

Individualized Education  
Program (IEP)/Individualized Family  
Service Plan (IFSP) Facilitation:  
Practical Insights and Programmatic  
Considerations

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## Introduction

Over 6.5 million youth and their families are eligible for early intervention or special education services (Data Accountability Center, 2011) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA). The principal mechanism by which goals, objectives, services and placements are determined for Part B of the IDEA are Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. Programs for children birth to three who receive services under Part C are developed in Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) meetings. Each plan or program is developed by a team of parents, early childhood service providers, teachers, administrators, and related service providers as well as attorneys and advocates, in some cases. These meetings represent an important opportunity to draw on participants' expertise and aspirations in the interest of developing a plan that leads to important learning outcomes for the child (Reiman et al., 2010).

Making important decisions and developing plans on one's own is often difficult. Making important decisions with others — particularly those who hold differing views — is further complicated. Fortunately, many groups find that the challenges of aligning diverse viewpoints can be overcome with the support of a facilitator, a term grounded in the Latin word for 'easy'.

An effective facilitator makes a group's work easier — or at least, less difficult — by supporting clear communication among prepared parties in a structured and focused process. Put more simply, "A facilitator's job is to support everyone to do their best thinking" (Kaner et al., 2007, p.32).

The application of facilitation to IEP/IFSP meetings has significantly increased. In 2008, twenty-four states reported using IEP facilitation and another eight states were in the planning or development stages (Henderson, 2008, p.7). As the practice of IEP/IFSP facilitation has grown, a body of expertise and associated practice recommendations has emerged. This document summarizes practical insights and promising practices for IEP/IFSP facilitation, collected from a broad review of facilitation and special education literature.

## Practical insights

**Before the meeting:** The following practices provide a solid foundation for a successful IEP/IFSP meeting. Preparation by both the facilitator and participants is key to an effective meeting.

**1. Explain the meeting process and structure in advance.** Many participants in facilitated IEP/IFSP meetings, especially parents and family members, may be unfamiliar with the process, so facilitators are advised to contact participants to outline the purposes and structure prior to the meeting. Lo (2012) counsels that professionals “de-mystify” the process for culturally and linguistically diverse families by sharing, in advance, a draft meeting agenda and other materials in the parents’ primary language; her advice is applicable to all parties. An evaluation of North Carolina’s IEP Facilitation Program (2006) noted the value of facilitators conversing with participants individually in advance, and both Martin (2010) and Mueller (2009) counsel that “ground rules” can help IEP meetings to run smoothly. Introducing these ground rules in advance of the meeting allows participants to prepare themselves for the structure and expectations of the meeting.

**2. Prepare participants for the IEP/IFSP meeting by ensuring their familiarity with topics and materials to be reviewed at the meeting.** Just as some participants may not be familiar with the process of facilitated planning meetings, they may be similarly unfamiliar with the forms or reports under consideration. Simon (2006) advises that districts share IEP forms with parents prior to meeting, and Stoner and colleagues (2005) counsel that participants also should be informed of their legal rights and related resources. Lo (2012) advises that facilitators should meet with language interpreters “at least thirty minutes prior to the meeting to provide a glossary of relevant terms and acronyms and to discuss how often the professionals should pause” to allow time for the interpreter to relay the communication.

**3. Encourage all participants to come with open minds and blank forms.** Appropriate IEPs and IFSPs are developed jointly by families and professionals through sharing and deliberation. Family members have found it problematic to arrive at meetings only to find some of the forms completed ahead of time, without the parents’ input. Studies by Fish (2008) and Cheatham and colleagues (2012) stress the need for educators to refrain from completing forms or setting goals in advance of the meeting.

**4. Schedule and provide ample time for the meeting.** Finding a meeting time convenient for all participants is not always easy but is certainly important. Both the start time and duration must be considered, and numerous articles conclude that participants desire sufficient time for full discussion of IEP issues (Fish, 2008; Peter, 2009) and appreciate flexibility in scheduling (Lo, 2012; Stoner et al., 2005).

