

OMG! The Difficult IEP Team Member

by Dr. Kelli Sandman-Hurley, Dyslexia Training Institute

There comes a time in every advocate's professional life when an IEP goes awry because of a hostile team member. This hostility can manifest verbally or non-verbally, and even when it is silent hostility it can still affect the IEP process. Today I had the pleasure of meeting a hostile IEP team member that was both verbally and non-verbally hostile and I am proud of the way we handled the situation, so I thought I would pass on some tips for handling this type of situation.

Before we go any further, I believe that hostility in IEP meetings is usually the result of someone feeling undertrained or overwhelmed. So, it is important to remember that when it comes to dyslexia, most IEP members are not equipped with the knowledge they need to help a child with dyslexia, to write a good IEP and to know what appropriate services are, and in some individuals, this can make a person defensive and hostile. Then...there are other cases where the person is just hostile. Here are some tips to smooth out an IEP meeting and get some results.

Scene: *Hostile IEP team member is holding his head in his hands and refusing to answer questions other than to say, "We already discussed that".*

This is when it is really important to try to understand his motivation for being hostile. What his body language is telling us is that he is done with the meeting and does not wish to answer any more questions. When asked questions or clarifications he does not seem to know the answer and is avoiding making that apparent by stating "We already discussed that."

What to do: I consider this type of interaction a gift for our case. When we asked a direct question like, "Can you please explain how the strategies you are suggesting work for children with dyslexia?" He scoffed and said, "I already told you". I highly encourage you to stay calm at all times and have a little empathy for the hostile IEP member and respond politely, "I don't remember that conversation, can you please explain that to me again?"

Scene: *Hostile IEP team member decided the meeting was over and stated, "As far I am concerned we have offered you FAPE and this meeting is over."*

I have to say, this was a new one for me. He was tired of answering very politely stated, but pointed, questions about the level and type of services being offered. He then decided to end the meeting which basically ended what little parent participation was actually being allowed.

What to do: We record every meeting, so I always speak and ask questions with the thought that down the road an attorney may be listening. So, I politely responded, "Oh, are you ending the meeting?" His body language told me the meeting was over before it started, but he verbally told me that meeting was indeed over and there was nothing left to discuss. Cases like this highlight the importance of having district staff attending because she saw what was happening and stated that "she still had some questions" thus saving the meeting and the district from some unneeded issues.

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Scene: Hostile IEP team member is reading through the goals and not asking for input. When politely interrupted to ask questions or offer suggestions for proposed goals, he was visibly annoyed and did not want to make the changes.

So, in this situation two very important parts of the IEP process are being denied. The first is parent participation in which the parent is an integral part of the IEP and has a right to offer suggestions regarding goals (and all parts of the IEP). The second issue is that this speaks to an IEP being predetermined and that the IEP team came to the meeting with preconceived ideas of goals and services.

What to do: You need to politely interrupt the hostile team member and remind him that the goals are an IEP team decision and they require discussion. Using the school's data we politely pointed out that there were identified needs which required goals. We also wanted to point out some errors in baselines, etc. While doing this we reminded the team that we were nitpicking so that the IEP could be read by anyone, thus trying to lessen any blaming or finger-pointing that the hostile team member might be perceiving.

Take Away

Meeting hostility with hostility will do more damage than anything good, so keep your cool. Try to understand the underlying reasons for the hostility and be polite. The hostile team member who refuses to participate, answer questions or allow parent participation is handing you a gift in the form of a case – so continue to ask the questions.

I cannot talk about the hostile IEP member without acknowledging the very real concern of parents' that this hostility might find its way into the instruction with the student. If that is the case, it is important to begin to document everything, hire someone to observe and let the administrators know about your concerns.

Lastly, leave the meeting knowing you kept your cool, you continued to ask your questions and you will get your child with dyslexia what they need despite any hostile human roadblocks. Now, I am off to buy some books on body language because he gave me some I still can't interpret.