

Welcome to Facilitating IEP Meetings!

IEP Meetings are vitally important! While most run smoothly, some challenges remain. These include that:

- people often have very different perceptions
- there may be unrealistic expectations
- sometimes meeting participants display ineffective behaviors
- consensus can be difficult to reach
- people may resist even the changes that are needed

This 90-minute session explores how facilitation tools and techniques provide real strategies for managing these and other challenges.

This session is highly interactive. Tools will be experienced and then debriefed. The workshop is a blend of mini-lectures, partner exercises and group discussions.

Session Objectives:

- To provide an overview of core facilitation techniques
- To highlight specific facilitation tools that can make *IEP* meetings more effective.
- To provide opportunities for hands-on practice with key tools to deepen learning
- To share insights about how facilitation tools can be integrated into any IEP process.

Agenda Overview

- Introductions and agenda overview
- Facilitation techniques overview
- Partner practice of facilitative listening
- Focus on the power of Norms
- Overview of Intervention language
- Partner and group practice on redirecting ineffective behaviors
- Overview of the facilitative approach to dealing with resistance
- Partner practice with resistance scenarios
- Overview of additional facilitation tools that improve IEP meetings
- Participant implementation plans

Introduction to Facilitation

A facilitator is someone who helps a group of people clarify their needs, identify their common objectives, make joint decisions and create action plans to achieve the goals that are important to them.

Facilitation was created to ensure that the voice of group members was heard. In order to leverage their talents and gain their commitment, facilitators always stay out of the discussion. This frees them up to focus on the process or how the conversation is structured and managed. This includes such things as defining the order in which topics will be discussed, the questions that will be asked and the specific decision-making tools that will be used.

Another way of understanding the role is to think of facilitators as referees. In that role they:

- provide an orderly sequence of activities
- watch the action, more than participate in it
- ensure that group members have effective rules to guide interactions
- keep discussion focused
- keep their finger on the pulse so they know when to move on or wrap things up
- help members make decisions they can live with
- help group members achieve closure and identify next steps.

To do all of these things facilitators stay neutral. Instead of interjecting into the content of the conversation, they focus on the process or how things are being managed.

Introduction to Facilitation

Definition of a Facilitator:

Someone who contributes structure & process to interactions, while leaving the actual discussion to the participants.

What is Facilitation?

A way of providing leadership, without taking control. This is accomplished by providing structure and process, instead of direction and answers.

Content	Process
What	How
Subjects discussed	Methods & procedures
Problems solved	Tools used
Decisions made	<i>Norms set</i>
Agenda items	Group dynamics
Goals	Climate

Facilitation Partner Practice

1. Find a partner: one of you will be person A and the other will be person B.
2. You will play these roles for 6 minutes.
3. After 6 minutes, switch roles for a second round of 6 minutes.

Person A will play the CONTENT role and answers the following questions:

- What are the best things staff can do before an ARD meeting help to ensure that it will be a success?
- What actions and behaviors on the part of the staff create trust and encourages buy-in from parents and advocates during an ARD meeting?

Person B will play the PROCESS role by:

- **Staying neutral** – Not adding your thoughts or trying to control the outcome of the conversation.
- **Listening actively** – Facing the speaker, making eye contact, listening to understand more than to judge.
- **Asking questions** – To probe, clarify, and encourage the other person to say more and dig deeper.
- **Paraphrasing key ideas** – Periodically repeating what the other person is saying to make sure key ideas are being understood.
- **Summarizing** – Using the last half-minute to give the speaker a brief summary of what they've been saying in all three questions.

Facilitation Core Practices

#1. Stay neutral on the content.

The whole purpose of facilitating is to hear from the group, so staying out of the conversation is the hallmark of the facilitator role. Instead of trying to influence what the client thinks, the facilitator stays focused on providing structure and helping people have a productive conversation. When facilitators ask questions or offer helpful alternatives, they never do this to impose their views or negate client ideas.

#2. Listen actively.

Since facilitating is all about getting others to talk, listening is key. Active listening is listening to understand more than judge. It also means using attentive body language and looking participants in the eye while they're speaking.

#3. Ask questions.

Since facilitation is asking instead of telling, questioning is the most fundamental facilitator tool. Questions can be used to clarify ideas, probe for hidden information, challenge assumptions or ratify a consensus. Effective questioning encourages people to look past symptoms to get at root causes.

