



A Related Service Provider's Guide to Collaborating on and Writing IEPs

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Introduction

For new school-based therapists—whether they’re new to therapy entirely or new to the educational setting—working with IEPs can be one of the most time-consuming, stressful, and confusing parts of the job.

IEPs are, however, critically important. Simply put, the IEP is the “cornerstone” of federal special education law, as Stephen Smith wrote: “For special education, there is no document more significant to districts, agencies, administrators, teachers, parents, and educational advocates, and students.”

In this guide, we at Pediatric Therapeutic Services (PTS) will give you a brief, high-level overview of:

- The basics of the IEP’s purpose and character, as mandated by federal law.
- The make-up of the IEP team—the group of people who develop it and put it into practice.
- The unique expertise you bring to the team as you write IEP goals, and an effective approach to writing good ones.

We hope this resource will start demystifying the IEP for you so you can make valuable contributions, through its development and implementation, to the success of the students you’re serving!





I. What is the IEP and Why Does it Matter to You?

An IEP is an Individualized Education Program.

The [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\)](#), the federal law governing special education, defines the IEP as “a written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in a meeting” of a dedicated team. (We’ll discuss the team members in Section II.)

The IEP must:

- State the student’s present levels of academic achievement and functional performance (including social, emotional, and behavioral performance), including how their disability affects their involvement and progress in the general education curriculum (or, for preschoolers, in appropriate activities).

- Present measurable annual academic and functional goals designed to meet the student’s educational needs. These goals answer the question, “How will the student be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum this year?”
- Describe how the student’s progress toward meeting these goals will be measured, including when periodic reports will be issued.
- Identify the special education, related services, and supports the student will receive to enable them to advance toward their goals, make progress in the general education curriculum, and be educated with non-disabled students.
- Explain any extent to which the child will not be educated with non-disabled students, as well as any alternate assessments needed to measure the student’s achievement and performance.

The IEP matters to you as a school-based clinician because it calls for and justifies the services you provide. In other practice settings, your therapy—whether physical, occupational, speech-language, or any other kind—may be appropriate for patients for a host of reasons. But in the school setting, students receive your services solely and specifically as they will help them access a free appropriate public education (FAPE). If the service can’t be justified on this basis, special education programs aren’t legally

obligated to provide or pay for it.

[PTS co-founder Pam Hackett tells the story](#) of a boy with a prosthetic leg who was “functioning beautifully” at his school: running, walking, climbing stairs, even playing basketball. One day, “a strap broke, and his prosthesis accidentally fell off on the playground.” His teachers, who’d never known about his prosthetic leg, put in a request for physical therapy—but because his lack of a natural leg had “no observable impact on his ability to learn,” the school had no legal obligation to provide physical therapy. Medical need doesn’t necessarily indicate an educational need.

The IEP also matters to you because you’ll be writing goals that end up in the document. As the expert and experienced provider of your particular related service working with a particular student, you know which objectives are reasonable and achievable, and which aren’t. You must write goals that are meaningful and legally defensible. (We’ll look more closely at goal-writing in Section 3.)

Finally, the IEP matters to you because you’ll attend many IEP team meetings! Whenever the team is discussing the particular related service you provide, you should be present, because you possess specialized knowledge of the service and firsthand knowledge of the student. In fact, in some situations, your membership on a student’s IEP team is required by law.

II. Meet the Members of the IEP Team

Ensuring a child with special needs receives their FAPE requires group commitment and group effort! Accordingly, writing and implementing an IEP is no single individual's responsibility. It's the work of an IEP team.

[IDEA mandates](#) these members be a part of each student's IEP team:

1. The Student (whenever appropriate)

The regulatory language lists the student seventh and last among the IEP team's members and adds the qualifying language "whenever appropriate." But in a sense, every student with a disability is (or ought to be) the first member of the team. After all, the team exists solely to help them achieve their educational goals.

If an IEP team is going to discuss the student's postsecondary goals and transitional services (such discussions commonly begin around ages 14-16), schools must invite them to the meeting. But unless their students aren't minors or parental rights have been limited,



[parents can decide whether their children attend.](#)

Students' physical presence and involvement may not always be possible, and students need not stay for the entire meeting. But when students can attend and take part in meetings—and [with appropriate accommodations](#), they often can—they gain valuable chances to shape their own education, provide direct feedback about interventions, and learn how to advocate for their own best interests.

