



## **How to Prepare for Your 3-Year-Old's First IEP**

When my child turned three, it was time to make the big leap from Early Intervention (EI) to the school system. I remember feeling a mix of emotions—excitement about his next step in the development process, but also anxiety about the new world we were stepping into. The Individualized Education Program (IEP) was something I had heard about but didn't fully understand. If you're in the same place, let me walk you through what I learned along the way. Trust me, you'll find your footing too.

### **Starting with the Basics**

First, I had to understand what an IEP really was. It's essentially a personalized roadmap for my child's education. The IEP outlines the support, services, and goals that would help my child succeed in school. Knowing my child was entitled to this under the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)** gave me a sense of empowerment. My child had a right to receive a "Free Appropriate Public Education" (FAPE), and the IEP was the tool to make sure that happened.

### **Reflecting on Early Intervention**

Before diving into the school system, I took some time to review my child's progress during Early Intervention. Looking back at reports and evaluations helped me see how far we had come. But it also highlighted areas where we still needed help. By knowing my child's strengths and the things we were still working on, I felt more prepared to share this with the school team.

### **Building a Relationship with the School**

I didn't want to walk into the IEP meeting as a stranger to the team that would be working with my child. So, I reached out early. I introduced myself and my child to the teachers and staff, which made everything feel a little less intimidating. Having a good relationship with the school staff made the whole process smoother because it felt like we were all working together for the same goal—my child's success.

### **Requesting an Evaluation**

One of the first steps I took was requesting a thorough evaluation from the school district. It was important for me to understand all aspects of my child's development, from social skills to cognitive abilities, and even physical needs. I knew that this evaluation would guide the services my child would receive, so I made sure to be involved in the process. The more I knew, the more confident I felt walking into that first IEP meeting.

### **Preparing for the IEP Meeting**

Once the evaluation results came in, I made sure to review them carefully. I wanted to go into the meeting fully informed. I also wrote down a list of questions because, let's face it, there's a lot to take in, and I didn't want to forget anything important. If you're nervous, don't hesitate to bring a support person with you—whether it's a friend, family member, or

even a special education advocate. Having someone by your side can make a world of difference.

### **Understanding the IEP**

At the heart of the IEP are a few key sections. The **Present Levels of Performance** describe where your child is right now in terms of skills and abilities. From there, the team sets **Measurable Goals**—specific targets that help your child grow in areas like speech, motor skills, or social interactions. The IEP also outlines the **Services and Supports** your child will receive, such as therapy or classroom accommodations. It's all about making sure your child can learn and thrive in the **Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)**, which means they'll be included with their peers as much as possible.

### **Advocating for My Child**

One thing I learned quickly is that no one knows my child better than I do. And because of that, I had to be their strongest advocate. Don't be afraid to speak up during the IEP meeting—ask for what your child needs. Be specific about accommodations and services, and don't hesitate to make suggestions. Remember, you are an important part of the team, and your input matters.

### **Life After the IEP Meeting**

Once the meeting was over, I reviewed the final IEP carefully. I wanted to make sure everything we discussed was captured correctly. If something was missing, I asked for revisions. It's also important to stay involved—keep in touch with your child's teachers and therapists, monitor their progress, and if needed, request another meeting to adjust the plan.

### **Transitioning to Preschool**

The move from Early Intervention to preschool felt like a big step, but having the IEP in place made the transition smoother. Depending on your child's needs, they may attend a special education preschool, an integrated classroom, or a general education setting with supports. Take the time to visit the preschool, meet the teachers, and get a feel for the environment. This will help both you and your child feel more comfortable.

### **Annual Reviews and Adjustments**

The IEP is a living document that changes as your child grows. Each year, you'll review and adjust it to reflect your child's progress and evolving needs. And remember, if something isn't working, you don't have to wait for the annual review—request a meeting anytime to make sure your child is getting the support they need.

For me, navigating the IEP process felt a lot less overwhelming once I knew what to expect and how to prepare. By staying informed, being proactive, and working closely with the school, I felt confident that my child was getting the help they needed to succeed. And you can too.