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### Group Dynamics, the IEP meeting, and an Advocate's Role

By: Lauren Morris, MS

Many of us experience IEP meetings that are stressful. An IEP team is made up of people that under everyday circumstances do not come together. Much like a kaleidoscope, individuals with different backgrounds, training, and viewpoints are brought together to bring one very important aspect into focus, the individualized needs of the child.

Parents often find they overwhelmed. Many times the parent and other team members take different positions regarding the unique needs of the child. As a result, the parent feels they are not part of the team. Researchers believe when at least two members of one team have different points of views it forces the entire team to address and think about issues in a more complex and dynamic way (Snyder, 2004). Dealing with differences of opinions results in better decision making (Gruenfeld & Preston, 2000). An advocate can ensure the concerns of the parent are addressed during the meeting which can lead the team to make better decisions for the child.

Generally, interactions in small groups shift and change and at times can be uncomfortable for team members. Parents, staff, and teachers are not aware that this is part of small group dynamics that have predictable stages and have been identified as forming, storming, norming, and performing (Tuckman, 1965). An advocate who understands both special education and small group dynamics can help the parent develop a stronger IEP for their child.

During the initial stage known as forming members of the IEP team are getting to know one another and tend to avoid serious topics while focusing much of their time on specific tasks. Meetings feel very formal, appear impersonal, and members are quite guarded. Think back to your first IEP meeting when you were sitting with a group of people you just met and they read the IEP while you sat with your hands in your lap and



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avoided eye contact. To move past this type of IEP meeting and into the next stage, parents need to become comfortable with small group dynamics and their child's IEP team to risk the possibility of conflict. An advocate sitting besides the parent can help.

Learning more about special education and their child's needs helps the parent develop confidence to ask more questions about the education process, goals, and objectives for their child. The result is other members feeling threatened and conflict follows. This is normal and known as the storming stage and through this process the purpose of the meeting and confrontation among team members occur. Some members will be very silent while other members step up and attempt to dominate the team. Conflict is natural and given the differences in backgrounds, training, and personalities of IEP teams, not surprising. Opinions differ and conversation about why they differ need to happen. A well trained advocate uses conflict to help the child.

During these times of conflict try to keep a sense of humor, organize your thoughts before the meeting to help stay on track and remember your vision which is to receive services for your child to succeed in the school environment. If you feel that one person is attempting to dominate the group, ignore them and attempt to engage other members into the discussion by asking direct questions of to those who can provide information to help resolve the problem. Attempt to stay objective and refrain from advice or criticism during the storming phase. The child's needs is the objective, not pointing out all the flaws of other team members.

Through storming, the team can reach the next stage, norming. During this stage, members identify with each other, understand the strengths of the team members, and use the strengths in a constructive manner. Leadership is shared and a there is a sense of unity. Members feel as part of the team and begin to contribute more to the process. Creativity can be harnessed and information shared.

Unfortunately, many IEP teams get stuck in forming and storming stages. The best outcomes for the child is reaching the norming stage so that members trust one another



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to function and use their energy for the needs of the child rather than the tasks of the team. An advocate can help you reach this target.

If the group can reach norming they can then reach the final stage, the performing stage. This stage is essential for the IEP team because here they are most productive. Ideas and strategies are welcomed, shared, and used to develop an effective IEP ensuring the child has the maximum benefit to their unique development and education.

Even understanding this process, parents may feel overwhelmed. Bring an advocate who understands the child and the situation as well as group dynamics and problem solving techniques.

Budgets, time, personnel, physical locations of schools, are all reasons that conflict arises as well as differing opinions, values, and techniques. Recognizing this and learning how to make it work to the advantage of the child takes persistence, time, and sometimes further training. Knowing when you need professional help, asking for help, and focusing on your child's needs can help you attain what we all want for our children: quality education and the skills necessary to move toward independence and achieve happiness for themselves.

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### About Lauren Morris:

Lauren Morris, founder of MyChild's Advocate, Inc. has her masters degree with extensive knowledge in research, education law, and training in advanced dispute resolution. She also has three children, all with special needs. You can reach Lauren at 407-592-0081 or [lauren@my-childsadvocate.com](mailto:lauren@my-childsadvocate.com)