**At the meeting:** Facilitated IEP/IFSP meetings run smoothly when structured and monitored effectively.

**5. Use clear, accessible language.** Groups can develop a shared understanding of a topic only through clear communication of interests, goals, and concerns. Some fields, including special education, develop vocabulary and

ways of communicating that are familiar only to those within the field. Highly specialized vocabulary is also commonly used by physical therapists (PT), occupational therapists (OT), and other related service providers. Use of vocabulary and abbreviations (such as IEP, IFSP, PT, OT, etc.) can be confusing and may require heightened attention from those unfamiliar with the terms in order to understand the conversation. Miles-Bonart (2002) advises that discussions within IEP meetings should avoid “educationese”, while Fish (2008) has found that parents appreciate the use of common language rather than jargon.

**6. Structure the meeting space to be comfortable and to foster collaboration.** Facilitation and mediation practitioners often counsel the use of round tables or no tables at all (see, e.g., Beer, 1997). Mueller advocates that the “environment should be comfortable; seating should be balanced to assure that school team members are not dominating one side of a table” (2009, p.64). Some participants will appreciate a working surface for reviewing documents and taking notes. Conscious choices about where to meet and the arrangement of adult-size tables and chairs should ensure that parents and school staff can see and hear each other and be seated comfortably for the time set aside for the meeting.

**7. Open the meeting by reviewing ground rules, goals, agenda and time frames.** Ideally, participants should arrive at the IEP/IFSP meeting with full knowledge of who will participate, what roles each person has, how long the meeting will last and what the meeting process will be. Guidelines for participation might include agreements about turning off cell phones and precluding other interruptions during the agreed-upon time frame. It is generally useful to the assembled group to review these guidelines briefly to ensure shared understanding, if only as a “gentle reminder” (Martin, 2010).

**8. Conveniently display important information for the group.** Facilitators often create flip-charts or other posters displaying the meeting agenda and ground rules, as well as a “parking lot” in which to note any topics or points that may arise during consideration of another topic (Bens, 2005; Mueller, 2009). Items ‘parked’ there are typically revisited before the meeting’s conclusion. As agreements are reached, the facilitator may record them visibly for all participants. Other visual facilitation strategies include the use of sticky notes (such as Post-its), by which participants may provide input or feedback on flip-charts, and colored markers or dot stickers to indicate support or preference for ideas under consideration (Wells and Sheehey, 2012).

**9. Periodically check with the group about process.** A facilitator assists a team to stay on task and on time (CADRE and the Alliance, 2004). Bens (2005) advises “stopping the discussion periodically to redirect attention to how the meeting is going” to identify any necessary changes or improvements. She lists four elements a facilitator should consider: the purpose (are we focused on the child?), the process (is the present approach working?), the pace (are things moving too quickly or too slowly?), and the pulse (are participants energized or tired, satisfied or frustrated?). When facilitators reflect a group’s dynamics clearly, participants are better able to step back to reconsider their process and refocus on their purpose (Kaner et al., 2007).

## **10. Be sure that important considerations and legal standards are addressed in the meeting.**

Capably facilitated IEP/IFSP meetings ought to address any concerns brought by participants. Any agreed-upon outcomes and resulting written documents must also meet certain standards. A finalized IEP, for example, should include clear goals and objectives and must attend to “the child’s present level of performance, measurable annual goals, and a statement of needed special education and other services” (Bateman and Herr, 2006, p.10).

**Closing the meeting:** IEPs and IFSPs provide action plans for the participants, so it’s important that all parties leave with a clear understanding of next steps.

**11. Review next steps at meeting conclusion to ensure shared understanding.** The value of facilitation is often most evident at the end of a meeting. While participants are likely focused on recent topics of discussion and deliberation, or on their next appointments, a facilitator is uniquely positioned to bring “meaningful closure” (Martin, 2010). Through clarification of next steps, an invitation for feedback on the meeting process, and perhaps a few words of affirmation for the participants’ efforts, the facilitator both closes the meeting and sets the stage for positive future interactions.

