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IS THIS A GOOD IEP GOAL FOR MY CHILD?

*A practical guide to meaningful, inclusive, and
appropriately ambitious IEP goals*

DISABILITYEDPROS

Just because an IEP goal is measurable doesn't mean it's meaningful.

IEP goals should be individualized, appropriately ambitious, and connected to your child's educational needs. They should support access to and progress in grade-level curriculum, with the individualized supports your child needs to participate and demonstrate learning.

Use this guide to look beyond goal-writing checklists and consider what your child is learning, how goals connect to grade-level standards, and whether they create meaningful opportunities for progress.

SMART VS. SMARTIE: WHY NEITHER IS NECESSARILY GOOD ENOUGH (AND HOW BOTH CAN GET IT WRONG)

SMART goals are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. SMARTIE adds Inclusive and Equitable, encouraging us to consider access, participation, fairness, and ambitious expectations.

These additions matter. But both frameworks can still become compliance-focused when the priority shifts from learning to documenting that a target was met.

Measurability matters. Measurement is not the same as mastery.

An 80% accuracy target may be easy to count, but does it show that the student understands and can apply the skill?

A student can demonstrate mastery with AAC, assistive technology, accommodations, or other individualized supports.

Independence may be an appropriate target, but it should not be the default definition of mastery.

We want students to become more capable, not simply less supported.



5 QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN REVIEWING YOUR CHILD'S IEP GOALS

1. What can my child do now?

- ◆ Does the goal build on their current skills and strengths?
 - ◆ Is it grounded in accurate present levels?
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2. What is my child ready to learn next?

- ◆ Is the goal appropriately ambitious?
 - ◆ Does it connect to grade-level standards and learning opportunities?
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3. What barriers affect access?

- ◆ Is the goal addressing a skill the student needs to learn, or a barrier the school should remove?
 - ◆ Are necessary accommodations and supports included?
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4. How does my child communicate?

- ◆ Can they demonstrate learning through speech, AAC, writing, gestures, or another method?
 - ◆ Does the goal measure the intended skill rather than the method of responding?
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5. Which supports help my child succeed?

- ◆ Are effective supports built into the goal?
 - ◆ Can my child demonstrate mastery with those supports?
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A good IEP goal is meaningful, appropriately ambitious, connected to learning, and designed with the student's access needs in mind.



DOES YOUR CHILD HAVE EXTENSIVE SUPPORT NEEDS? THIS ONE'S FOR YOU.

Students with extensive support needs are often given goals focused primarily on functional skills, prerequisite skills, or completing tasks independently. Those skills can matter, but they should not be the only skills a student has the opportunity to learn.

Your child does not have to master every prerequisite skill before accessing grade-level learning.

- ◆ Grade-level connections: Do goals connect to grade-level standards while keeping learning goals and supports individualized?
- ◆ Academic opportunities: Are functional skills taught in addition to academic skills, rather than replacing them?
- ◆ Communication and access: Are AAC, assistive technology, accommodations, and other supports incorporated?
- ◆ Meaningful participation: Do goals create opportunities to participate in classroom learning alongside peers?

EXAMPLE 1: SAME STUDENT. DIFFERENT READING GOALS.

Student profile: A third-grade student understands grade-level stories read aloud, communicates using AAC, and is still developing decoding skills.

BEFORE: A GOAL FOCUSED ON DECODING

By [date], when given a third-grade passage, Student will independently decode the text with 80% accuracy across three consecutive trials.

AFTER: A GOAL FOCUSED ON COMPREHENSION

By [date], during shared reading of grade-level literary texts, with access to individualized supports, Student will identify a character's action and explain how that action affects the sequence of events, demonstrating consistent understanding across multiple texts and instructional settings.

WHAT CHANGED?

- ◆ The learning target is grade-level comprehension, not independent decoding.
- ◆ Supports make the text and response accessible; they do not invalidate mastery.
- ◆ Evidence comes from understanding across texts and settings, not an arbitrary percentage alone.
- ◆ A decoding goal may also be appropriate if decoding is the skill being taught. It should not be a prerequisite for access to grade-level comprehension.

SUPPORTS REQUIRE TEACHING, NOT JUST AVAILABILITY

Adults help the student discover available tools, explore how they work, identify what helps, and make choices about when and how to use them. Possibilities include audio, adapted text, visual supports, and AAC.

*What are we measuring? Reading comprehension. What are we figuring out along the way?
Which supports help the student access and demonstrate that learning.*

EXAMPLE 2: WRITING IS NOT THE SAME AS HANDWRITING

BEFORE: A GOAL FOCUSED ON INDEPENDENT PRODUCTION

By [date], Student will independently write a five-sentence paragraph with correct spelling, capitalization, and punctuation in 4 out of 5 trials.

AFTER: A GOAL FOCUSED ON WRITTEN EXPRESSION

By [date], given a grade-level writing prompt and access to individualized composition and communication supports, Student will compose a paragraph with a clear main idea, relevant supporting details, and an organized sequence of ideas across multiple writing assignments.

WHAT CHANGED?

- ◆ The learning target is developing, organizing, and communicating ideas.
- ◆ The student might type, dictate, use speech-to-text, or compose using AAC; handwriting is not required to demonstrate written expression.
- ◆ Spelling, conventions, or handwriting can be taught separately when appropriate.

The goal is to develop the student's ability to express ideas, not require a particular method of producing them.



YOUR IEP GOAL REVIEW WORKSHEET

Review one current or proposed goal. These prompts are conversation starters, not a scorecard.

Goal I am reviewing:

- ☐ Reflects my child's current skills and needs
- ☐ Is appropriately ambitious and connects to grade-level learning
- ☐ Measures a meaningful skill, not just task completion
- ☐ Includes necessary supports without unnecessarily requiring independence
- ☐ Has a meaningful way to measure progress and mastery
- ☐ Explains what the team will change if progress is insufficient

Questions or changes to discuss:



QUESTIONS TO ASK DURING YOUR IEP MEETING

You do not need to arrive with a perfectly rewritten goal. You can ask questions that help the team reconsider it.

- ◆ What skill are we actually trying to teach and measure with this goal?
- ◆ How does this goal connect to grade-level standards and classroom learning?
- ◆ Are we measuring my child's understanding, or their ability to complete the task in a particular way?
- ◆ What would mastery look like, and how will we know my child has achieved it?
- ◆ If my child isn't making meaningful progress, what will we change about the instruction or supports?

You are an important member of the IEP team. Ask questions, suggest revisions, and request clarification.

WANT TO GO BEYOND THE GOALS?

IEPs: FROM RIGHTS TO REALITY

What the law requires, what happens in practice, and what parents can do next.

Understanding IEP goals is one part of effective advocacy. In this eight-week course, we'll explore how the parts of the IEP work together and what parents can do when their child's needs are not being met.

Join the waitlist to be the first to know when enrollment opens.

Course begins January 11, 2027. Enrollment opens January 4, 2027.



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