



Preparing for the Eligibility Determination Meeting

If you recently referred your child for an evaluation under IDEA or Section 504, you've usually got a few weeks (or a few months, in some places!) to go until you get a letter notifying you that the evaluation has been completed. During this time, you should be getting ready. Here are some things I generally recommend:

Get the Treating Professionals' Help

If you haven't already asked your child's physician for a letter giving his/her diagnoses, do so immediately. You should enlist your child's physician and any other treating professionals to help you advocate for your child. If a parent asks for an accommodation for their child, it is often not as effective as the doctor sending the district a letter saying that their patient needs to have the accommodation for medical reasons.

If your child has Tourette Syndrome, OCD, or ADHD, ask your doctor to make their letter to the district educational by citing your child's current symptoms, explaining some of their impact, and noting that the symptoms will change in their intensity, frequency, and form (for tics or obsessions and compulsions) over time.

The doctor's letter should also encourage the district personnel to call him/her at any time if they have any question about the patient's symptoms, condition, or medication. While some parents are reluctant to allow direct contact between the school and the outside treating professionals, my experience is that it is particularly important if your child has behavioral symptoms or behavioral problems associated with their condition. I have gone in on disciplinary disputes where the district was taking a hard line and I pointed to a doctor's letter and said, "It says here that you could call the doctor if you had any questions or concerns. Did you? Did you ever call the doctor and ask the doctor about Johnny's [behavior]? Did you ever let the treating doctor know that his patient was having problems?" If they hadn't, then my position is that they did not take appropriate steps before disciplining/suspending the student, and I move to have the suspension lifted and the record expunged.

Ask the doctor to address the letter to the district but to send it to you first so that you can make sure it covers what you want covered. If the letter is satisfactory, send it on to the district. If it is not, ask the doctor to rewrite it so that it is more helpful to your child.

Request the District's Reports in Advance

Did you remember to request that the district send you all the assessment results/reports in advance of the meeting so that you can review them with your child's doctor(s)? If not, you still have time. Call the district to make the request, make a note of the date and time you made the request, and then follow up with a confirming letter. If you waited too long and they've already sent you the notice/invitation to the meeting, you can still ask them for the reports one day in advance of the meeting.

Find Out About Tape Recording

Call your state education department and find out if your state allows you to tape recording meetings. If 'yes,' get your recorder ready and pack extra tapes and batteries. Try to get a good omnidirectional microphone as you may be sitting at a fairly long table.

If the State tells you that they leave it up to the districts to decide whether taping is permitted, contact your district and request their written policy on tape recording these meetings.

Note that even if your state doesn't generally permit taping, if you, as the parent, have a disability and need the taping because of your disability, then even if the state's general policy is 'no taping,' they must make an exception. Similarly, if you can demonstrate that you can't participate meaningfully without taping, then they should make an exception and let you tape.

If tape recording is permissible, most districts prefer that you notify them in advance if you plan to tape.

Compile Your Data

Go through your child's old and current records and look for things that will help bolster your case for qualifying your child under IDEA. Teachers' comments on report cards are often very helpful this way, as are notes they may have written you. Sometimes in going back through old report cards or notes, you'll discover that the teachers were seeing symptoms of your child's disability, but your child hadn't been diagnosed as yet. The fact that they commented on the symptoms shows that they were seeing an educational impact. Bring those papers with you, neatly organized in a folder so that you can quickly pull out whatever you need during the meeting.

Use the worksheet called "Organizing Your Concerns" (Appendix A) to compile your data and to organize yourself for your upcoming meeting to determine eligibility. You will want to take the worksheet with you to the meeting.

Make a list of things you want to tell the Committee about your child -- including your child's strengths and hobbies. All too often, meetings focus on the negatives. Be sure to include some of your child's strengths and talents.

Make a list of questions you want to ask the Committee about their test results and reports.

If handwriting is a concern, bring samples of your son's handwriting in school.

Smile for the Camera?

Some parents like to bring a photo of their child to the meeting so that they can help the team put a face to the child they're talking about. I never did that, but it's not a bad idea.

Pack Some Literature on Your Child's Disability

Pack some literature to bring with you. Simple and short handouts are generally appreciated. Bringing in a stack of books or videos may be well-intended, but don't do that unless they indicate they would appreciate it – or unless you're building a legal case that you offered materials and they refused them.

Be Prepared on Medications

On the day of the meeting, be prepared to tell the team exactly what medications your child is on (even the ones taken only at home), and what doses.