2. The Student's Parent(s)

The student's biological or foster parent(s), legal guardian(s), or other legally responsible caregivers bring irreplaceable knowledge about and experience of their child to the IEP team. They can speak from years of firsthand experience about their child's personality and priorities; their strengths and needs; their preferred modes of learning; and any environmental and cultural factors IEP goals should take into account.

In addition, parents have ultimate legal control over their child's special education and must give consent to large-scale IEP changes.

The unique parental perspective can sometimes lead to real breakthroughs in a student's progress. For example, Pam Hackett tells the story of an Occupational Therapist (OT) working with a boy struggling with a severe inability to pay attention and finish activities without repeated cueing. But when the boy's mother mentioned how much he loved the Pirates of the Caribbean films, the OT gave him pirate-related handwriting activities and had him dig therapy putty for "buried treasure." "Suddenly," says Pam, "the child who had literally been running out of the therapy room was asking if they could play just one more game!" Parents' membership on the IEP team can create challenges as well as opportunities. Some parents may be disengaged from the process,

but often only because of lapses in communication or understanding. Frequent good faith attempts to keep parents informed by email, telephone, and letter can go a long way toward securing more active involvement. And avoiding [professional educational and therapy jargon](#) as much as possible can make parents feel more confident about contributing to discussions, especially those from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Since parental membership and participation is legally mandated—not to mention vital to the success of the IEP team's efforts—you'll want to do all you can, as a related services provider, to encourage and promote it.

3. The Regular Education Teacher

At least one regular education teacher must be on the IEP team if the student is participating or may participate in the regular education environment.

More students who receive special education are in such environments. As of fall 2017, 63.4% of all students with disabilities [spent 80% or more of their time at school in general education](#). IDEA's mandate that students with special needs be educated [in the least restrictive environment \(LRE\)](#) and greater awareness of [inclusive education's benefits for all students](#) means it's more than likely regular education teachers will serve on IEP teams with you.



General education teachers understand students' grade-level general education curriculum. They give most students their core academic instruction. They can help the IEP team make key decisions about what accommodations will help students learn most effectively in their classrooms.

Although not all of the students regular education teachers must attend IEP meetings, the school must ensure all the student's teachers can access the IEP and know their responsibilities in implementing it.

As a school-based therapist, you'll want to forge strong, positive relationships with regular education teachers, especially in schools using a Multi-Tiered

Systems of Support (MTSS) approach to related services. You can [train teachers in Tier 1](#) interventions for students' most pressing functional issues. Teachers can then deliver "therapy without the therapist" as needed and appropriate. More students get help faster, and fewer students are referred for evaluations—which means your caseload sizes stay more manageable!

4. The Special Education Teacher or Special Education Provider

Because special education teachers are trained and experienced in specially designed instruction, modifications, and accommodations, their input in IEP team meetings is invaluable.

At least one of the student's special education teachers must be on the team.

This teacher provides observational data gathered while teaching the student. The teacher advises the team on modifying the curriculum to help students with special needs learn, modifying testing so the students can show what they've learned, and introducing supports and services to facilitate the students' success.

In addition to helping write the IEP, the special education teacher is [responsible for working to implement it with fidelity](#). That task involves working with not only the student but also regular education teachers. Frequently, special education teachers [team teach or co-teach](#) with general education teachers in order to provide IEP services.

The special education teacher often serves as the [IEP case manager](#), meaning they are responsible for making sure the student is actually receiving the services and supports identified in the IEP. They also ensure the student's evaluations and other relevant records are current and serve as parents' primary point of contact for IEP-related questions and concerns.

While IDEA doesn't specifically require related services personnel to attend IEP team meetings, it's certainly appropriate for you to do so, at least in part, when the team is discussing the specific related service you provide. The school may even designate you a required team member since the law mandates the team includes "[n]ot less than one

special education teacher of the child or, where appropriate, not less than one special education provider of the child."

