

**** Section I. Get Your Bearings ****

Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION

(Note →: Underlined words are defined in Appendix 2, Lookup+.)

A bigger boat – Do you need one?

It's possible to just sit back and let things take their course – let life happen, let our child drift through school, let the school create an Individualized Education Program for our child, let come what may. But I'm betting that you're reading this workbook because you aren't willing to risk your child's future to whatever may come. Read on for one families' story of why they needed a bigger boat.

Meet Donald

Donald

In preschool, his teacher stated that other children made many snowflakes, but he would quit after one. He needed glasses in kindergarten – his prescription changed at least twice a year. He had many ear infections that only cleared up when he was older. In first grade, he had trouble reading, so his parents hired a private tutor. At that time the public school teacher said they could not teach phonics based reading. The tutor did, and Donald learned to read.

In second grade, weekly timed math facts tests became a form of torture. Donald had stomachaches on Sunday night. If Donald did not score 100, the test had to be repeated weekly. Every child knew who was repeating a test. Eventually Donald gave up and did the same test for 20 weeks, completing about ½ of the test each time.

His frustrated parents attended a parent- teacher meeting. The teacher blamed Donald's problems on drug usage by the birth mother, since Donald was adopted. After fleeing the school, they tried changing to a private school that moved at each child's pace. Donald made no progress. Finally, they arranged to have Donald tested by an educational specialist. He said Donald had problems "processing auditory data, poor sequence memory," and needed some teaching techniques that would make up for these tendencies. Donald's parents needed a dictionary to read the report.

After 6 months of no progress, Donald was switched to a special education school. It had small classes. They emphasized Slingerland teaching techniques.

Donald had his first IEP in the middle of 6th grade before switching to public school. The IEP said that Donald had a specific learning

disability in “auditory processing.” The school used the results of the testing done by the educational consultant the parents hired and some testing the school did on its own.

The family moved and Donald entered a public school 8th grade. He struggled in math and science, and did OK in history and language arts. Each year he had an annual IEP meeting.

High School

The next year Donald started high school. In October, his parents received a call asking if they knew that Donald was failing most of his subjects. His triennial (every three years) IEP meeting was due in December but by that time, the semester was a disaster and his GPA (grade point average) was 0.68. Some changes were made and his next semester GPA was 1.72. He attended summer school for math, his weakest subject, and passed one semester of two.

In sophomore year, he took resource math and “fundamental” history and language arts. These courses had lower reading levels and expectations, even though Donald seemed to be able to read just fine. They were considered non-college courses. During that year, his GPA hovered around 3.0. Accommodations consisted of use of calculator, preferential seating, option to take tests in resource room, and more time on certain tests.

In junior year, he was placed in a college level history course. The teacher demanded exact requirements on note taking, notebook contents, format of homework, spacing on cover sheets, type of paper and ink used, etc. Donald crashed and burned and dragged down his other class grades with the energy taken up by this course and again ended up in summer school.

At the end of the year, seven years after he was originally tested, Donald was diagnosed with ADD, impulse control variety. Donald’s parents had been told by experts years before that Donald did not have ADD because his behavior was not like those of someone with ADD.

His parents were well educated and by now in touch with the IEP process.

Donald’s future

But here Donald was, nearing the end of high school. He was not sure he could pass the high stakes High School Exit Exam. He was pretty down on himself, not interested in studying or applying himself, and poorly prepared for the years ahead.

What went wrong?

Early in the process, Donald's parents needed information. They needed to be able to understand the private assessment test results better (See **Acronyms, Lookup+** and **Chapter 8**). They needed to understand their options (See **Chapter 13**). They needed not to waste their money or time reading books, websites, newsletters that did not really help them with Donald's problems (see **Chapter 7 Targeted Information Searches**). They should have reviewed all possible causes of learning problems and then had a full private educational AND medical assessment that gave results of all tests and explained the meaning of each (see **Chapters 4, 5 and 8**).