#4. Paraphrase continuously.

The only real proof that you actually heard someone is to be able to accurately repeat what he or she said. For this reason facilitators paraphrase continuously during discussions. Paraphrasing involves repeating what group members say. This lets people know that they were heard and acknowledges their input. Paraphrasing also lets others hear points for a second time.

#5. Summarize discussions.

Facilitators summarize ideas discussed at the end of every discussion. They do this to ensure that everyone has heard all of the ideas, to check for accuracy and to bring closure. Facilitators also summarize in the middle of discussions to catch everyone up on the conversation. Summarizing can also be useful to restart a stalled discussion to remind group members of the points already made which often sparks new thinking. In many decision-making discussions, consensus is created when the facilitator gives the group a clear and concise summarization of key points.

#6. Record ideas.

Groups need to leave meetings with complete and accurate notes that summarize discussions. Facilitators do this on flip charts or on electronic whiteboards. This lets people see that their ideas are being recorded and helps focus the conversation.

#7. Synthesize ideas.

Facilitators bounce ideas around the group to ensure that people build on each other's views. In non-decision-making conversations, they do this to build conversation and create synergy. In decision-making conversations, they ping-pong ideas to allow each person to add their comments to the points made by others until they hear enough to be able to create a statement that everyone can live with.

#8. Keep discussions on track.

If discussions veer off track or lose focus, facilitators notice this and tactfully point it out. They place a *Parking Lot* sheet on a wall and offer participants the option of parking extraneous topics for later discussion.

#9. Test assumptions.

At the start of every discussion facilitators outline the parameters of that topic, who is empowered to make the decision and any other constraints that might apply so that everyone is on the same page. They're always on the lookout for situations in which misunderstandings are rooted in differing assumptions and probe carefully to uncover these. They routinely invite people to clarify exactly what they mean.

10. Make periodic process checks.

Facilitators periodically stop the action to check on whether or not the meeting is still effective. Facilitators check if the purpose is still clear to everyone, if the process is working, if the pace is too fast or too slow or to find out how people are feeling.

Using Norms to Create a Positive Climate

In the ideal world, everyone who participates in an *IEP* meeting would arrive on time, keep their cell phones turned off and use respectful and appropriate language. Sadly, this isn't always how people act.

In a minority of meetings, parents and guardians have become hostile and argumentative. In other instances, advocates have become aggressive and demanding. Worst of all, there are times when staff members have become embroiled in disagreements about how to interpret test results or manage the meeting.

Regardless of the source of the discord, you can use a tool known as "*Norming*." Norms are the standards of behavior that are seen as normal in a specific group. Norms are sometimes called meeting guidelines or team rules.

Whenever facilitators anticipate that a meeting has the potential to become contentious, they create a set of specific questions that will prompt participants to suggest rules. For example, if everyone talked over one another at the last meeting, the facilitator would ask a question like the following:

"What rule can we set so that people don't talk over each other at the meeting?" What should I say if that starts to happen?"

The specific questions asked are dictated by the issues that are anticipated at the meeting. Some common *Norming* questions asked by facilitators include the following:

- *"How do we ensure that everyone is heard during this meeting and that no one person dominates?"*
- *"How should each of us react whenever we hear an idea we don't like?"*
- *"What should I say or do if the meeting tone becomes overly emotional?"*
- *"What do you want me to do if we start to go in circles, or go off track during the meeting?"*
- *"What should I say or do if people become emotional or talk over each other during the meeting? Can I stop the action and remind us of our norms or meeting guidelines?"*
- *"On a scale of 1 to 10, how important is it that we have a productive and constructive meeting today? What rules or guidelines will help ensure that these things happen?"*

You may have noticed that *Norming* questions are often asked so that they prompt group members to give the meeting manager permission to intervene. Since

behavior is part of the group process, facilitators technically don't need permission to intervene when people act out. Having said that, we all know that it's hard to speak up and point out ineffective behaviors. However, if you've got group member approval, this is going to make intervening much easier.

While you could write out a set of rules and impose them at the start of every *IEP* meeting, this is rarely effective. That's because people tend to ignore rules set by other people. To overcome this barrier, try one of the following approaches:

Option 1: Talk about your desire to have a great meeting during the pre-meeting interview with the parent. Then ask the norming questions you feel are most important to prompt the parent or guardian to suggest rules. Use the facilitative listening technique while the parent is speaking. Record the rules suggested by the parent or guardian. If this is a face-to-face meeting, record their suggested rules on a flip chart. Post this sheet in the meeting room and read these rules at the start of the meeting.

