

**Every Team Needs A Captain!**  
**By Maureen A. Lowry-Fritz, J.D., M.A.**

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I've never been what one would call a “jock.” As a kid, I was small, weak, and pretty clumsy. I tried to play softball one summer, but it ended miserably. I realized quickly that sports were not “my thing,” and I eventually surrendered to my lack of athleticism.

Now, I don't have a lot of regrets in life. I try to live in the moment and make the most of each opportunity. But, I have to admit, that I regret not playing team sports because I have always longed to be a team captain.

As the saying goes, “be careful what you wish for.”

On November 13, 1999 at 1:15 p.m., I suddenly found myself catapulted onto a team in a way I had never imagined. At that moment, my daughter had her first of what would be countless epileptic seizures. These seizures have continued for years, and negatively affect virtually every aspect of her life...particularly her education.

The first seizures led us to a pediatrician, who led us to a developmental pediatrician, who led us to the Early Intervention program. Early Intervention led us to speech therapists, occupational therapists, physical therapists and developmental therapists. The Early Intervention experience ended, and we found ourselves in the world of Early Childhood Education at our local preschool.

And there I was...unwittingly recruited to be a member of my daughter's IEP Team. I was stunned. I didn't sign up for the team. I never tried out. No one checked my credentials or qualifications to make sure I could handle the job. But here I was. I had been recruited.

When the shock wore off, I had a decision to make about my role on the team. Would I be an active team member? Or just a spectator?

I immediately knew my answer. I didn't want to be the team's water girl or the towel girl. I had to take a leadership role. I had to learn as much as I could, and share what I learned. I had to build a relationship with my teammates based on mutual respect. I had to help guide the team toward the prize. In this case, the prize would not be a

trophy or gold medal. The prize would be my daughter's ability to fully reach her academic potential.

I am honored to have been recruited to her team, and I live every single day of my life trying to be worthy of my spot on her team. I established myself as the "captain" of my daughter's IEP Team. I develop team strategies. I motivate the team members. I keep the team focused on its mission: developing an implementing an appropriate educational program for my daughter.

Any parent can become the captain of her child's IEP Team, if she understands seven fundamental lessons.

- **Customize The IEP To The Child's Needs**

Parents are in a prime position to understand a child's disability. They accompany the child to doctor appointments and private evaluations. They invest hours in the library and on the internet researching the child's disability. They work right next to child during homework assignments, long-term projects and test preparation. They grow to understand the child's academic strengths, weaknesses, and learning style.

Parents also develop an understanding as to how the child's disability affects her educational abilities. Over time, parents become experts on their child. Teachers, administrators and therapists simply do not have the time or resources to develop such a broad understanding of each student, each disability, and each educational impact. Therefore, parents must share their unique knowledge and perspective with their teammates.

- **Accept That The School System Isn't Perfect**

I am a huge advocate of the public school system. Public schools have a tremendous obligation to develop and educate children. Over the past few hundred years, the responsibilities of American public schools have grown exponentially. And I firmly believe that – given the constraints under which they operate – they are doing a good job with an overwhelming task.

Parents must understand the realities of the public school system. School districts operate under a number of significant constraints. School districts have inadequate amounts of money. Schools have limited space. They have limited staff members. They are not always able to provide adequate personnel development opportunities.

What does this mean for parents of children with special needs? As captains of our child's IEP Team, we must assert ourselves. We must zealously advocate on our child's behalf, in order to obtain appropriate programming. We must collaborate with our teammates to develop creative ways to provide services. We must help the school officials break through the constraints that plague the public school system.

The system isn't perfect. It isn't meant to be perfect. And it likely never will be perfect. But team captains take the initiative to drive the team toward excellence. Parents must push the IEP Team beyond its comfort zone. While the system inevitably suffers from imperfections, parents can encourage the Team to be the best that it possibly can be.

- **Participate In A Professional Manner**

You've no doubt heard the expression, "You get more flies with honey." I think that is true for almost any relationship. I am a firm believer that parents can get more special education services for their child by cooperating and collaborating with the school than by yelling, threatening, bullying or pointing fingers.

Participating in a professional manner is simply a matter of common sense and human civility. It's the old golden rule: treat others in the way that you would like to be treated. It's acting in a way that would make your mother proud!

