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# The Individualized Education Plan: Parental Satisfaction and Involvement

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The Individualized Education Plan:  
Parental Satisfaction and Involvement

(TITLE)

BY

Melissa Habing

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
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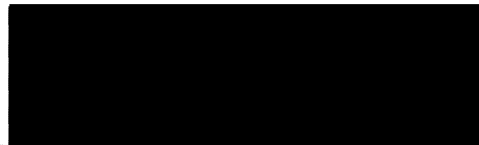
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The Individualized Education Plan:  
Parental Involvement and Satisfaction

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### Abstract

Little recent research has examined parents' involvement and satisfaction with their child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). For the current study, parents of children with special needs were surveyed. Out of 1,000 questionnaires mailed out by an agency that provides support to families who have a child with a disability, 348 parents completed and returned the survey. As a result of the parents' written responses, it was determined that 234 (67%) of the children they reported on were boys and 114 (33%) were girls. The age of the children whose parents completed the questionnaire ranged from two to twenty-two. All eligible diagnostic categories included in the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) were represented in the sample. Results suggest that although many of the parents were satisfied with the IEP process, some parents expressed several significant concerns with their IEP experiences. Approximately one-half of the parents responding described themselves as completely satisfied with the outcome of their child's IEP meeting. The most common positive aspects of the IEP process/meeting reported were related to communication and partnership with the school. However, the most commonly written negative aspects of the IEP process/meeting were the lack of cooperation/shared decision-making and the feeling that their child's individual needs were not being met.

### The Individualized Education Plan: Parental Involvement and Satisfaction

Public Law 94-142 gave parents the right to participate with schools in the education of their children who qualify for special education programs. PL 94-142 states that parents have the right to be a part of the process of the evaluation and placement of their child into special education programs (Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wheat, 1982). Parents also have the right to play an active role in the planning of their child's educational program (Turnbull et al., 1982). Before the passing of PL 94-142, educators made most of the decisions regarding a child's placement, learning styles, and educational goals with little to no parental involvement (Vaughn, Bos, Harrell, & Lasky, 1988). After PL 94-142, parents were given the right to take a more active and equal role in determining their child's educational program.

Why did PL 94-142 include guarantees for parent participation in the educational planning process? Turnbull et al. (1982) examined many of the assumptions pertaining to parent participation and involvement in their child's educational plan made by lawmakers when passing PL 94-142. One assumption by lawmakers was that parent participation was helpful for the child, the parent, and the school. Another reason for this particular law was that Congress believed that parents, prior to PL 94-142, were unable to make any assumptions regarding the education of their child with a disability. Allowing parent participation in the process would ensure that parents were able to hold schools accountable for their children's education. Another assumption was that parents who attend IEP conferences would become more effective decision makers. It was assumed that parents wanted to be involved in making the important decisions regarding their child's education program. Also, Congress determined that parents would always have



the best interest of their child in mind and by mandating that the parent play an active role in the process, the rights of the child would be assured (Turnbull, et al., 1982).

Attitudes about parental participation in the educational planning process have not always been positive. A few years after the passing of PL 94-142, Yoshida, Fenton, Kaufman, and Maxwell (1978) examined planning team members' attitudes about the kinds of activities parents should participate in during the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) conference. Mainly special education and regular education teachers completed this survey. Parents were not included in the survey. Participants were asked to decide if parents should play a role in 24 different activities that were part of the IEP process. Results indicated that only two activities were selected by more than 50 percent of the participants involved in this study. These two activities were presenting information relevant to the case and gathering information relevant to the case. Only 41 percent of the participants of this study indicated that parents should play an active role in reviewing the student's educational progress. Some of the other IEP activities that were examined received even smaller percentages of agreement, such as reviewing the appropriateness of the student's educational program (36%) and judging programming alternatives (34%). Only 26 percent of the participants felt that parents should be involved in finalizing decisions. The results of this study suggested that parents were expected to provide information to the planning team but were not expected to take an active role in making decisions regarding their child's educational program (Yoshida, et al., 1978).

Although PL 94-142 was passed almost 30 years ago, research showed that some parents are still not taking an active role in their children's educational plans. Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, and Curry (1980) examined the IEP conference process of 14

elementary students with mild disabilities. This study examined the frequency of parental involvement in the conference, the nature of the topics discussed by parents and school faculty, and the satisfaction of each member of the group once the IEP meeting was finished. They found that curriculum, behavior, and performance were the top three ranked topics discussed during the IEP meeting. However, topics such as evaluation, placement, special services, rights and responsibilities, future contacts, and future plans were rarely discussed. Overall, parental contributions made up less than 25 percent of the total conference contributions. The majority of statements made by classroom teachers and resource teachers were directed toward the parent, with the parent taking a passive role (i.e. listening to a previously developed IEP) during the meeting. It should be noted that out of 14 conferences, there was only one instance in which developing goals and objectives were determined jointly by the parents and educators. Overall, conference time described in this study consisted mostly of the resource teacher describing a previously developed IEP to the parent (Goldstein, et al., 1980).