The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services [provides this example](#):

If the child's disability is a speech impairment and the only service the child receives is speech-language pathology, and speech-language pathology is also considered special education rather than a related service under State standards, then the special education provider on the IEP Team for the child should be the speech-language pathologist.

When in doubt whether you are required to attend an IEP team meeting, check with your special education administrator.

5. The Educational Agency's Representative

IDEA requires the team includes a representative from the school district or other local educational agency (LEA) who is qualified to provide or supervise the provision of instruction designed to meet students' special needs, and who knows about both the general education curriculum and the resources available for special education.

This team member facilitates discussion at the team meeting. They have the authority to suggest and approve school resources for students. They must also

make sure the resources discussed during the IEP meeting are attainable and accessible.

School district administrators usually fulfill this role, but their designee—for instance, a school principal—may do so, provided they meet IDEA’s criteria.

Special education administrators and school principals routinely interact on a daily basis with those who are providing IEP services to students. They can support you as you implement your responsibilities under the IEP, and will also hold you accountable for doing so. (School-based therapists who work with PTS can also turn to their [Clinical Directors](#) for support, mentorship, and advocacy when necessary.)

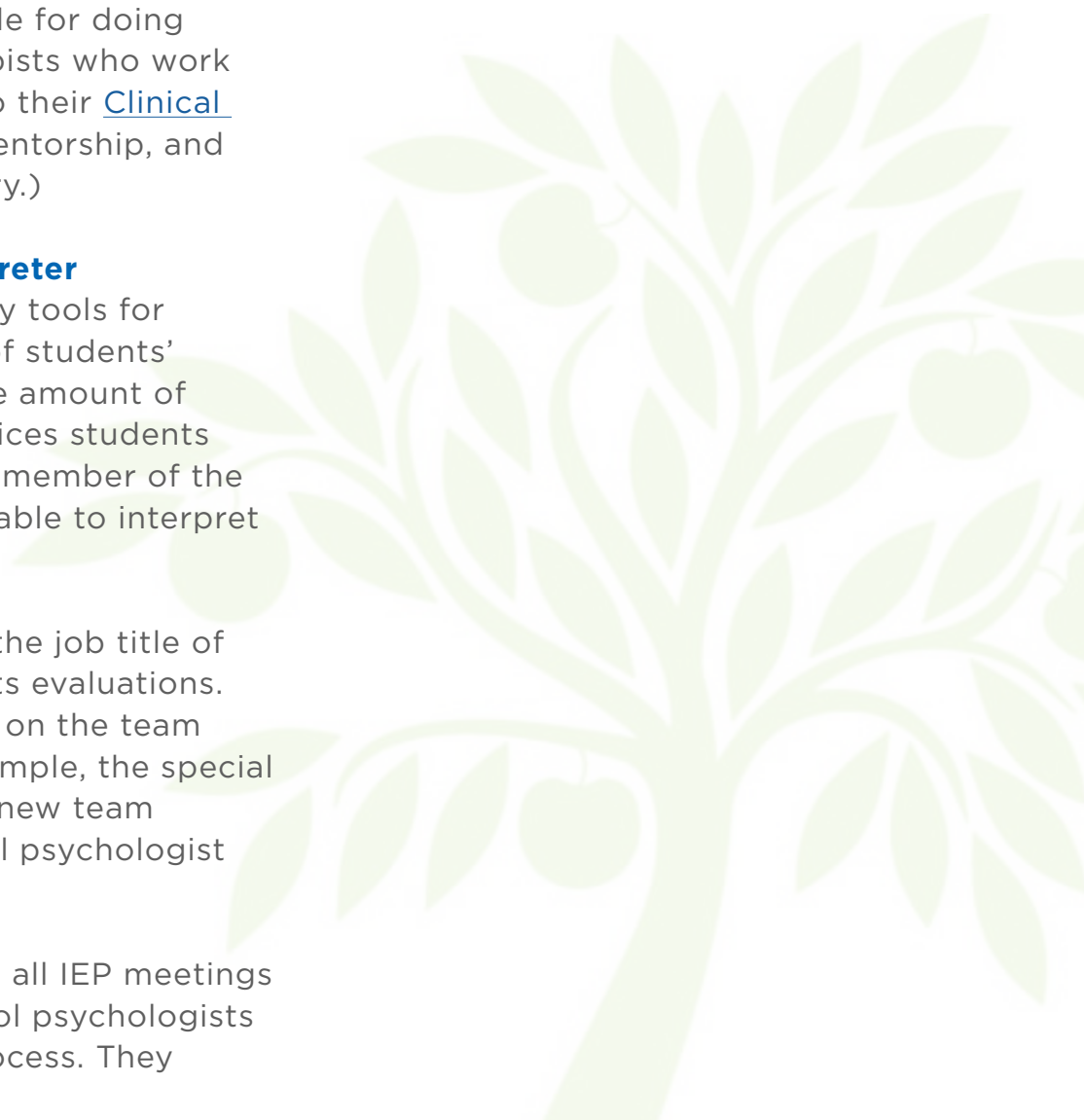
6. The Evaluation Interpreter

Evaluations are necessary tools for determining the extent of students’ disabilities, as well as the amount of therapy and related services students need. IDEA requires one member of the IEP team member to be able to interpret evaluation results.

The law doesn’t specify the job title of the person who interprets evaluations. Someone who is already on the team may fill this role—for example, the special education teacher—or a new team member such as a school psychologist may do it.

Even if they don’t attend all IEP meetings as a team member, school psychologists are critical to the IEP process. They

recommend appropriate assessments for students suspected of having disabilities or disorders. They make sure qualified professionals conduct those assessments. And their summary reports of the results show the IEP team in which areas the student needs services and supports. If the school psychologist is especially strong at translating assessment results into everyday language non-psychologists can comprehend, they are ideal for fulfilling the mandated role of evaluation interpreter.





III. Related Service Providers and the IEP Team