Parents should treat their teammates with courtesy and respect. Our teammates are professionals in their respective fields, and we owe deference to their expertise. Parents should ask teachers many questions, and listen to their answers. Criticisms should be presented in a constructive manner, and always accompanied by realistic suggestions and solutions.

Likewise, parents should feel confident in sharing their own opinions about their child and their child's education. Calmly and rationally share your insight and expertise regarding your child, her disability, and how the disability affects her participation in the classroom.

Your professional and diplomatic participation in the IEP meeting is critical to securing appropriate special education programming. When teammates disagree about what constitutes appropriate programming and services, you

should provide expert testimony to support your requests for special education supports and related services.

Finally, end each meeting on a positive note. Even if you experienced several disagreements throughout the meeting, refer to a matter upon which you did agree. Point to that agreement as an example of how the team was able to successfully reach consensus.

- **Tackle Conflicts As They Arise**

Disagreement is good. It is a sign that thinking people believe in their ideas. Disagreements are inevitable at IEP meetings. The key to handling disagreements is remaining calm, rational and open-minded.

When you disagree with fellow IEP team members, really listen to their viewpoints. Try to understand why they are saying what they are saying. And then explain why you are saying what you are saying. Then, take the best points from each of your perspectives, and collaborate to develop a creative solution.

Sometimes disagreements get heated. At times, parents feel they are going to “lose it.” If you feel this way, explain to your teammates that your emotions are escalating. Tell them that you feel very strongly about the issue at hand, and you want to continue discussing it in a calm and rational way. However, in order to do so, you will need to step out for a moment. Simply ask for a five minute break. Chances are, your teammates will also benefit from the hiatus!

- **Ally Yourself With The Team**

I look for the good in everyone at the IEP table. I expect a lot from my teammates, and I am rarely disappointed. Each person at the IEP table has some area of expertise that I don't have. I need each and every one of them to help my child learn. I do my best at all times to stay on good terms with them.

Maintain positive home-school relationships throughout the school year. Show your teammates that you respect their position and expertise. Give frequent and sincere thanks to each member.

I assume the best motivations from each IEP team member. Even if I meet a teacher who doesn't appear to be giving all that she can, I still thank her for the things she **has** contributed. And I encourage her to meet some higher expectations.

- **Involve Yourself In The Educational Process**

Like most kids, my children are in school for thirty-five hours per week. They spend more waking hours away from me than they do with me. But, I still consider myself to be their primary and most important teacher.

My fellow IEP team members know this. And they respect me for it. Because of my role as their primary teacher, they are very responsive to my input, suggestions, and requests. If you are not already doing so, I urge you to become incredibly involved in the education of your child.

Communicate regularly with all team members (i.e. phone, e-mails, notebook system, etc.). Ask related service personnel for at-home activities. Also, volunteer in the classroom, when possible. This will enable you to discuss classroom events with first-hand knowledge.

- **Negotiate To Reach Consensus**

Attending an IEP meeting is a lot like buying a car. Each is a negotiation process. When you go to buy a car, you (hopefully) know what you want. You know the make and model of the car you wish to purchase. You have a general idea of what sort of options you want. You probably know what color you want. If you have a trade-in, you've likely checked out the blue-book trade-in value.

Likewise, when you attend an IEP meeting, you should know what you expect to be accomplished. You want to be the party driving the negotiation, as opposed to one who is just along for the ride.

Begin negotiating your child's goals two weeks before the IEP meeting. Prior to the meeting, develop your "wish list" of services, as well as your list of "non-negotiables." Finally, remember that consensus is "something everyone can live with," and **not** getting everything you want.

- **Conclusion**

Following these seven rules can be difficult at times. As with any worthwhile endeavor, this job can be challenging and exhausting. Let the love you have for your child keep you motivated as you follow these rules, and you will earn your position as "Captain" of your child's IEP Team.

- C**ustomize the IEP
- A**ccept that the system isn't perfect
- P**articipate in a professional way
- T**ackle conflicts as they arise
- A**lly yourself with the team
- I**nvolve yourself in the process
- N**egotiate to reach consensus

Captains keep the whole team moving to the ultimate prize. In your case, the prize is an appropriate education, which will enable your child to reach her fullest potential. The prize is a future for your child. A future that is full of open doors and endless potential. The prize is a limitless and boundary-free future for your child.

The captain keeps everyone motivated, educated, energized and focused. The captain leads the IEP team to victory for the child. Secure that victory, and your child will reap the benefits for years to come!