McKinney and Hocutt (1982) conducted a study that examined the nature and extent of parental involvement of children with a learning disability compared to the involvement of parents of average achievers. Parents in this study completed the *Parent Involvement Questionnaire* that consisted of questions that could be grouped into five subscales: information exchange, parent education/training, program planning, educational program, and program evaluation. Each question was answered on a four-point scale (i.e. “very important” to “not important”). Parents were then asked to circle “yes” or “no” as to whether they had participated in each activity the previous school year. They found that the parents of children with a learning disability were given more

opportunities to receive information about their child's adjustment, evaluate their child's program effectiveness, and communicate their satisfaction with the services provided to their child. However, the parents of children with a learning disability did not report being more involved in activities related to planning their child's programs or in activities related to the exchange of information about the nature of school services. Of the parents interviewed, 43 percent of the parents felt that they did not fully participate in the development of the IEP. Approximately one-third of the parents in this study said that they actually helped write the IEP and only 16% of these parents could recall specifically what they had contributed (McKinney & Hocutt, 1982).

Lynch and Stein (1982) examined the parental participation of 328 parents whose children were involved in special education programs. Several questions were directly related to the parents' participation in the development, implementation, and evaluation of their child's IEP. Seventy-one percent of the parents interviewed indicated that they felt they were actively involved in the development of the plan. However, when asked how they were involved, parents consistently responded with answers that were considered primarily passive (i.e. listened and agreed to the teacher's recommendations). Almost one-third of parents indicated that they perceived themselves as not involved during the development of their child's IEP. Also, parents who attended both formal staffings and informal parent conferences indicated that they preferred the informal parent conference if given a choice (Lynch & Stein, 1982).

Further research conducted by Vaughn, Bos, Harrell, and Lasky (1988) examined parent participation and involvement in the IEP conference to determine if parents were taking a more active role in the process. They found that verbal interactions from parents

occurred, on average, approximately 15 percent of the total conference time. Verbal interactions were defined as questions initiated by the parent, parent responses to initiations from other team members, and comments initiated by the parents. Of this 15 percent, eight percent was spent initiating comments while making responses occurred six percent of the time. Less than one percent of the time was spent asking questions. Results from this study indicate that parents were still not taking or given the opportunity to take an active role in the IEP conference (Vaughn, et al., 1988).

Harry, Allen, and McLaughlin (1995) also conducted a study that followed 24 different families and evaluated their involvement in the IEP meetings over a period of three years. The authors reported that 16 of the 18 families attended the IEP meeting during the first year, whereas only 11 out of those 18 families attended the meeting the third year. Some of the reasons parents gave for not attending the meeting were schedule conflicts, late notice of the meeting, the use of educational jargon, the routine nature of the conference in which the professionals did most of the talking while parents listened, and the emphasis on paperwork rather than involvement in the process. Still another deterrent was due to the structure of power at the IEP conference. Because the conferences were structured as the professionals reporting to the parents and the parents listening, it gave the sense that all the power was possessed by the professionals rather than the parents (Harry et al., 1995).

A more recent study by Garriott, Wandry, and Snyder (2000) also confirmed that many parents were still not playing an active role in the educational planning of their children. Parents were asked to answer a questionnaire that involved a Likert-type scale and open-ended questions were used to evaluate the parents' perceived levels of

involvement and satisfaction in the IEP planning conference. Parents were asked why they attend their child's IEP meeting. Although over half the parents who completed the questionnaire attended IEP meetings to take an active role (i.e. provide input to educators, to fulfill parental responsibilities, and/or to advocate for their child), an alarming 42 percent of participants responded to this question with an answer that was passive in nature. Parents in this category, for the most part, said they attended their child's IEP meeting primarily to be informed about the academic process of their child and to learn what the educators were planning for the future. Another question asked participants if they felt they were treated as an equal, respected member of the IEP team. Of the parents, 27 percent felt that they were only "sometimes" or "never" treated as an equal team member. The common theme among these respondents was that they felt useless because the IEP had already been written before the meeting and/or inferior because their knowledge or expertise about their child was not valued or integrated into the IEP plan. Parents were also asked if they directly influenced the formation of the IEP goals and objectives of their child's education plan. While 46 percent of parents responded "always" to this question, over 50 percent of the parents responded "usually," "sometimes," and "never." Of these responses, the majority of the parents indicated that the goals and objectives were already developed prior to the IEP meeting and that their input was not incorporated into the IEP (Garriott et al, 2000).

So why, after two decades since the enactment of PL 94-142, are parents still taking a passive role in the participation of IEP conferences? There are several barriers that parents may face that must be addressed when examining this issue. One of the most common barriers is the feeling of inferiority some parents may have within regard to

other professionals involved in planning the IEP meeting. Gilliam and Coleman (1981) asked members involved in the IEP meeting to rank the importance of each participant. Before the actual meeting, parents were ranked high amongst the members involved. However, after the meeting, parents were ranked low in regard to their contribution during the meeting. One way of possibly overcoming this barrier may be to directly and/or indirectly encourage parents to play an active role in the process, as well as reminding them that they are a valuable member of the team (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1986). Another possible barrier is that parents may feel inferior due to the sometimes large number of professionals involved in the IEP meeting. In short, the parents may feel outnumbered compared to the professionals who work together regularly (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1986).

Because poor communication between parents and other team members can also be a barrier, communication that is sensitive to the inclusion of parents during the IEP process may be effective in increasing parental involvement (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1986). Goldstein and Turnbull (1982) conducted a study to determine the effectiveness of two different strategies on parental involvement in the IEP meeting. One strategy involved sending a questionnaire to the parent prior to the IEP meeting and a follow-up telephone call, while another strategy involved having the school counselor act as a parent advocate during the conference. As the parent advocate, school counselors were instructed to introduce the parent, clarify jargon, ask questions, reinforce parental contributions, and summarize the decisions made at the end of the conference. Results indicate that there was significantly more parental involvement when the parent advocate was present compared to the control group (Goldstein & Turnbull, 1982). This study suggests that

good communication during the IEP conference effectively increased parental involvement (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1986).