IDEA also allows, at the parents' or the school's discretion, "other individuals who have knowledge or special expertise regarding the child, including related services personnel as appropriate," to serve on the IEP team.

You will attend many IEP meetings as part of your work. By virtue of your job, you most definitely have knowledge and special expertise. For example:

- **Occupational Therapy (OT)**
Although the uninitiated sometimes think it sounds like jobs-related therapy, school-based OT helps students learn and master the "occupations," or activities, needed

for educational success—“from paying attention in class; concentrating on the task at hand; holding a pencil, musical instrument, or book in the easiest way; or just behaving appropriately in class,” according to [the American Occupational Therapy Association \(AOTA\)](#).

- **Physical Therapy (PT)**

[School-based PT](#) focuses on improving students’ strength, balance, coordination, and/or mobility so they may more fully access their educational setting and benefit from their educational program. Moving around the school building (with or without assistance), sitting properly balanced in a classroom chair, using playground equipment at recess—physical therapy can help students do all this and more.

- **Speech-Language Pathology (SLP)**

Naturally, [school-based SLPs](#) help students who have speech issues articulate sounds and pronounce words properly. But they can also help students build their vocabulary, begin to read and then read with more comprehension, teach them to express more complex ideas, and help them improve their social communication skills.

- **Behavioral Therapy**

Through the science of [Applied Behavior Analysis \(ABA\)](#), school-based behavioral health specialists help students learn behaviors that facilitate educational progress. These behaviors include following a teacher’s directions,

clearly communicating their own wants and needs, accepting “no” as an answer without responding angrily, approaching and interacting with their peers in appropriate ways, and more.

- **School Psychology**

As noted earlier, [school psychologists](#) are often the IEP team member who interprets the results of evaluations, but their job involves many more responsibilities. They provide individual and group counseling for students. They also consult with other school personnel as well as with families about student learning, behavior, and the environment. Their services can help students improve their academic achievement, promote their positive behavior and mental health, and contribute to safe and positive climates for learners, teachers, and staff alike.

Whatever your therapy discipline, as a school-based clinician you will collaborate with the IEP team by:

- **Completing screenings, evaluations, and assessments** so the team has accurate, up-to-date data from which to form a picture of the student’s current level of educational achievement and their need for further progress.
- **Writing IEP goals** to set forth desired outcomes for the student and specify how the student will achieve those outcomes. (See Section IV for more on writing IEP goals).