## **Programmatic considerations**

Five issues appear in the facilitation literature that relate as much to program design as to practice. Facilitators and facilitation program administrators should develop — and share with their clients — clear approaches to each of these issues, which are described briefly below:

**Confidentiality:** Clear guidelines exist regarding confidentiality in special education mediation but these do not apply to facilitation. Professional facilitation providers often pledge to keep all communication confidential unless parties consent to sharing (Davidson, 2005; Hunter & Thorpe, 2005). To what extent are facilitators to keep confidential any communication and information shared within and beyond an IEP or IFSP meeting? Information related to health or education is customarily treated as very sensitive and private. Beyond legal or administrative standards, facilitators should have a clear understanding of the appropriate treatment of communications and information. How might a facilitator be expected to respond to an allegation of child abuse or a threat of physical harm? Similarly, under what circumstances might a facilitator be asked to testify? Many facilitation providers require participants to sign an “Agreement to Facilitate” form stipulating that participants will not issue a subpoena or ask the facilitator to testify about the facilitated discussions (Minnesota Department of Education, 2009; Ohio Department of Education, 2011).

**Neutrality/impartiality:** How does a facilitator’s relationship to each party affect perceptions of her/his ability to conduct a meeting without favor for certain views or outcomes? Roles with decision-making authority — such as hearing officer or judge — demand complete freedom from actual or perceived conflicts-of-interest or partiality

toward either party. While facilitators do not render decisions, and therefore may not be held to such a standard, meeting participants might wish to know whether and how a facilitator is linked to any of the groups or agencies involved. Martin (2010, p.143) notes that when school professionals serve as facilitators, parents may have concerns about bias; he advises that a clear presentation of the facilitator's role, along with asking all team members to "point out if at any time they perceive the facilitator to be biased," may allay such concerns. Other studies recommend that when a school district employee serves as a facilitator, she should not have a prior relationship with the family or child (Mueller, 2009; Mueller, Singer, & Draper, 2008).

**Content knowledge:** The depth and breadth of a facilitator's knowledge necessary to be effective is a topic of some debate among scholars and practitioners (see, e.g., Schwarz, 1994; Martin, 2010). How much information about special education laws and practices should a facilitator possess to be effective? Is basic familiarity with frequently used terms sufficient or is more advanced understanding of applicable laws and regulations needed? The nature and themes of the discussions which a facilitator is asked to manage will determine, to a large extent, what degree of content knowledge and what degree of process expertise will be appropriate in each case.

**Cultural dimensions, cultural competence:** Facilitators must be knowledgeable about and responsive to cultural dimensions within an IEP/IFSP meeting. "Culture" here refers to the entire range of differences which exist among people. Parents' styles of interaction with educators is greatly influenced by their cultural and social "capital" — defined as access to information and connections to others (Trainor, 2010) — and facilitators should be mindful that no two families (or even parents) are identical in their understanding, abilities, networks and values. Facilitators are advised to "avoid stereotyping and generalizations — for example, that an individual represents a culture, that all age groups have the same cultural values, and that city and rural dwellers have the same values" (Hogan, 2005, p.279). Further, the professional culture of educators is likely distinct from that of most families (Kalyanpur and Harry, 1999). Facilitators should be trained and empowered to adapt meeting structures and process to best meet the needs of all participants.

**Power imbalances:** While facilitators can help address power disparities, the special education facilitation literature generally does not provide much guidance on this important topic. Useful insights can be found in the negotiation and mediation literature (see, e.g., Kurilof and Goldberg, 1997; Feinberg and Beyer, 2000; Kritek, 2002). Advocates can play an important role in empowering parents to more effectively engage in team meetings and the network of federally-funded parent centers has long played a role in assisting family members in this regard.

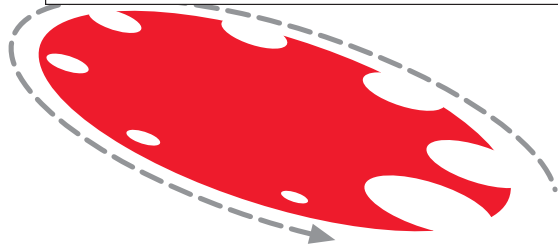
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CADRE works with state and local education and early intervention systems, parent centers, families and educators to improve programs and results for children with disabilities.

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### **CADRE's Priorities**

- *Identify effective, cost-beneficial dispute resolution practices and support their implementation*
- *Enhance collaboration between education/early intervention agencies and parent organizations*
- *Promote improved problem-solving skills across stakeholder groups*
- *Assist states to implement the dispute resolution provisions of IDEA'04*
- *Support integration of dispute resolution management and improved state system performance*
- *Compile State Performance Plan data and information on the characteristics of state systems*