Option 2: If you didn't discuss norms in the pre-meeting interview, post a flip chart with a small set of two or three commonsense rules in the meeting room. These are the kind of rules that most people would agree make perfect sense. At the start of the meeting, read this starter set aloud, then invite everyone present at the meeting to suggest additional guidelines. Add the additions to the starter set. Read the whole set of rules aloud to ratify them with everyone present.

Redirecting Ineffective Behaviors

From time to time those around us exhibit ineffective behaviors. They might interrupt, say inappropriate things, fail to listen or simply withdraw. The list of possibilities is endless!

Fortunately, there's a non-confrontational way to respond to people who are being inappropriate. This technique involves using a simple formula:

1. Describe what you see the other person doing to raise their awareness:

"I see that you're...." or "I'm noticing that you're...." or "You're....."

2. Describe the impact of the behavior as a concern for the other person:

"I'm concerned that..."

3. Offer specific instructions about what you need them to do instead.

"I need you to...." or "Please....."

Statement # 1 is designed to raise the other person's awareness about their behavior.

Statement #2 signals that you mean no harm and are acting out of concern for the other person.

Statement #3 describes the specific behavior that you need the other person to emulate.

Body Language Interventions

1. Describe what you see..."You're frowning"

**2. Ask what it means... "Tell me what that means: Did we miss something?"
"Have we got something wrong?"**

Intervention Language Partner Exercise

Betty, the parent, is looking really upset, is twisting her fingers around and around and is not saying anything. She has totally withdrawn.

What's the effective thing to say to redirect Betty?

Fred the parent is locked in a circular argument with the school psychologist Mary, Each of them are repeating their points. Both are getting increasingly agitated. You are concerned that they may not be hearing each other's valuable ideas. You need to help them get unstuck.

What's the effective thing to say to redirect Fred and Mary?

Chuck is a great parent who comes to meetings armed with a long list of things that he wants to say. Then he launches into those points and hardly listens to what anyone says. You are concerned that he never acknowledged a single point staff members have make.

What's the effective thing to say to redirect Chuck?

The meeting has gone totally off track. The off-topic item has been allowed to dominate. Time is slipping away and you worry that there just won't be time to address several important issues.

What's the effective thing to say to redirect the whole group?

Intervention Wording Drill

1. I'm the parent. I pull out my phone and start looking at and responding to emails. Meanwhile important issues are being discussed.
2. I'm the parent and a real bully. I'm starting to speak really loud to intimidate you.
3. I'm a Specialist. I just start talking while a parent is in the middle of an important point.
4. I'm part of the Public Agency Representative. Throughout the meeting I haven't acknowledged the points made by the parent. I'm more or less using my paperwork as a script and not engaging in a real conversation with anyone else at the meeting.
5. I'm the Special Education Teacher. Throughout this meeting, I've talked way more than my colleague George, who hasn't said a word and who has now totally withdrawn.
6. I'm a parent who tends to use a condescending tone of voice. I come across as rude. The words I'm using are very insulting.
7. I'm the parent and I'm getting into a really heated argument with my child's teacher. I'm disagreeing with every single thing she's saying. I came here knowing what I want and I'm just going to keep repeating my points until the others give in.
8. We've been here for hours. The whole group looks tired and only two people are engaged. People are fidgeting. A few are yawning! The meeting is dragging.
9. The parent and the advocate are side-chatting and not paying attention while the Educational diagnostician is presenting data and an update on the child's progress.
10. I'm the meeting leader. We're in the middle of a fruitful discussion, but the agenda says that the time allocated for this particular item is almost up.

