



AUTISM CLASSROOM RESOURCES PODCAST EPISODE 39: BUILDING POSITIVE IEPs

URL: <http://autismclassroomresources.com/episode39>


Welcome back to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast. I am Chris Reeve and I'm your host and I have a special episode today that I am sharing directly from the vault of the [Special Educator Academy](#). For those of you who are not familiar with the Academy, it is an online training and support resource for special educators of all kinds. And one of the things that it includes is a subscription to two podcasts streams that occur every other week. So there's a new podcast every week and the one that I am sharing today comes from the one we call Monday Morning Reflections. It was originally designed to start folks out on the right note for the week with positive feedback. But primarily it focuses on self care, coping strategies, working collaboratively with coworkers and working effectively and collaborating with families. And that is what today's episode is about.

This Episode

In this episode, I share five ways that you can effectively work with families to have a positive IEP meeting. So it focuses on effective communication strategies and collaboration. And I think that these issues are even more important now than they were when I recorded this originally a year ago because most of our IEPs right now are taking place in virtual worlds. So I have an episode that I did recently on running a virtual IEP and having it be effective and it focused primarily on the mechanics. So if you want to check that out, you can go to autismclassroomresources.com/episode34. And today I'm going to focus more on how we interact with families and how we include them in the discussion and create true collaboration. So have a listen, let's get started.

Monday Morning Reflections Episode

I hope that you are off to a good start of the week, if you're listening to this on Monday. If not, I hope the rest of your week has gone well. Today I want to talk about having a positive IEP meeting.



Many of you have heard me say that IEPs set the tone for the entire relationship with a family. And many of our IEPs can be pretty contentious. So it's really important that we spend some time thinking about how we can make them more positive. IEPs that go well are good for families. But they're also good for us because they help to build that relationship with the family. And that relationship is going to set the tone for our other interactions with families being positive or negative.

So I want to talk, not about the pieces of the meeting and things like that. I'll talk about that another time. But mostly I want to talk about how our interactions with families can make a difference in their interactions with us. And it's really hard to remember sometimes that we have our behavior has an impact on them. Just the way that their behavior has an impact on us.

5 Things to Increase Positivity in the IEP Meeting


So I just want to go over five different things to think about as you go through an IEP meeting..

I. Be Genuine

The first is, and it sounds very trite, but be genuine. It's not meant to be a trite statement because being genuine can sometimes be really hard sometimes interacting with some of our families. It's hard. I said it.

Avoid Jargon

But think about it. We use acronyms and special ed language speak all the time. ESY and IEP and LRE and FAPE and LEA and all sorts of things. And to us that sounds like normal everyday language. But to everybody else, it sounds like a completely foreign language. So constantly, we often forget that the jargon is going to be offsetting for people and they're already going



to feel at a disadvantage. And many people are going to feel that you are using those terms in order to make them feel inferior.

Behavior Analysts and Jargon

Let me put that in the framework of think about a professional that came into your classroom from another field. I'm going to use behavior analysts because I think we're the worst about jargon. And I feel more comfortable picking on my own profession. So we come in, and we talk about mands and tacts and interracial intervals and discrete trials and SDs--discriminative stimuli. And we can throw the jargon around like nothing you've ever seen. Trust me, if you've never had this experience it can be really something. But what happens, and what I find that teachers feel when people come in and do that is they feel like you're trying to show them how smart you are. The implication is that because they don't know what these words mean, they're not smart.

How Jargon Affects Others

And I see teachers react this way so often and it's very off-putting. It means that that language is very off-putting. The special ed language that we use is no different for a family member who's never experienced it.

So certainly you have families that are pros at this. I mean, they can come in and explain to you what all the acronyms mean, but you're always going to have a family that kind of sits back and doesn't say anything because they, they feel like they don't understand what you're talking about. So try to make sure that you're taking the time to explain that language.

Enlist Help Running the IEP Meeting

Try to identify somebody in your meeting because running your meeting, and dealing with the paperwork and all the things you deal with when you run a meeting, are difficult. Try to have another professional in the meeting who's in charge of just keeping an eye on the parents and making sure that they are looking like they're comfortable with what you're saying. And then giving you an indication or interrupting in some way to stop, to explain. That doesn't have to be, you don't feel like you have to do everything in the meeting.



