

Chart Your Own Future: How Your Individualized Education Program (IEP) Can Help

What will you do after high school? Where will you work, go to school, or live? What kind of life do you want? Your transition Individualized Education Program (IEP) can help you answer these questions, and help you live your life to the fullest.

What is an IEP? An IEP is an education program written just for you. That is why it is called “individualized.” It is based on your strengths, interests, and goals regarding education, employment, and daily living skills.

Taking an active role in developing your IEP is important and will help you:

- Gain the information, skills, and support you need to reach your goals
- Begin turning your hopes into reality
- Discover what really matters to you
- Have more control over your time and activities at school

Although you cannot control every aspect of your education, you do have the power to make changes in your education program. As you influence major parts of your IEP, you gain more control over what happens to you. You have more ability to make changes.

Three Easy Steps to Becoming Involved in Your IEP

Here are a few ideas to help you take ownership of your IEP. You may want to discuss these with a friend or family member.

1. Start thinking about what you want in life

Planning for the future is exciting. You can begin to think about the skills and interests you have now and those you would like to develop. As you start planning, you might consider:

- What you like to do now
- What you think you would like to be doing five years from now
- What you are good at now
- What you would like to be good at in five years
- What excites you now
- What you think will excite you five years from now

As your dreams and visions become clearer, talk with family or friends about your plans. Listen to their ideas, and consider adding some of these to your plan.

2. Set one goal at a time

To make the planning process more manageable, pick one goal that is important to you. Discuss it with a relative or friend and then with your special education teacher. Have them help you break your goal into small, practical steps that you can start taking now. For example, if your goal is to continue your education, you might want to visit colleges, technical schools, or certificate programs to see how they fit into your plans for the future.

Don't worry if you feel confused while you are making decisions about your future education, employment, and housing. It's not unusual to feel that way. It takes time to figure it out and, if you are like most people, your plans will likely change many times as you learn more about yourself.

3. Know who can help you

Everybody needs someone who will listen to their future plans, offer suggestions, help sort through options, and find creative solutions to possible barriers along the way. Who in your life can do that for you? Make a list of their contact information: names, addresses, phone numbers, e-mail addresses, and descriptions of how they might be able to help you reach your goals.

For example:

- You could visit a cousin at a college you might want to attend
- A neighbor might allow you to volunteer at her daycare
- Your older brother or sister might invite you to go apartment hunting with them
- A family friend could show you how he runs his small lawn care business

At your next IEP meeting, you could show your team and supporters what you've learned about your future options. For example, you could:

- Invite everyone on your IEP team and your list of important people to the IEP meeting
- Show pictures, a video, or a PowerPoint presentation summarizing what you did to explore possibilities
- Invite your employer, volunteer supervisor, or friend to give his or her views at the meeting