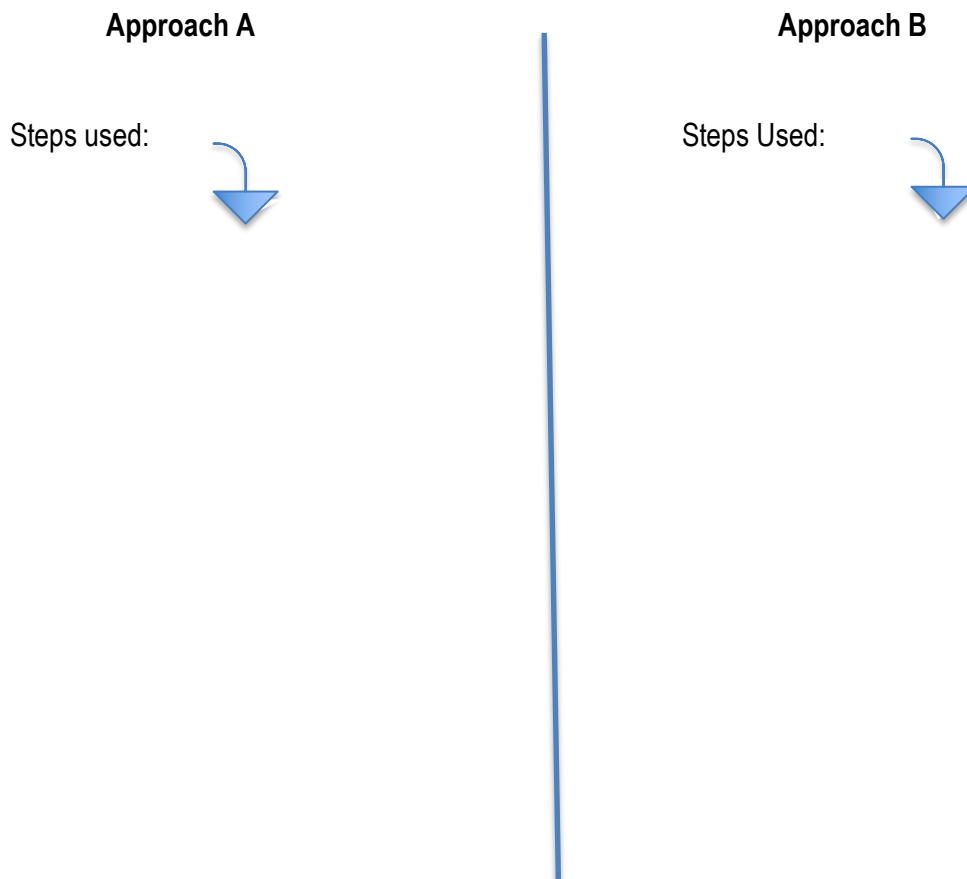
Facilitating Through Resistance

It's very common to encounter resistance when proposing a course of action. This can happen for a number of reasons:

- people may be anxious about their capacity to handle change
- people may fear that they will not get what they want
- people might feel that the proposed plan isn't going to work

When you encounter resistance you have two choices: One of these is ineffective and makes the resistance worse, while the second, facilitative approach surfaces the resistance and makes it manageable.

Resistance Observation



The Two-Step Process for Managing Resistance

Step 1. Vent concerns: Listen, ask questions, paraphrase, summarize:

“Tell me what the issues are?”

“Why does this concern you?”

“What else do I need to know?”

The Transition Question: **“Can I ask you a Question?”**

No!



Yes!



Step 2: Resolving the Problems: removing the barriers:

Help the resistor find solutions:

“Under what conditions or with what assurances could you move forward?”

“What else do you suggest?”

Why the two-step facilitative approach works.

Taking a questioning approach works because it acknowledges the concerns of the resistor while allowing them to vent their frustration and be heard. They are then consulted about what to do next. Since people don't generally refuse to act on their own suggestions, most people will abandon their resistance and move forward.

In contrast, the directive approach is less effective because it involves telling people what to do. While you may get compliance, this approach tends to shatter buy-in. Telling responses usually make the resistance go underground or get worse.

While responding to a challenge with a question may feel like giving in, it actually allows you to manage the situation. When you ask the resistor for their suggestions and work with them to find a solution, you come across as relaxed and flexible. At this point all but the toughest resisters will collaborate on gracefully getting out of the situation.

Additional Facilitation Tools

Intervention Examples

Chuck is a great parent who comes to meetings armed with a long list of things he wants to say. He launches into those points and hardly listens to what anyone else says. You're concerned that he never acknowledges a single point that staff members make.

1. *"Chuck, it's wonderful that you come to these meetings with so many suggestions."*
2. *"I'm worried, though, that you might be missing out on staff ideas."*
3. *"I'm going to recap everything that you've presented so far and then ask you to listen to the suggestions that the staff believe would be helpful."*

Throughout the second hour of the meeting, staff have been running in and out, despite the fact that the group agreed to a rule against that sort of thing.