They should have started the public school IEP process immediately even though they had switched to private school. They may have been eligible for certain services (see **Chapter 3 IDEA**). They should have had the educational specialist attend Donald's IEP. They should have considered working with an advocate who understood the process better. They should have organized all of their paperwork so it could be quickly located when necessary (See **Chapter 6**).

You know your child best

They should have listed Donald's strengths before looking at his weaknesses. A child's strengths are what lead to success. Then they should have listed all his weaknesses. Then they might have seen that more was going on than just auditory processing problems (see **Chapters 4, 9, 10, Strengths / Challenges Worksheet**).

They should have studied "auditory processing" in books or the Internet. They might have found help available for elementary grade students with that problem (see **Chapter 7 Targeted Information Searches**). Then they should have coordinated with his ear doctor and an auditory specialist.

They should have had a "second opinion" to many of the *opinions* they received. Some of the information they received was incorrect or questionable. "Donald has no need for auditory services." "Donald does not have ADD because he is not like kids with ADHD." "Donald has no need for any assistive technology."

You must prepare

They should have prepared for IEPs before the first meeting. They should have attended each IEP with their own agenda (see **Chapter 12, Parent Attachment, Parent Agenda**). They should have insisted that the IEP goals be meaningful and contribute to Donald's real progress (see **Chapter 11**). Donald needed to move early towards

passing the High School Exit Exam. (see **Chapter 11, 14, Strengths / Challenges Worksheet and Transition Plan Worksheet**). They could have used a visual graphic at each IEP (see **Chapter 12 Parent Attachment, Monitor Goals Tracking Sheet**). They should have tracked his progress or lack of progress in grades, achievement tests, and goals (see **Chapter 12**). They should have created a list of accommodations, remediations, strategies, and techniques that work (see **Chapter 9**). The list would be matched to Donald's strengths and challenges. They could have requested those services and goals at the IEP meeting (see **Chapter 9, 10, 11, 12**).

Transitions are critical

They should have done a detailed transition plan when Donald moved to public school (see **Chapter 14, Transition Plan**). They also needed a transition plan before he started high school. They should have tracked his progress at the start of high school on a weekly basis.

They should have called an IEP meeting to insist that he switch classes when the teacher refused to honor accommodations, the spirit of the IEP or the child. They should have made sure that each teacher at the start of each semester had a summary of Donald and his needs and that they read the summary (see **Appendix 10B Teacher Information Sheet**). They should have been aware of their legal options before they were needed (see **Chapter 3**).

They were educated, available, and eager but they still did many things wrong. How much more difficult is the IEP process with one parent, two working parents, family stress due to the disability, school changes, multiple children with learning disabilities, parent with learning disabilities, an uncooperative school district, and on and on.

The IEP Process

Where did this process come from?

Just like you and I, many members of Congress had children, or grandchildren, or nieces and nephews with learning difficulties. They could see that the public schools were not teaching these children; sometimes they were not even allowed to go to school.

Congress, in its wisdom, wrote:

1. Every learning disabled child's education plan should be different. It would be individualized and special just for that child.
2. The parents or guardians should be the main advocates or speakers for their children. Parents should be the driving force in the process for young children.

Who better knows the child's struggles, who better knows the strengths and weaknesses? Who better knows what makes a good day and what leads to a bad one? Who better to care about the child's future? Absolutely, the parents are an important part of the educational process.

From a rational point of view, *what were they thinking?* How do working parents with other children get the time to go to many meetings, put together important documents, or become experts at psycho-educational evaluations? How does the parent of a dyslexic child, who is himself or herself dyslexic, understand a legal paper? How does a parent who is emotionally invested in a child monitor the child's progress without hurting their relationship with the child? How is a parent without a degree in education ;+n, or a degree at all, supposed to know what education plan is best for a child? If the plan is individualized and unique for that child, you can't just copy someone else's. Everyone has to start from scratch.

Here's what happened

Congress drafted good laws with good intentions. Lawyers changed the wording so it would be clear, in a "legalese" kind of way. States and schools interpreted the laws in an "educationese" kind of way.

In real life, the process became too difficult and time consuming for most parents to succeed.

So, parents put their trust and the burden on school employees or attorneys – that's not what Congress intended.