Focus on the Student as a Person

You know, along the same lines, talk about the student as a child that, you know, make them real. Don't read the IEP. You know, if you've observed the student, let them know what you've seen of them, but talk about them as a student, not as a piece of paper. Talk about what they do in your classroom. If you're a general ed, if you're working with a general ed teacher, tell them that you need them to be willing to share their observations from when the child was in their class. Try to include the positives as well as the things that need to be addressed. You've got to tell the families about the weaknesses because that's what we need to write the goals for.

Recognize and Note Strengths

But it's just as important that they recognize the strengths and the gifts that the child has because this is still their kid and at the end of the meeting, he's still their kid. So we want to really make sure that we're sharing with them the positives that we see.


2. Be a Good Listener

Another is be a good listener. Don't anticipate what people are going to say. Can't tell you how many times I've anticipated something that a family member was going to say only to be completely wrong. From a family that we walked into the meeting, the student was off the wall. She'd been doing extremely well and Mom was going to really push to go out the community.

And instead mom walked in and said, "There's something wrong with her. There's something physically wrong with her. We need to address that. We can't go out in the community yet." So we'd geared ourselves up for this and we were ready for a fight. And there was no fight because the mom saw the same thing.

Don't Anticipate.

Sometimes I want to jump in. I'm really guilty at this. I want to jump in and finish a sentence for a family. Help them describe or interpret what I think they're feeling. And in reality, I think I'm doing them a favor. I think I'm



making things easier. But in reality I'm taking away their voice. And I shouldn't be taking away their voice, because they should be participating in this meeting just as much as we are.

So make sure that we listen to people, look up from their paperwork and make eye contact with families. That's a really hard thing to do with the amount of paperwork we deal with in these meetings. Repeat back if you're not sure about what a family said, had them repeat it if you are not sure or just to let them know that you've heard them, repeat back and make sure that you are understanding what they're asking.

Ask Questions and Listen

Don't assume about what a parent wants. Ask them. That's really important, because so many times, especially if you've been in the same district for a while, families get reputations. And people stop asking them questions. And then they're surprised, when in middle school, Mom walks in and says, "Why doesn't anybody teach my kid functional skills?" Well, because in kindergarten you said absolutely no over your dead body. And that just traveled down the line over time.


So ask the question. They, you know, they may be frustrated that you're asking the question, but make sure that you're exploring those things. Also make sure that they're on the same page and that they're really understanding what they're expressing.

3. Advocate for the Student

Another thing to make it go positive is advocate for the student. And I think this is really the one thing that every IEP team member has in common is our job is to advocate for the student.

The student is the center of the conversation. If you always keep the student at the center of the conversation, then you avoid things like, well, we don't do that here or we can't do that for you. Or we're focusing on what he needs and whether or not we can meet those needs.

Recognize that the parent is the expert in their child longterm. They can see beyond the classroom. Sometimes it's harder for them to see that than



maybe an outsider. But they are the ones whose goal who are going to live with this child and support this child until there are other systems in place.

Keep the Student at the Center


We have to stand up for what we know the student needs. We are the experts in education and we need to take that on. But we also need to make sure that we're getting the information from the families about where they want to go. And that we're respecting that their path may not be our path, that they may really want them to be in a general ed class because they want the, the community to accept their child.

Example

I'll give you a good example. One of the things I can get very focused on in advocating for a child is making sure that they're getting the instruction that they need and they can't always get that instruction in the general ed classroom. And I had a family that wanted their child fully included. He was a kid with very severe autism and intellectual disability and a lot of behavioral issues. So our initial thought was we can't teach him in that setting, the things that he needs to learn. We need to make sure that he's getting the strategies and the skills that he needs to be more successful to address the behavior and things like that.

Luckily

And so luckily we sat down, rather than saying, "this is what we think he needs," and standing on it. We said to the family, why is it so important to you? And I interviewed them and I got more information from them. What came out very clearly when I listened to them was that they were saying, "These are the people who are going to hire my child. These are the people who are going to be their neighbors. These are the people who are going to be in this community when this child grows up. And I need them to know him. I need them to accept him and not be afraid of him. And if we don't include him, then we're sending the message that he can't be with them and that's not what I want for my child." And so we were then able to continue to advocate for teaching the skills, but also look at where are the, where should we be spending our time and what is our focus? Because that completely



changed the focus of this child's IEP. We're looking at very different skills at that point.

