



STEP staff often receives requests to attend Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings with families. STEP's mission is to provide information to parents and family members that will help them increase their skills so they can become their child's best advocate. Because our mission is to help build parent capacity, we have established a process for responding to families' requests for support at a meeting.

There are many disability organizations in Tennessee, and each one provides services in a unique way based on their mission and the guidelines of the sources that fund them. We want to assist families and professionals in understanding the STEP service delivery model and make it easy for folks to access the wide range of support and training we provide. The eight member STEP team is committed to fulfilling the mission of STEP **"to empower parents through information, training, and support to become effective partners with professionals in planning appropriate educational programs for their children with disabilities"**.

Our model for meeting this mission is based on our belief that parents possess unique information about the development, nature and needs of their children. Our goal is to ensure that parents receive the information they need regarding special education rights and responsibilities so that they can speak up for, and with, their children and youth with disabilities. Important information about our support services:

- **Educational Workshops:** Recognizing that this type of empowerment does not happen overnight, but rather is a process, STEP encourages families to learn what the law requires school systems to provide for their children through the *Introduction to Special Education BASIC Rights Workshop*.
 - The workshops are offered "live" across Tennessee and also through DVD.

As parents, we remember being at an IEP meeting and not understanding the words, what was being planned, or the extent of our rights to participate in the discussion. The BASIC Rights Workshop, followed by training on understanding the IEP which is now made available via YouTube on the STEP website www.tnstep.org, provides a wealth of information that will help increase your confidence in your ability to speak up for your son or daughter in meaningful ways.

Many families, through the 25 year history of STEP, have shared how powerful this information was for them!

- **Strategy Planning:** The STEP staff assists parents by building on their knowledge and helping them plan for participating in their child's IEP meetings in ways that make a difference. STEP staff enable families and students to:
 - Understand what special education is and how to determine the services your child needs.
 - How to have high expectations and express those expectations at a meeting.
 - How to be an effective member of the educational planning team.
 - How to communicate your ideas.
 - How to use your rights in meaningful ways when there is disagreement on needed services and supports.

Thousands of family members have been successful in IEP meetings by learning their rights and with help in planning from STEP team members.

- **Mentoring Support at a Meeting:** We recognize that there are situations where a family may need someone to assist them in using the skills they have learned, so STEP staff do attend IEP meetings with families who have tried to apply what they have learned but have experienced barriers. There are families who may experience disability themselves or have other special circumstances that require more intensive one to one assistance, and STEP staff is available to meet those needs.
 - Determinations on attending meetings with families are made by staff members by looking at the urgency of the issue, what steps the family has already tried, and other factors.

We want children and youth with disabilities to have positive educational experiences and receive the services and supports that they need to help them acquire the skills to be productive, independent adults to the maximum extent possible.

- **Connections to Other Agencies That Serve Families:** We are continually looking for ways to expand our capacity to serve families. We work in partnership with other disability organizations and community projects to link families to supports that may be available through these organizations and projects. One project that trains advocates to attend meetings with families is the Volunteer Advocacy Project (VAP). There are no criteria to getting a VAP advocate to attend your meeting; although they do not generally handle IEP meetings where the issue is discipline or behavior. Remember, it takes time for a link to be made with an advocate, and VAP advocates are not available in all areas of the state. STEP does not have any oversight or management responsibilities of the VAP advocates. If you have questions about the VAP project, or to request a VAP advocate, please contact Samantha Goldman Samantha.Goldman@Vanderbilt.edu (615) 953-9623 or Maria Mello Maria.P.Mello@Vanderbilt.edu

Are we advocates for children's and families' rights? YES!

Will we support you in your advocacy efforts? YES!

Our commitment is to provide training, information and support to families. If you have any questions regarding STEP services, please feel free to contact the Coordinator in your area. <http://www.tnstep.org/contact.aspx>