Vaughn et al. (1988) found that the parents' lack of knowledge of terms used during IEP meetings can also deter parent involvement. In this study parents, were asked to define the term "learning disabled." Twenty-seven percent of parents defined "learning disabled" as meaning their child was slow and not learning as well as other children the same age. Thirty-one percent of the parents thought that it meant that their child had a learning problem in some area, and four percent of parents defined it as meaning their child had average or above average IQ. Twelve percent of parents defined it as their child having some sort of physical problem, and eight percent defined it as "it is what my child is." Twenty-three percent of parents were unable to define the term and/or their answers were completely unrelated to the term. When parents were asked how they felt about the placement of their child and the IEP meeting itself, 69 percent indicated positive responses. However, 23 percent indicated that they felt nervous and cautious, and eight percent felt confused and overwhelmed (Vaughn, et al., 1988).

Pruitt, Wandry, and Hollums (1998) conducted a study to investigate what special educators could do to encourage parent participation in the IEP planning process. Seventy-three families were interviewed for this study. Some of the common themes that emerged from the data were: (1) parents want professionals to listen to what they have to say, (2) parents want to develop effective communication between parents and school professionals, (3) parents want professionals to increase their knowledge about various disabilities, (4) parents want professionals to show sensitivity, (5) parents want school faculty to demonstrate respect for their child and his/her individual needs, (6) and parents

want the IEP process to be improved. Seventy-seven percent of the parents who were interviewed indicated that educators should realize that every family is different, and they should respect these differences. Overall, parents reported that they want professionals to acknowledge that parents should play an equal and collaborative role in the process of developing the IEP because, as parents, they possess critical information about their children (Pruitt, et al., 1998).

Dembinski and Mauser (1977) conducted a study to explore variables that parents reported as affecting parent participation. One-third of the participants in this study felt comfortable interacting with professionals within the school. However, the majority of parents reported feeling uncomfortable and awkward when communicating with school personnel. Many parents reported feeling as though they were imposing on professionals when they asked questions. Ninety-one percent of parents reported the importance of using language they could understand. Eighty-three percent of respondents reported that it is important for professionals to give them materials to read regarding their child's disability. Several parents also emphasized the need for receiving advice and recommendations on how to deal with their child's disability (Dembinski & Mauser, 1977).

Parental satisfaction with the IEP meeting is also an important issue that must be addressed when evaluating parental involvement. Overall, research in this area suggests that many parents are satisfied with the IEP meeting. However, these results may be skewed for several different reasons. Goldstein et al. (1980) found that parents in their study had an overwhelming positive reaction to the IEP meetings they attended. The majority of the parents felt that all their questions had been answered during the IEP



conference. However, Goldstein et al. (1980) noted that because of the overall short duration of the meetings and the limited topics discussed during the meeting, the scores seem somewhat inflated. The researchers in this study suggested that many of the parents might have responded so positively due to the parent's lack of knowledge of the purpose of the IEP meeting (Goldstein et al., 1980). Another study by Goldstein and Turnbull (1982) produced similar findings. Parents in this study were put into three different conditions: (1) one group of parents was given a questionnaire prior to the IEP meeting, (2) another group of parents was accompanied to the meeting with a parent advocate, and (3) a third group of parents were assigned to a control group. Parents in all three conditions were satisfied with the IEP meeting, even though parents who were accompanied with a parent advocate participated more in the meeting than did the parents in the control group. These results are consistent with previous research that found parents, in general, are satisfied with the IEP meeting regardless of what occurred during the meeting (Goldstein & Turnbull, 1982). Many parents may be satisfied with the meeting because they felt it kept them in touch with educators about their child's education (Goldstein & Turnbull, 1982).

Not all parents, however, report satisfaction with their participation in the IEP process. McKinney and Hocutt (1982) found that the majority of the parents involved in their study felt they had not participated fully and only a few parents could directly identify a specific contribution they had made toward their child's IEP. Polifka (1981) conducted a study that involved 258 parents of children who were involved in special education programs and attended IEP conferences. Results indicated that there was a significant relationship between the reported satisfaction of parent's with children in

special education programs and (1) whether they were asked to help prepare IEP's for their children, (2) whether the parents felt that their child was placed in the appropriate special education program, (3) whether they were told their rights to appeal if they disagreed with their child's placement, and (4) whether they were invited to a meeting to review their child's IEP (Polifka, 1981).

Salembier and Furney (1997) conducted a study to investigate the perception of parental involvement and the level of parental satisfaction in IEP/transition planning meetings. Parents answered a questionnaire that had questions related to these areas. Results indicated that 69 percent of parents in this study listened more than they talked during the meeting. Twenty-eight percent of parents reported talking only once or twice throughout the meeting. Parents were also asked how they would like to participate more in the meetings. Most parents wanted to be more involved in the pre-planning activities (i.e. setting the agenda, being prepared for what to expect). Some parents responded that they felt uncomfortable voicing their opinions or felt like other team members did not listen to what they had to say. Finally, parents wished they knew more about their rights and felt more comfortable speaking up during the meeting. When parents were asked to rate their satisfaction with the level of participation, it was found the 17 percent of parents "really liked" their level of participation, 53 percent "liked" their level of participation, 25 percent "didn't like" their level of participation, and six percent reported that they "really didn't like" their level of participation (Salembier & Furney, 1997).

