



Key points:

- **Bring people out of 'fight or flight' mode**
- **Recognize that emotional outbursts can be natural response to threats, stress**
- **Ask team members not to get 'hooked' by other person's behavior**

IEP teams: Address outbursts without making matters worse

Scott Bellows spent about an hour in a school parking lot trying to persuade an upset parent to return to the IEP [meeting](#). It started to drizzle, but they just kept talking.

"She wouldn't come back under the awning of the school building, but she also didn't get in her car," said Bellows, a [mediator](#) and IEP team facilitator with [Dispute Solutions LLC](#) in Portland, Ore.

Clearly, the parent was very upset. So why not reconvene the team meeting for another time?

High emotions don't always need to end an IEP meeting, Bellows said. Especially when an emotional outburst might be a sign that the meeting is getting to the issues that matter most to that person, he added. In fact, that particular situation ended with the parent coming back inside, and by the end of the meeting -- an hour later -- the team had come to an agreement.

Behavior such as running out of the building, bullying other team members, or even name-calling can be handled by a team leader or facilitator with some facilitation techniques, he said.

Use these strategies to handle emotional or unprofessional conduct:

- **Understand where this behavior comes from.** Humans are hardwired to go into "fight, flight, or freeze" mode when they're confronted with threats, Bellows said. The issues that surface during an IEP meeting can make many people at the table feel threatened, he said. "Not just parents, but many people are involved in special education because they have a child with a disability in their lives or they know someone with a disability," Bellows said. For instance, an advocate may remember feeling threatened during her own child's IEP meeting. Or, a teacher who's very passionate about working with children with disabilities may feel as though someone is questioning his ability to teach. A person can act irrationally when he feels threatened, he said. "Once you understand there are reasons why, you're able to be compassionate and figure out how to help them through it," Bellows said.

- **Coach other team members on how to respond.** If you know that a person becomes very emotional or acts out during IEP meetings, prepare other team members for that conduct, Bellows said. A team leader or facilitator can normalize "bad" behaviors so that other team members aren't surprised if they happen, he said. Tell staffers that behaviors that may seem strange or unprofessional are a normal human reaction to stress or threats. Ask staffers not to respond defensively to the conduct, he said. Allow the team leader or facilitator to handle the issue.

- **Give that person extra supports.** Find out how to get the person who engages in challenging behavior extra support at the meeting, Bellows said. "Sometimes when others are there for you, they can say, 'OK, this is a reasonable place to compromise,' and you'll listen," he said. For instance, if the person is a parent, encourage the

other parent to attend the meeting or put her in contact with an advocacy center, he said. If it's a teacher, consider having another familiar teacher there.

- **Don't "bite the hook."** If an outburst appears to be a quick flare up, let the person's behavior go unaddressed and move on with the meeting, Bellows said. "You can base that on prior conversations you've had with the person. Then, having coached other people in the room to just let it go, it'll likely pass," he said. "Biting the hook" refers to what happens when another person responds to that conduct, he said. It can escalate or sidetrack the meeting, he said. On the other hand, "a facilitator can't emotionally check out from the meeting," Bellows said. "You have to do the difficult work of receiving that anger and saying, 'I see how angry you are and I'm really sorry that what I'm doing is making you angry, and I want to make it better.'"

Don't be drawn away from the focus of the meeting by unprofessional conduct, agreed Fran Fletcher, associate policy scientist in the Conflict Resolution Program in the [Institute for Public Administration at the University of Delaware](#). "Don't add fuel to the behavior by giving it attention," she said.

- **Discuss positive communication in advance.** When you expect a tense meeting, take time to explain how the team will communicate, Fletcher said. "I don't like to use the words 'ground rules,' but I try to address those bad behaviors in a positive way," she said. For instance, instead of "no name-calling," explain that you want to have a process that's "free of name-calling," she said.

- **Call a break.** If someone's conduct becomes egregious, consider asking for a break, Fletcher said. For instance, testimony from a recent case noted that a parent attorney mimicked an employee's accent and spoke in a "demeaning tone to his own client," during an IEP meeting in *K.K. v. State of Hawaii, Dep't of Educ.*, [66 IDELR 12](#) (D. Hawaii 2015). "I would probably take a break after that," Fletcher said. A neutral facilitator could address the conduct without becoming adversarial, Fletcher said. "I might ask, do you think that was productive to the meeting?"

- **Bring out snacks when things get heated.** Don't put out snacks right away, Bellows said. The science behind the "fight or flight" behavior suggests that when humans feel threatened, we have trouble thinking rationally and we can't process pleasure, he said. "I pull out the cookies if I notice tensions start to rise," Bellows said. "Stopping to enjoy a cookie requires activating the same part of your brain that is able to act cooperatively and logically."

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Jennifer Herseim covers Section 504, IEP teams, and Common Core issues related to special education for LRP Publications.

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How meeting location impacts team behavior

Hospital patients who have a window with a view of a natural area tend to heal faster than patients who can't see anything except a brick wall next door, said Scott Bellows, [mediator](#) and IEP team facilitator with Dispute Solutions in Portland, Ore.

"It's not that hard to imagine how our environment impacts our behaviors," Bellows said. As such, swap out a cramped, windowless conference room for a setting that better complements a calm and productive IEP team [meeting](#).

Bellows shared these tips:

- ✓ **Pick a room with large windows.** Openness, natural lighting, and a view of trees can have a calming effect on people, he said. Consider picking a classroom that has a view of the playground, Bellows suggested.
- ✓ **Position yourself with your back to the window.** As a facilitator, Bellows likes to position himself so that when people look at him, they can also see out this window, he said.
- ✓ **Set aside more time.** If you know that a meeting might be emotional or charged, set aside a block of time for school staff, he said. "Consider bringing in a half-day [substitute] for teachers," he said. Normally, one to two hours is enough time for an IEP meeting. That's not enough time for a meeting where parties already feel contentious, Bellows said. "I might schedule a five-hour window and have a back-up date so that everyone knows it's on the calendar in case we need more time."

Jennifer Herseim covers Section 504, IEP teams, and Common Core issues related to special education for LRP Publications.

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