There were disastrous results in some cases, a feeling of complete or partial failure in others, and too few successes.

Even with all these laws, The National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 found that over 62% of students with a learning disability had reading and math scores 3 or more grades below actual grade level.

Where can I find answers to my questions?

I searched an Internet book site for books on "learning disabilities," etc. and here is what I found.

BOOKS ABOUT

Special Education	7,143
Learning Disabilities	2,717
Dyslexia	644
IEP	170

I searched the Internet for articles on learning disability topics and here is what I found:

ARTICLES ABOUT

"special education"	4,700,000
"autism"	2,660,000
"learning disabilities"	1,790,000
"IEP"	1,290,000
"dyslexia"	1,020,000
"dyscalculia"	137,000
"nonverbal learning disability"	5,150

The good news is that it looks like there's plenty of information. But which of the 2,717 books should I read? And which of the 1,790,000 articles is the best? How did it get to be so complicated?

Everyone wants to help

Professional teachers, lawyers, psychologists, parents, etc. saw the problems and stepped in and created websites, wrote books, and created organizations and newsletters to help parents with the process. The information age hit and there is now so much information that parents are:

- a. Wildly guessing at what to read
- b. Wasting valuable time looking in wrong places or too many places
- c. Wasting valuable time (and money) trying things that may not work for their child
- d. Trying to understand material that is written in '*educationese*' or '*legalese*' or '*medicalese*'

So what should happen?

Congress was correct. You are your child's best advocate, or helper, in the educational system. You need to be able to be an advocate.

No matter what education you have had, there are some things you must learn and understand about the law and the process.

You need to find relevant information to fill in the things you do not know. But you don't want to overdo it. You want to *target* the right information.

You need to find relevant, readable material that is clear and simple to understand.

You need to know what steps to follow to know that you are doing the right thing and going in the right direction.

You need to know every year that your child is making acceptable progress,

You need to understand your options.

You need to know when and where to find help.

You need to immediately drop services, remediations, methods, teachers, etc. that are not helping your child make progress.

And you need to feel confident so you can instill confidence in your child as they mature and hopefully take over your job as advocate.

What's in this workbook?

In this workbook, there is information on organizing your data, targeting your information searches, understanding the law and tests, and selecting “ramps” that will help your child rise.

Included in other chapters are forms to help you focus in on your child, track events, track your child's progress, build an educational plan, prepare for meetings, and gather more information effectively. This workbook is a tool. It will send you off to do specific tasks and research. The plan needs to be *specific* to your child; you need *specific* research.

Next, there is an important chapter on transitions so you can plan for any major change points in your child's life.

And for those who procrastinate, see Chapter 15, IEP 911.

In the back of the workbook is an Appendix. Appendix 10A is called “**Our Book.**” It is designed to help you organize the various forms and information into *your own reference book for your own family*. The rest of the Appendix contains a list of **acronyms**, Lookup+ that is a dictionary plus a little more, IEP steps, lists of major cross-references by topic, organizations, websites, books, resources, and blank worksheets for you to copy and use.

How do I use this workbook?

Should you read every page, fill out every worksheet, and follow every recommendation in this or any workbook? That's a challenging job for most of us. I've seen my children in enough unsuccessful classes where a teacher tried to teach them the end all perfect method to solve their poor performance. We all have our own best way of learning - use yours.

Reading some of these chapters might be enough for you. Or for someone else, filling out every form helps them get a handle on things.

For a lot of us that's way too overwhelming! Some of us will go right to the chapter we need at that moment. Some will go to create "Our Book." Some of us will skip to the IEP 911 chapter. Workbooks are toolboxes – pick your tool but remember there's a whole box full; if one doesn't help, go back, and get more. But always target your child's situation. Copy the worksheets in the appendix and use the ones you need.

But: at the very least, go to Appendix 10 and fill out the sheets in Appendix 10A, "Our Book," using the workbook as a reference.

We are all walking many miles in these shoes. I hope this information will help you find a flatter path, avoid potholes, and make this journey with your child more enjoyable for you both.