Interestingly, Salembier and Furney (1997) also asked parents an open-ended question regarding which characteristics of the IEP meeting make it easier for them to participate. Parents stressed the importance of professional/parent relationships and the

importance of good communication between parents and school personnel. Parents reported higher levels of participation when they felt like teachers knew their sons or daughters well. Parents reported that participation increased when school personnel were open, focused on the shared goals of the student, and explained the parent's legal rights to them. Parents were also asked what characteristics of the meeting prevented or deterred participation. One common theme that emerged was that parents had difficulty participating when they felt that the relationships with the school personnel were unsatisfactory. Also, many parents felt that participation was discouraged when IEP/transitional planning meetings were pre-determined without much input from the parent and when technical jargon was used repeatedly (Salembier & Furney, 1997).

Miles-Bonart (2002) examined four different variables that affect parent satisfaction. The four dependent variables were professional etiquette (i.e. communication activities, physical comfort parents felt), procedurals (i.e. parental legal rights), demographics (i.e. family income, marital status), and student eligibility codes. The dependent variable was parent satisfaction. Results indicated that there was a strong relationship between communication and parent satisfaction. All four variables impacted the satisfaction parents reported after attending an IEP meeting. There was a direct positive relationship between professional etiquette and parental satisfaction, as well as between procedures and parental satisfaction. An inverse relationship existed between certain demographic features (i.e. as family income, parent education, and male participation) and satisfaction (Miles-Bonart, 2002).

Parental involvement and satisfaction can directly affect the outcome of the IEP meeting. Positive benefits associated with parent participation are an overall positive

relationship between the parent and educators, as well as positive educational outcomes for the students involved (Salembier & Furney, 1997). Previous research has also shown that parents tend to indicate high degrees of satisfaction of the IEP meeting regardless of what was discussed or accomplished during the meeting. Research has consistently shown that parents may take a passive role during the IEP process. Previous research has identified several variables that affect parental involvement and satisfaction. Parents often feel out of place or uncertain if the professionals involved will take their opinion seriously. Parents often do not understand much of the technical jargon used during IEP meetings by professionals, and parents often feel outnumbered. Good communication between team members and parents can often improve parental involvement and satisfaction.

Because parent involvement in the form of shared decision-making was a key component in the revision of PL94-142 into the Individual with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA), the purpose of this study was to investigate the satisfaction of parents today with the IEP meeting. This study examined the parents' perception of their involvement in the IEP meeting, as well how involved they felt in making decisions regarding their child's educational plan. This study attempted to answer the following research questions: (1) How satisfied and involved are parents today with their IEP experience? and (2) What are the most positive and negative aspects reported by parents involved in the IEP process/meeting?

## Method

### *Participants*

For this study, 1,000 parents who attended their child's IEP meeting in school districts throughout a midwestern state were sent a questionnaire. A total of 376 parents returned a questionnaire about their IEP experience. A total of 348 questionnaires were complete and relevant to the present study. As a result of the parents' written responses, it was determined that 234 (67%) of the children they were reporting on were boys and 114 (33%) were girls. The age of the children whose parents completed the questionnaire ranged from two to twenty-two. The frequency and percentage of the different ages can be found in Table 1.

The parents who completed the questionnaire reported several different diagnoses regarding their children. All diagnostic categories included in IDEA were represented in the sample. Sixty-three (18%) children were diagnosed with a learning disability, 55 (16%) children were diagnosed with mental retardation, 11(3%) children were diagnosed with a behavior disorder, 33 (9%) children were diagnosed with an Other Health Impairment, and 29 (8%) of the parents just marked the "other" category (without specifying the child's diagnosis). Of those parents who marked the "other" category and specified their child's diagnosis, 58 (17%) reported their child was diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder, 12 (3%) reported their child was diagnosed with a speech/language impairment, and 8 (2%) reported their child was diagnosed with a developmental delay. Two (0.006%)of the questionnaires returned were completed, but the child's eligibility was not filled out. Seventy-seven (22%) parents reported more than

one diagnosis for their child. The frequency and percentage of diagnoses can be found in Table 2.

### *Materials*

The questionnaire of parental satisfaction with the IEP process was adapted from one created by Hudson and Graham (1978). This survey was created by the authors as a tool for school districts to use in order to obtain information from parents about the quality of interaction and communication that occurred during an IEP meeting. This questionnaire followed a Likert-type scale with parents asked to circle “YES”, “PARTIALLY”, or “NO.” The questionnaire consisted of 15 questions pertaining to parent’s perceived involvement and satisfaction. At the end of the questionnaire, parents were given space to describe their most positive and negative experiences of the IEP meeting/process (see Appendix A for a copy of the questionnaire).

### *Procedures*

The questionnaires were sent to parents by a state and federally funded organization that provides information and support to parents who have a child with a disability. This organization agreed to send out the questionnaire to a random subset of 1,000 parents they had in their database of over 90,000 families. To maintain anonymity and confidentiality, no information asked of the parent was identifiable. Informed consent was assumed if the parent chose to send back the questionnaire. Parents were asked to complete the questionnaire and return it using an enclosed, self-addressed envelope.

## Results

The 348 parents who completed the questionnaire responded to questions that pertained to IEP regulations/procedures, their level of comfort at the IEP meeting, their perception of the importance of their participation, and their overall satisfaction in regards to the meeting and the IEP plan developed. See Table 3 for a summary of parents' responses to the questions that could be answered "Yes", "Partially", or "No." Following the model from studies by Garriott et al. (2000), Lynch and Stein (1982), Pruitt et al. (1998), and Vaughn et al. (1988), results are presented as the percentage of parents who indicated a given response.

