

Title: How Students with Significant Disabilities can use Choice in the IEP

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We all agree that student participation in the IEP process is an important goal. For students with significant disabilities, especially for students who are unable to talk, meaningful participation in the IEP is difficult. These students often struggle to communicate basic choices about daily activities; therefore, their personal curriculum goals are not usually solicited as part of the IEP process.

For these students to make real choices about their educational plans and ultimately their life plan, they need daily practice in communicating choices. On a day-to-day basis, however, it can be challenging for families and educators to place universal choice-making as a top priority. Additionally, the topic of communicating choice often is neglected in the IEP process, either by “assigning” it as the responsibility of one professional (e.g. the speech therapist), or worse yet, omitting it altogether.

The following chart looks at three key parts of the IEP, and describes how choice-making communication skills can be included in a student’s educational plan.

IEP	Purpose in the IEP	Including Choice	Example
<p><b>PLAAFP</b> (Present Level of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance)</p>	<p>Should accurately describe the student's performance in <i>all</i> areas of education that are affected by the student's disability.</p>	<p>Mary is able to communicate choices of preference through specific signals for "yes" and "no". She moves her eyes up to signal 'yes" and down to signal "no."</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mary uses her "yes" and "no" signals to choose references for (e.g.) activities, food, and some self-care needs.</li> <li>2. She does not yet use these signals to answer questions about instructional content (e.g.) colors, calendar, or vocabulary items.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Goals and Short-term Objectives</b></p>	<p>Should build upon the abilities and needs identified in the PLAAPF. These goals and objectives should be measurable.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mary will learn to use her yes/no signal to answer questions related to instructional content with 80% consistency.</li> <li>2. Mary, with consultation from staff with expertise in Assistive Technology (AT), will develop initial skills to use computer scanning presentations. She will practice with equipment identified through the AT process at least 3x/day, and choices in her display will always include at least one neutral or undesired consequence.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mary is able to communicate the day of the week through the use of choice by use of her yes/no signal: "Is today Tuesday?"</li> <li>2. Mary will use a head mouse or other switch interface system to choose a 3 minute activity from three choices: sand play, artwork, or watching clock.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Related Services and Supports</b></p>	<p>Services and supports include special education, supplementary aids and services, and program modification or supports for school staff. Intended to aid the child in meeting their annual goals.</p>	<p>Teachers, therapists, and ancillary support team members (IEP Team) will coordinate presentation and response styles to encourage consistent use of Mary's yes/no signals and emerging scanning skills.</p> <p>The IEP team will schedule regular monthly meetings to review progress and make necessary modification. according to progress.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. PT: Mary will use yes/no or scanning signals to choose first PT activity of session.</li> <li>2. OT: Mary will identify self-care items (toothbrush, comb, etc.) using yes/no.</li> <li>3. Daily assessment of instructional content will be presented such that Mary can express her knowledge independently.</li> </ol>

Understanding a student's current abilities to make and express choices creates opportunities for intervention and learning. If a student is able to accurately communicate an informed choice - even if by way of assistive technology - parents and educators can tap into areas of the student's life that may have never been considered before, such as self-awareness, memory, specific academic strengths, and learning style, to name a few. These are the fundamentals necessary for parents and educators to make informed and rational decisions when developing a student's IEP<sup>1</sup>.

To learn more about the communication of choice for students with significant disabilities, visit the ACSESS website: <http://www.med.umich.edu/pmr/acsess>

1. For more information on the IEP procedures, visit Wrights Law at [www.wrightslaw.com/info/iep.goals/plan.htm](http://www.wrightslaw.com/info/iep.goals/plan.htm) and Bridges4Kids at [www.bridges4kids.org/IEP.html](http://www.bridges4kids.org/IEP.html)