1. *"During this last hour, several people have come and gone from the meeting."*
2. *"I'm concerned that this is slowing things down for all of us."*
3. *"Please remember the rule that you set about this earlier."*

Fred, the parent, is locked in a circular argument with the school psychologist, Mary. Each of them is repeating the same points over and over. Both are becoming agitated. You're concerned that they're not hearing each other.

1. *"Fred, Mary, I'm noticing that you're each repeating your points."*
2. *"I'm concerned that you may not be hearing each other's valuable ideas."*
3. *"Let's start over. Fred, you go first. Then, Mary, tell us what Fred is saying."*

The meeting has gone totally off track. An off-topic item has been allowed to dominate. Time is slipping away and you worry that there just won't be time to address several important issues.

1. *"Folks, I need to point out that we've been on this topic for 20 minutes."*
2. *"I'm concerned that this is eating all of our time and that we won't get to the other items that need our attention."*
3. *"I'm going to recap what's been said so far. Then, I'm going to ask you to tell me how we can move beyond this topic to focus on the rest of our agenda."*

For the third time in the meeting, Fred, the advocate, has pulled out his phone and started responding to emails. Meanwhile, important issues are being discussed that Fred is not hearing.

1. *"Fred, I see that you're responding to messages."*
2. *"I'm concerned that we're missing out on your input."*
3. *"Please, we need you back."*

Whenever the parent, Joe, hears something that he doesn't like, he starts shouting. This is very intimidating and creates a lot of tension.

1. *"Joe, you're shouting."*
2. *"When you do that, I get so distracted I can't focus on what you're saying."*
3. *"I need you to make your point again, this time, please lower your voice."*

Alice, the school psychologist, just starts talking while Michael, the parent, is in the middle of an important point.

1. *"Excuse me, Alice, but you started talking before Michael was finished."*
2. *"We don't want to miss out on anything either of you has to say."*
3. *"Please hold off until Michael has finished making his point."*

Charles is an outside education specialist who helped assess Jenny's progress. Throughout the meeting, Jerry has been reading from his papers and has hardly acknowledged a single point made by anyone else at the meeting. Steve, the parent, has hardly said a word. Charles is using his paperwork as a script and not engaging in real conversation. He just keeps barreling along.

1. *"Charles, you're presenting us with really important information."*
2. *"I'm concerned, however, that your points aren't getting the in-depth discussion that they deserve. Also, you're missing out on hearing Steve's perspective."*
3. *"Let's go back to the last two recommendations and hear from Steve."*

Brian, the parent's advocate, tends to use a condescending tone of voice. The words he uses are rude and quite insulting. The staff are becoming upset.

1. *"Brian, I'm concerned that the way you're making your points is getting in the way of us really hearing your ideas."*
2. *"I need you to make that last point again, only this time please use different language."*

Joan, the parent, is getting into a really heated argument with her child's teacher. She disagrees with every single suggestion being made. She keeps saying that she came to the meeting knowing exactly what she wants and keeps repeating her points until the staff gives in to her demands.

1. *"Joan, it's clear that you came here knowing exactly what you want."*
2. *"I'm concerned, however, that you're not going to benefit from the insights and suggestions of the staff."*
3. *"I'm going to recap the main staff suggestions and then get you to tell us what you think is positive about each of these ideas and also what concerns you about them."*

The parent, Bill, and the advocate, Joe, are side-chatting and not paying attention while the school psychologist is sharing test results and providing an update on the student's progress.

1. *"Bill and Joe, I see you're having a conversation."*
2. *"I'm concerned that you could be missing out on hearing important information that we want your input about."*
3. *"Please hold your discussion until after this presentation."*

The group is in the middle of an important discussion, but the agenda indicates that the time allocated for this particular item is almost up.

1. *"I need to point out that we're almost out of time for this topic."*
2. *"I would hate to stop discussion everyone thinks is really important."*
3. *"Should we try to wrap this up or should we adjust the agenda so that we can keep discussing this topic?"*

All of the tools covered in this workshop and much more are featured in the new book

Facilitating IEP Meetings.

Buy it now on Amazon or Barnes and Noble, or contact the author for information about large group discount rates.

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