In the area of rules and regulations, 91% of the parents felt they were notified of the meeting early enough insure their attendance, whereas two percent responded that they were not given enough notice. Ninety-five percent of the parents reported that they were provided a copy of the IEP, and 79% of the parents reported that they were informed of their parental rights.

When asked if they felt comfortable at the meeting, 59% responded "yes", 14% reported "no", and 27% reported "partially". Thirty-nine percent of the parents stated that they were asked for their input prior to the meeting, whereas 40% of the parents reported that they were not asked for their input before the meeting. However, during the meeting, 68% of parents reported that someone asked for their input.

When questioned about the importance of their participation, slightly over half of the parents felt that other team members were interested in what they had to contribute. Sixty-eight percent of parents felt free to contribute information during the meeting. Eighteen of the parents indicated in the margins of the questionnaire that they provided

their input or asked questions even though they were never asked to do so. Some parents (9) indicated that in the beginning stages, they were uncomfortable during the meetings, but over time this has changed. Fifteen parents qualified their answers by indicating that it was up to them to educate themselves and ask professionals to explain terms being used. They indicated that it was up to them to look out for the best interest of their child.

Eighty-four percent of parents reported that the goals and objectives for their child's IEP were completely or, at least, partially filled out prior to the meeting. The majority (82%) of the parents reported that they understood the IEP that was developed for their child. Only 14% of parents felt that other professionals used technical jargon that was difficult to understand.

Overall, approximately half (51%) of parents reported being completely satisfied with decisions made at the staffing conference. However, 34% of parents were only partially satisfied, while 14% of parents were unsatisfied with decisions made. Sixty-three percent of parents felt that they contributed information that influenced decisions that were made, whereas 28% of parents felt that the information that they provided had no influence on to the decisions made. Overall, 59% of parents were satisfied with their role in the IEP conference. Thirteen percent reported that they were not satisfied with their role in the process of developing their child's educational plan.

At the end of the questionnaire were two open-ended questions pertaining to parents' most positive and negative perceptions of the IEP meeting/process. After reviewing their responses, four main positive themes were evident (with many parents mentioning more than one theme). Table 4 summarizes the percentage of parents who mentioned each positive theme. All positive responses were grouped into the following



categories: learning experience (learning experience for parent and/or staff), partnership with school staff/communication (related to shared-decision making), outcome (statement indicates something positive resulted from the meeting), and positive characteristics of school staff. As indicated in Table 4, 9% of parents indicated nothing positive occurred, 8% left this question blank, and some (4%) parents' comments did not relate to any of the other categories (such as the meeting was on time, hope for my child, over the years the district has improved, child was able to participate, staff acknowledged the diagnosis, and still problems with the IEP process).

The most common positive response given by parents was that the IEP process allowed a partnership with the school staff (28%). Some examples of comments under this category were feelings of teamwork, collaboration, and getting to know the staff. Twenty-two percent of parents wrote statements about positive characteristics of the school staff (i.e. caring teachers, open to ideas, etc.). Nineteen percent of the parents responded with statements that indicated it was a learning experience for them and/or the staff (i.e. school learns information from me about my child, get to know the people working with my child, and parent learned about child). The outcome of the meeting/process (i.e. child's progress, child finally gets the help they needed, able to make sure school is following the IEP) was ranked fourth in regards to the most positive experience parents reported. Some parents (5%) indicated that they were glad they could bring whomever they wanted to the meeting (i.e. advocate, teacher, friend, etc.)

Parents were also given the opportunity to describe their most negative perceptions of the IEP meeting/process. The majority of the responses fell into one of the five main categories: child's individual needs not being met, unprofessional behaviors or

other negative characteristics of staff, lack of cooperation/shared decision making, negatively or unfriendly attitude or tone of meeting, and time involved. Table 5 includes a summary of parents' negative perceptions of the IEP process.

Twenty-seven percent of parents indicated that the most negative aspect of the IEP process was the lack of cooperation/shared decision-making (i.e. school was uncooperative, feel like I have to fight for what my child needs, my concerns are not listened to) and/or they felt the individual needs of the child were not being met (i.e. school doesn't follow through on the IEP, lack of resources/money, goals created are difficult to measure). Unprofessional behaviors or negative characteristics of the staff, as well as the negative or unfriendly attitude and tone of the meeting were the next most commonly written responses, occurring 19% of the time. Examples of comments written that were tallied under this category were staff appeared uninterested, staff was unprepared, meetings seemed formal/generic, and parent felt intimidated. Ten percent of parents surveyed indicated that there was nothing negative that occurred during the meeting. Whereas, 7% of parents responded that the most negative aspect of the IEP process was the time involved (i.e. meeting was too long, meeting was too short, took too long to get services). Finally, 8% of parents wrote responses that did not fall under any of the categories (i.e. "My daughter is viewed solely and entirely by her disability," "One year we had to file for due process," "Getting it organized," and "Son was not involved in his goals and objectives") and 6% of the questionnaires had no response written for this category.

## Discussion

The present study surveyed parents of children with special needs about their participation and satisfaction with the IEP process. Based on the responses of almost 350 parents, the results of this study make several contributions to our understanding of the success of PL94-142/IDEA from the perception of parents today. A first and positive finding was that parents indicated overwhelmingly that school systems are, for the most part, following the letter of the law. Over 90% of parents reported that they were notified of their child's IEP staffing early enough to ensure their attendance. Additionally, 95% of parents indicated that they were provided with a copy of their child's IEP. Seventy-nine percent of parents agreed that they were completely informed of their parental rights. These findings are comparable to those found by Lynch and Stein (1982) over 20 years ago. They found that 85% of parents specified that their rights were explained in a clear and understandable manner. Ninety-two percent of the parents indicated that they were given a signed copy of the IEP after the meeting. Overall, it appears that parents have felt for a long time that schools are following the procedural provisions outlined in PL94-142/IDEA.