- **Recommending related services, supports, and accommodations**

that will help the student obtain the outcomes described in the IEP. Design and implement therapy interventions to help the student meet their goals.

- **Teaching and training other team members as appropriate, including teachers and family members**, in ways to help the student meet their goals.



IV. Writing IEP Goals

IDEA requires IEPs contain a “statement of measurable annual goals” and a description of how the student’s progress toward meeting those goals “will be measured.”

Without measurable goals, as the precedent-setting decision [Escambia County Board of Education v. Benton](#) (2005) states, “educators and parents [are] engaged in a futile endeavor to pin the tail on a moving donkey while blindfolded in a dark room... Vague and unmeasurable objectives are the hand-maiden of stagnation, as a program cannot possibly confer an educational benefit... if [a student’s] teachers and parents do not know where they are trying to take [a student] and how they will know when [a student] has arrived.”

The idea of writing measurable IEP goals may sound straightforward.

Unfortunately, [as special education teacher Courtney Hough writes](#), “[s]ome IEP goals are straight-up dumpster fires.”

What causes so many IEP goals to miss the mark? [The IRIS Center](#) at Vanderbilt University identifies some common problems:

- **Ambiguous terms** - The student will “enjoy reading” or will “make friends.”

- **Overly broad language** - The student will demonstrate a skill “during reading.”
- **Subjective criteria** - The student will “improve over time.”
- **Unrealistic (or absent) timeframes** - The student is given no deadline for demonstrating a skill.

What’s the remedy for writing IEP goals that are stronger? Make them S.M.A.R.T. goals!

Students (like any of us) are much more likely to meet S.M.A.R.T. goals than other kinds of goals. [S.M.A.R.T. goals](#) are:

- **Specific**
The goal names what the student will do and how the student will do it.
- **Measurable**
The goal states the objective standard against which the student’s outcomes will be evaluated and how observers will know when the outcomes meet expectations.

- **Attainable**

The goal is reasonable and realistic, and names what supports and resources the student will need in order to reach the desired outcome.

- **Results-oriented (or relevant)**

The goal focuses on objectively observable outcomes, not activities, and is directly related to the student's educational progress.

- **Time-bound**

The goal sets a realistic deadline for its achievement.

Because IEP goals are, by definition, supposed to be individualized, simply adapting them from a boilerplate template isn't best practice. But here are a few samples to give you a flavor for S.M.A.R.T. IEP goals:

- Given a choice of three picture cards of self-calming strategies, (Student) will independently choose a strategy card and follow what it shows in 4 out of 5 opportunities as measured by teacher data sheets by May y 20__.¹
- Using real money, Jane will be able to show how much money she has after she receives two weeks of allowance, and how much money she will have left after she buys one object, with 75 percent accuracy measured twice weekly each quarter.²

- At the end of the first semester, Mark will touch-type a passage of text at a speed of 20 words per minute, with no more than 10 errors, with progress measured on a five-minute timed test.³

Writing S.M.A.R.T. IEP goals and objectives doesn't magically make writing IEP goals faster or easier. But you will write effective and legally defensible goals as a result.

S.M.A.R.T. goals are not only effective and legally defensible but also pass "the stranger test." Could someone who doesn't already know the student pick up the document, read the description of the student's individual needs, and understand exactly what they'd have to do to meet those needs? If so, it passes the test and is a well-written IEP!

¹ "Setting SMART IEP Goals," The Autism Community in Action; <https://tacanow.org/family-resources/smart-iep-goals/>

² Ruth Heitin, "Writing IEP Goals," LD Online, <http://www.ldonline.org/article/42058/>

³ Pam Wright and Pete Wright's [From Emotions to Advocacy: The Special Education Survival Guide](#)



Join the PTS Team

If you're a pediatric therapist looking for your next school-based position, or interested in entering this challenging and rewarding setting for the first time, we invite you to join our team.

At PTS, we'll not only help you navigate the ins and outs of Individualized Education Programs—writing goals, implementing them, serving on the IEP team, and more—but also equip you with the resources and support you need to maximize the good your work does and grow in your professional identity.

For more information, [visit us online](#) or call us at 610-941-7020.



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