those goals. To teach strategies for reading and strategies for math or accessing accommodations, rather than teaching the specific or writing in this specific curriculum skill.

Enabling Goal Example

Instead of a goal about comprehending a sixth grade text by answering questions, you might write your goal that the student will choose an appropriate graphic organizer based on the questions being asked. Complete the graphic organizer correctly and use it to either answer specific questions or write a summary of the story. You have built your enabling piece into a goal that you can then tie back to that specific curriculum skill.

Learn More About IEP Goals Hands-On in the Special Educator Academy

There's a whole lot that goes into writing goals and objectives. And there's a whole lot that goes into writing enabling goals and objectives. I like them because I think you get more bang for your buck. You get more power in your goals when you write enabling goals. But there is a lot that goes into them that I really can't begin to explain in this amount of time. Because of that, in Special Educator Academy, we actually have training on IEP goals. And I am considering doing a study group this summer.



We've done some work sessions before on how do we write IEPs for our students, because it's not cookie cutter. There is no cookie cutter approach unfortunately. But there are guidelines and strategies that we can use.

So if you're interested in learning more about that, definitely hop over to specialeducatoracademy.com and check us out, and get your free trial.

Other IEP Goal Requirements

It's important to remember that our enabling goals still have to be measurable. They have to be tied to specific methods for instruction as well as how we measure them. And I'll talk a little bit about that in next week's episode. All the requirements of IEP goals are still going to apply. However, when you write enabling goals, when you're done you have an IEP that focuses on the individual needs of that student. And that when mastered, will increase his independence and ability to learn from his environment and access the curriculum.

I would love to hear your thoughts about enabling goals. If you want to hop over to our [free Facebook Group at specialeducatorsconnection.com](https://www.facebook.com/specialeducatorsconnection).

Free "Is Your Goal Enabling?" Checklist

I have a list of questions for you to use as you're thinking about your goals. If you answer yes to these questions, you have enabling goals, [free in the Resource Library](#). Thanks so much for joining me. I really appreciate you taking the time. I hope that this has given you some ideas and sparked maybe some inspiration for your IEP writing. Since we know that even though we are teaching at home IEPs, like taxes, still remain. Thank you, stay safe and hopefully I'll see you again back here next week for another episode about IEPs.