A second positive finding in the present study relates to a concern over the use of jargon reported in previous research (e.g., Dembinski & Mauser, 1977; Harry et al., 1995; Vaughn et al., 1988). In the present study, very few parents indicated that professionals used technical terms that were difficult to understand. This decline in reported use of jargon may be because professionals working with families today are more attuned to communicating effectively with parents and, therefore, use less jargon and/or parents today are more educated and familiar with the terms associated with their child's

diagnosis and educational setting. In their written responses, many parents commented favorably on how the IEP experience provided them and school personnel with opportunities to learn about their child. The present findings suggest that progress has been made in how parents and other IEP team members communicate.

A third positive finding in the present study was also related to improved communication and level of comfort between parents and school personnel. Although research by Dembinski and Mauser published in 1977 revealed that two-thirds of parents described themselves as feeling awkward and/or nervous when interacting with professionals at their child's school, over two-thirds of the parents responding in the present study indicated that they felt free to contribute suggestions regarding their child's needs. The most frequent positive comments written by parents related to their level of comfort and collaboration with school personnel, providing further evidence of improved communication between parents and other IEP team members. Whether this reported improvement in level of comfort and collaboration is due to changes in the behavior of professionals, parents, or both is unknown. For whatever reason, these results are promising and suggest that parents have become more and more comfortable with the IEP process over the years.

Although communication and level of comfort during IEP meetings may have improved over the years, data from the present study also suggest some barriers to the shared decision making partnership between parents and professionals. One barrier relates to parents' ability to play an active role in making decisions about their child's educational plan. Although almost 60% of parents were satisfied with their role at the IEP conference, responses that related to a lack of shared decision making and their child's

individual needs not being met were the most frequent negative comments written by parents. Several parents indicated on the questionnaire that they felt intimidated and outnumbered at IEP meetings and that there was no open communication. Similar to statistics reported by researchers over twenty years ago (i.e., Lynch and Stein, 1982), only about two-thirds of parents in the present study indicated that school personnel asked for their input during their child's IEP meeting. Approximately one-fourth of parents felt that the information they did provide had no influence on decisions made about their child. Almost 80% of parents noted that goals and objectives for their child's IEP were at least partially developed and filled out by school personnel prior to the IEP meeting, while only 39% of parents reported that they were asked for their input prior to the meeting. Garriott, et al. (2000) also found that the majority of parents unsatisfied with their role in an IEP meeting indicated frustration over the fact that goals were already developed prior to the meeting. Salembier and Furry (1997) also reported that parents often felt that their participation was discouraged when IEP meetings were pre-determined and that most parents want to be involved in the pre-planning activities for the IEP meeting. When team members develop goals and objectives prior to the IEP meeting without consulting parents, this may give parents the perception that they are not equally valued members of the shared-decision making team.

Another barrier to shared decision making found in the present study relates to parental discontent over the outcome of the IEP process. Although approximately one-half of parents in the present study reported that they were satisfied with the final decisions made during the IEP meeting, another one-third of the parents responding indicated that they were not content with the decisions made about their child's

education. Based on their written responses, parents were unsatisfied because they felt their child's individual needs were not being met. For example, parents made comments related to a lack of resources, support, and testing, their dissatisfaction with their child's placement or services received, and a perceived lack of follow-through or measurable goals related to their individual child's IEP. Lynch and Stein in 1982 also found that 34% of parents were not satisfied with their child's current special education program. Overall, the present survey results suggest that the number of parents dissatisfied with the results of the IEP process has not changed over the past 20 years or so.

So why, after all these years, do some of the data from the present study correspond to results from studies conducted years ago after PL94-142 was first implemented? Salembier and Furney (1997) concluded that factors that improve parent participation and satisfaction include favorable IEP meeting conditions, good communication between parents and professionals, and a strong relationship between the school and parents. They describe a strong relationship as one that is continually ongoing and evolving. Results from the present study indicate that over the years, there has been some improvement in meeting conditions and communication with professionals for parents of children with special needs. Parents reported that they felt comfortable making contributions and that there was little use of jargon at IEP meetings. The results from the present study also suggest, however, that some parents do not feel that they have a strong relationship with school personnel. Shared-decision making, by definition, means that individuals must collaborate and compromise in order to have and maintain an ongoing and evolving relationship. It appears that approximately the same number of individual parents and professionals today as in the past have difficulty with the cooperation

necessary for a strong relationship to develop. Future research should examine the specific characteristics of individuals involved in the IEP process that foster and hinder a strong team relationship.

Several limitations must be considered when interpreting the results of the present study. First, the sample was not representative of all parents in the United States because only parents from portions of one midwestern state were surveyed. Additionally, the questionnaire was sent out to parents by an agency that provides information and support to parents who have a child with a disability. By using their large database, it was possible to reach many parents, but it also limited the sample to parents who had some link to this organization. Only about one-third of parents who received the questionnaire responded. Relevant background factors related to who did not return the questionnaire are unknown. For instance, it is not known if the parents who were more satisfied with their IEP experiences were less likely to reply. The parents who returned the questionnaire, therefore, may not be representative of all parents who participate in the IEP decision-making.

