



Building Partnerships Between Families, Schools, and Communities

A SERVICE IS NOT A NEED

by Calvin and Tricia Luker

The key to a well-written, well-reasoned IEP is to clearly identify and write measurable goals and objectives. The single most important part of that process is identifying and understanding the student's needs.

Parents often ask advocates and lawyers how they can obtain specific school services for their children. Usually the question begins with the statement, "My son/daughter needs . . . " (an aide, more occupational therapy, smaller class size, etc.). The problem is that school IEP Team members don't accept these "My child needs . . . " statements at face value. When preparing for an IEP Team meeting we must always remind ourselves that special education is a *needs driven* service delivery system. When we confuse "services" with "needs," we fall into the trap of being told the school won't provide a service.

What is a need? A need, simply stated, is a challenge or problem that requires some action to be taken, either by the student, or by another person helping the student. We understand that nutrition is a need that is met by eating. A person might possess the ability to eat on his/her own or might need help from others. In special education, once a need is identified, the question becomes how do we help the student meet that need. The preferred answer is to identify way to help the student meet the need him/herself. When help or support from others is required, the help or support given is the service.

Let's say, for example, that a student "needs friends." Parents often will know of that specific need and will come into the IEP requesting that the student have a formal Circle of Friends developed around them as part of their IEP service. The Circle of Friends might at first blush appear to be the service to solve the "no friends" need. But that won't address the need and solve the problem of no friends until you dig further into why the student doesn't have friends. There may be several reasons why the student is not able to make friends easily. For example, the student might:

- ◆ lack social skills;
- ◆ receive segregated educational services;
- ◆ have ambulatory, environmental or other challenges directly related to the child's disability;
- ◆ have intensive personal care needs that make scheduling social activities difficult; or
- ◆ lack access to general community interactive experiences

As we see, the single need for friends can exist for several reasons. Each of those "reasons," when carefully examined, identify other needs. Take, for example, the lack social skills. If we hope to teach or provide the student with the social skills needed to make friends, we must first

identify what social skills the student lacks. The student may not know how to start a conversation, invite other students to join them in an activity or might not feel comfortable making eye contact with other students. These challenges can be stated as needs. For example the student needs to learn:

- ◆ how to make and maintain eye contact;
- ◆ how to initiate and end conversations;
- ◆ how to be aware of their body language;
- ◆ how to invite others to join in activities; etc.

In order to address the larger need of having friends, we now see that other things must be addressed or learned first in order to meet the ultimate goal of making friends. Now it is time to explore strategies which would help the student learn the necessary social skills.

Direct support strategies that could be used to help the student be better prepared to make friends might include:

- ◆ teaching specific social contact strategies essential to promoting positive contact with others [eye contact, initiate conversations, etc.]
- ◆ teaching emotional controls and cues (how to read body language, using acceptable tone of voice, expression, etc.)
- ◆ teaching how to play games, use toys and equipment, etc. in typical social environments.
- ◆ teaching value of consideration, empathy, sympathy, respect, etc. through role-playing and other activities, etc.
- ◆ encouraging the student to make environmental choices that increase the opportunity for socialization and contact with peers. (class seating, where and with whom to sit at lunch, where to go and what to do at recess.

These all are examples of steps that might help a student to act in a way that helps them to take advantage of opportunities to make friends. They also identify the specific services that need to be performed in order to prepare the student to make and keep friends.

But what about the parents' desire Circle of Friends Service? We suggested above that another reason that a student might not be able to make friends is because she/he receives segregated educational services or lacks access to general community interactive experiences. These examples can be restated as needs. For example, saying that "the student needs opportunities to interact with other students to demonstrate and expand his/her social skills" clearly focuses the IEP Team on social areas that must be addressed as goals and objectives in the student's IEP. Once the IEP Team has embraced the necessity for expanded opportunities for social interaction in a goal and objective format, then it becomes time to consider what services will help achieve the goal. One service might be the Circle of Friends. But by having identified the need and writing the goal and objective based on the need, the IEP Team can now look beyond the Circle of Friends service initially demanded by the parents, and can consider and implement other creative supports and services as well.

Okay, so how does all this look on an IEP? Most IEP forms identify student needs before considering goals and objectives. For our student, we have identified the following needs:

- ◆ Needs friends;
- ◆ Needs to learn how to make and maintain eye contact;

- ◆ Needs to learn how to initiate and end conversations;
- ◆ Needs to learn how to be aware of their body language;
- ◆ Needs to learn how to invite others to join in activities; etc.

We have identified the student goals. For example:

- ◆ The student will increase his/her interpersonal relationship skills;
- ◆ The student will increase his/her nonverbal communication skills;
- ◆ The student will increase his/her verbal communication skills;
- ◆ The student will demonstrate effective reactions;

Each of these goals can have clearly stated and measurable objectives. For example, for the goal "The student will increase his/her interpersonal relationship skills," the objectives might include:

- ◆ Introduce him/herself to another person;
- ◆ Introduce two people to each other;
- ◆ Compliment another person;
- ◆ Invite another person to join him/her in an activity;
- ◆ Start a conversation;

Now that we know the needs, have identified the student goals and have clearly stated some measurable objectives, we are at the point where we can consider what supports and services will best help the student meet the objectives. Some possible supports and services might include:

- ◆ Circle of Friends;
- ◆ Group speech therapy;
- ◆ Lunchtime job in the cafeteria selling milk;
- ◆ Social skills group;
- ◆ Social work services; etc.

The IEP development process works best when we focus on student needs rather than focusing on potential services. When we understand and can clearly state our children's needs we are better positioned to advocate for the services that offer the greatest potential for addressing those needs. In our next article, we will concentrate on defining and describing goals and objectives, and offer suggestions on how to craft support services to meet those goals and objectives.