4. Avoid Assumicide

Assumicide is when you assume what someone else wants, means, or says. We have a tendency to assume when a family member doesn't show up for a meeting that they don't care. Especially if this is a repeated occurrence, we have a tendency to assume that if they keep canceling the meeting that they're not invested in their child's education. When in reality it may be that they have a car that keeps breaking down. Or they couldn't get the bus to get to where the school was. Maybe they have to work in order to keep their job, and they can't come out in the middle of the day.


Err on Not Judging

So don't assume, believe what people tell you. Yes. I recognize that sometimes when we believe everything that someone says that we are opening ourselves up to being gullible. But I would rather believe it and take it at face value and have a relationship with that person than I would believing anything that they say and in which case I'm not going to want to interact with them at all.

Yes, sometimes you will be taken advantage of. Sometimes you may feel duped, but you can sleep at night knowing that you haven't read into the situation something that was incorrect and judged someone who didn't deserve it. And you'll have a better relationship with that person.

A Parable

Stephen Covey has a great story and seven habits for highly effective people that I love. And it's all about a father and a train who can't control his kids and his kids are bouncing around the train car and everybody is really frustrated that these kids can't behave and they're really a mess. Finally somebody says, "Can't you control your kids?" And the father just breaks down crying and says, "I'm so sorry. I, you know, my, I just came from the hospital and picked up the kids. My wife died today and I haven't been able to figure out how to tell them that their mother is gone."



And everybody's point of view on that person then completely changes. People will then turn around asking how could I help this child and how can I help you with these kids? Because they recognize that this is not normal. You know, this is a situation that requires sympathy, not judgment. And so I think the more that we can focus on empathy and sympathy and less on judgment, the better off we'll be.

5. Take a Break in the IEP Meeting

And finally recognize that you don't have to have this meeting until the absolute end of time. You can end the meeting and reconvene. You can also just take a break. Sometimes it really helps to just say, you know what? Let's all get up, get a drink of water, use the bathroom chat. We'll come back in 15 minutes and continue.


Or sometimes it's better to say, okay, this is a really good start. Let's make another time and make the time for the meeting before they leave. Let's make another start and we'll complete this at another time. Suddenly IEPs are extremely complicated. And we can say it's because the parents are difficult or the school is difficult and it really doesn't matter. Some IEPs are difficult because the students are complex and there's a lot of stuff that we have to worry about.

After a couple hours people aren't going to be able to focus on what you're doing. So at that point it makes more sense to say, "Let's come back another time."

Longer IEPs are Often More Contentious

So I've sat in a lot of IEPs in my career and over time I've seen a lot of relationships be built in a good way. And I've seen a lot of relationships trashed as part of the IEP. I've sat in IEPs that we never ended; IEPs that we met every week for a semester and couldn't come to agreement. And I've seen IEPs that take you 20 minutes.

So there's a lot of things that go on in an IEP and it's not an easy time, but just remember that you're there to advocate for the student. You need to be genuine, don't make assumptions and anticipate what other people are looking for. Advocate for the student and keep them at the center of the



conversation. And if all else fails and things break down and the meeting and come back.

One of My Best IEPs

One of the best IEP meetings I ever had was when we had the fire alarm go off in the middle of it, and we had to walk across the street to another building to continue. Things had been getting really, really tense. That walk solved that problem and we were able to complete the meeting in the other building.

Building Relationships in Virtual Learning

So I hope that gives you some ideas that you can use as you are working through your virtual IEPs possibly for the first time. And to help really think about how we build collaboration with families.

I think that we have the opportunity at this time that we've kind of seen into more families' homes, sometimes literally with zoom and sometimes figuratively. I think that families have seen more about what we do in the classroom and how much is involved in working with their own students.

So we have an opportunity to really build some strong family relationships if we've just can make sure that we keep everything focused on the needs of the student.

What About You?

I would love to hear more about what you are thinking and doing in your IEP, especially in this difficult time and what you have found to be important to build those strong family relationships. So hop over to our free Facebook group. If you're an educator [specialeducatorsconnection.com](https://www.facebook.com/specialeducatorsconnection) and definitely share with us there. If you're interested in learning more about the Special Educator Academy, hop over to [specialeducatoracademy.com](https://www.specialeducatoracademy.com) and check out our 7-day free trial for training, support, and community. Thanks guys and I'll see you again next week.