Despite its limitations, the present study also suggests several future areas of research. Because the IEP process involves people working together, the characteristics, personalities, and response styles of individuals, both parents and professionals, which promote a strong shared decision-making environment need to be identified. It would also be interesting to examine teacher and other school personnel's attitudes and thoughts on the IEP process. The results of these types of studies will help bring school personnel and parents together to create the best possible educational plan for each child.

Results from the present study indicate that many parents are satisfied with their IEP experiences. The findings also highlight that IEPs involve people working together. Written comments suggest that the satisfaction of some parents would increase if professionals sought parental input prior to the IEP meeting and if professionals consistently displayed a respectful, caring attitude during the IEP process.



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Table 1  
 Percentage and Frequency of Child's Age Occurring in the Sample

<b>Child's Age</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
2	3	0.00862069
3	23	0.066091954
4	12	0.034482759
5	24	0.068965517
6	18	0.051724138
7	25	0.07183908
8	16	0.045977011
9	16	0.045977011
10	25	0.07183908
11	29	0.083333333
12	21	0.060344828
13	27	0.077586207
14	22	0.063218391
15	18	0.051724138
16	18	0.051724138
17	17	0.048850575
18	20	0.057471264
19	6	0.017241379
20	5	0.014367816
21	2	0.005747126
22	1	0.002873563
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>348</b>	

Table 2  
Percentage and Frequency of Placement Occurring in the Sample

<b>Child's Placement (as indicated by the parent)</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Learning Disability	63	0.181034
Mental Retardation	55	0.158046
Behavior Disorder	11	0.031609
Other Health Impairment	33	0.094828
Other (did not list disability)	29	0.083333
Behavior Disorder, Other Health Impairment	3	0.008621
Behavior Disorder, Other (indicated as Asperger's Syndrome)	1	0.002874
Mental Retardation (indicated as Down Syndrome)	10	0.028736
Learning Disability, Behavior Disorder	9	0.025862
Learning Disability, Behavior Disorder, Other Health Impairment	4	0.011494
Learning Disability, Behavior Disorder, Other	2	0.005747
Learning Disability, Other Health Impairment	10	0.028736
Learning Disability, Other (did not indicate disability)	12	0.034483
Mental Retardation, Behavior Disorder	2	0.005747
Mental Retardation, Behavior Disorder, Other Health Impairment	4	0.011494
Mental Retardation, Other Health Impairment	5	0.014368
Mental Retardation, Other (did not indicate disability)	9	0.025862
Autism (marked "Other" but indicated Autism)	58	0.166667
Unknown (did not mark any category)	2	0.005747
Speech (marked "Other" but indicated Speech)	12	0.034483
Mental Retardation, Other Health Impairment, Other (did not indicate disability)	2	0.005747
Other Health Impairment and Other (did not indicate disability)	3	0.008621
Developmental Delay (marked "Other" but indicated Developmental Delay)	8	0.022989
Mental Retardation, Behavior Disorder, Other (did not indicate disability)	1	0.002874
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>348</b>	

Table 3

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Percentage of Parents Responding “Yes” on Questionnaire About IEP Experiences

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75% or more parents agreed:

- They were provided a copy of IEP (95%)
- They were notified early enough to attend meeting (92%)
- Goals and objectives for IEP were partially or completely filled out prior to meeting (82%)
- They were informed of parental rights (79%)
- They felt comfortable asking questions during the IEP meeting (75%)
- They understood the IEP developed (82%)

50 to 74% of parents agreed:

- They felt free to contribute suggestions during the meeting (73%)
- They were asked for their input during the meeting (68%)
- Felt they had contributed information that influenced decision making (63%)
- They felt comfortable during the IEP meeting (59%)
- They were satisfied with their role (60%)
- Team members were interested in what parents had to say (55%)
- They were completely satisfied with decisions made (51%)

Less than 50% of parents agreed:

- They were asked for their input prior to the meeting (39%)
- Professionals used technical jargon (14%)

Table 4

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**Positive Responses Grouped Into Themes**


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1. **PARTNERSHIP WITH SCHOOL STAFF (28%)**
  - I feel comfortable
  - Teamwork
  - Positive relationship
  - Get to know the staff
  - Staff listened to what I had to say or to my concerns
  - Interested in my input
  - Able to voice concerns and opinion
  - Communication
  - Able to give input
  - Have a say in my child's plan or goals
  - Collaboration
  - One-on-one contact with teaching professionals
  
2. **POSITIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF SCHOOL STAFF (22%)**
  - Displayed a caring attitude
  - Dedicated professionals
  - Supportive
  - Empathetic
  - Interested
  - Open to ideas
  - Want to help/want what's best for your child
  
3. **LEARNING EXPERIENCE (19%)**
  - I learn about my child
  - School learns information from me
  - I see my child from their point
  - Learn about my child's progress
  - learn about services school can offer
  - Everyone together in the same room
  - Getting testing results
  - Get to learn and know all the people that work with my child
  - Teaching the school about my child
  - Able to discuss strengths and weaknesses
  - Able to meet new teacher
  
4. **OUTCOME (15%)**
  - Child's progress
  - Decisions reached
  - Child's getting needed services
  - Child finally getting help/Finally correctly diagnosed
  - Overall plan and/or goals developed

- Trying to help your child/Truly want to help your child
  - Able to make sure school is following through on the IEP
  - Meeting was productive
5. ABLE TO BRING WHOMEVER YOU WANT (5%)
  6. NOTHING POSITIVE (9%)
  7. LEFT BLANK (8%)
  8. OTHER (5%)

Table 5

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 Negative Responses Grouped into Themes
 

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1. CHILD'S INDIVIDUAL NEEDS ARE NOT BEING MET (27%)
  - No follow through with IEP or other decisions made
  - Tries to fit child into existing services
  - Not meeting the individual needs of the child
  - Lack of resources or money
  - Placement
  - Untrained staff
  - Child not making progress
  - Not enough support
  - Not enough services
  - Not enough testing
  - Difficult to measure goals
  - Difficult to make sure each teacher is following the IEP
  
2. LACK OF COOPERATION/SHARED DECISION MAKING (27%)
  - Uncooperative
  - Have to fight for what child needs
  - "Us" vs. "Them" attitude
  - Focus on paperwork instead of shared decisions
  - Don't listen to me or my concerns
  - Staff doesn't share information with me
  - Need to have an advocate or have a demanding attitude
  - Decisions were made before meeting/Goals already written
  - Ignore parents concerns or input
  
3. UNPROFESSIONAL BEHAVIORS OR OTHER NEGATIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF STAFF (19%)
  - Inattention/uninterested during meetings
  - Look at watches
  - Don't show up to meeting
  - Not enough of the professionals involved
  - Not prepared
  - Staff lied to me or gave me misinformation
  - Felt staff hid information from me
  - Staff used jargon
  - Unwillingness attitude of some professionals
  - Hand out last years IEP
  - School becomes defensive when questions are asked
  
4. NEGATIVE/UNFRIENDLY ATTITUDES OR TONE OF MEETING (19%)
  - Blame me
  - Focus on child's weaknesses or disability/focus on what my child can't do
  - Felt outnumbered



- Felt intimidated
  - Meetings seem formal and generic
  - Felt overwhelmed/nervous
  - Felt ganged up on
  - Not knowing what to expect
5. TIME INVOLVED (7%)
- Length of meeting to short
  - Length of meeting to long
  - Time it took to get services
  - Length of the entire process
  - Waiting for test results
6. NOTHING NEGATIVE (10%)
7. LEFT BLANK (6%)
8. OTHER (8%)

Appendix A

Dear Parent,

I am a graduate student at Eastern Illinois University seeking my Specialist degree in School Psychology. As part of my thesis project, I am conducting a survey on parental involvement in the IEP (Individualized Education Program) planning process. You have been selected at random from the Family Matters database as someone who has possibly attended an IEP meeting. **All information reported by you will be anonymous and confidential. Family Matters is mailing out the letter; I do not have access to your name or address.**

I hope you will take a few minutes of your time to complete the questionnaire and return in the enclosed self-addressed, stamped envelope. There has been little recent research asking parents about their involvement and thoughts about the IEP process. Your participation in this study will help researchers further understand parents' perception of the IEP meeting. By completing and mailing back the questionnaire, you will give your consent to participate in the present research project. Your participation in this research is completely voluntary.

If you would like a summary of the findings from this study, please indicate so at the bottom of this letter.

If you have any questions, please contact either me, Melissa Habing, at (217) 857-1490 or Dr. Linda Leal, Psychology Department at Eastern Illinois University, at (217) 581-2158.

Thank you for your time.

Melissa Habing

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Please cut off and return if you would like a summary of the results of this research project:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

**Questionnaire Regarding the IEP Process/Meeting**

Child's Age \_\_\_\_\_

Child's Sex \_\_\_\_\_

Child's Placement

Child's age at first IEP \_\_\_\_\_

- Learning Disabled
- Mental Retardation
- Behavior Disordered
- Other Health Impairment
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

What is the severity of your child's disability? **MILD    MODERATE    SEVERE**

Have you ever attended an IEP meeting before for this child? **YES    NO**

If so, how many years have you been involved in this process? \_\_\_\_\_

Has your child had an IFSP prior to having an IEP? **YES    NO**

How many professionals attended or attend your child's IEP meeting? \_\_\_\_\_

Were there any members of the IEP conference that attended at your request?

(e.g. an advocate)? **YES    NO**

1. Were you notified of the staffing conference early enough to insure your participation? **YES    PARTIALLY    NO**
2. Were you informed of due process procedures and your rights to appeal decisions? **YES    PARTIALLY    NO**
3. Were you provided a copy of the IEP?  
**YES    PARTIALLY    NO**
4. Did you feel comfortable attending the staffing conference?  
**YES    PARTIALLY    NO**
5. Prior to the meeting, did anyone ask for your input?  
**YES    PARTIALLY    NO**
6. Were you asked for your input during the meeting?  
**YES    PARTIALLY    NO**
7. Did you feel free to contribute suggestions regarding your child's needs?  
**YES    PARTIALLY    NO**

8. Did the other team members appear interested in what you had to say?  
**YES                      PARTIALLY                      NO**
9. Were the objectives and goals for your child's IEP already filled out prior to the meeting?  
**YES                      PARTIALLY                      NO**
10. Did you understand the IEP developed for your child?  
**YES                      PARTIALLY                      NO**
11. Did you feel comfortable asking questions during the IEP meeting?  
**YES                      PARTIALLY                      NO**
12. Did other professionals use technical terms that were difficult to understand?  
**YES                      PARTIALLY                      NO**
13. Are you satisfied with the decision made at the staffing conference?  
**YES                      PARTIALLY                      NO**
14. Do you feel that you contributed information that influenced decisions made regarding your child's educational plan?  
**YES                      PARTIALLY                      NO**
15. Overall, are you satisfied with your role in the IEP conference?  
**YES                      PARTIALLY                      NO**

What was the most positive aspect of the IEP conference?

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What was the most negative aspect of the IEP process?

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