Dr. Phil on Prioritizing IEP Goals

Okay… I admit it. I’m a Dr. Phil junky. He seems to have a no-nonsense way of telling folks how to cut to the chase and just do something. People flock around him to hear, what I consider to be, common sense with pizzazz.

Recently, Ol’ Doc Phil has agreed to take on the national problem of obesity. I haven’t read his book, but I bet he will help the masses cut through the enormous amount of magazine articles, medical journals, and specialized diets to tell us the key points we all should be working on to acquire that perfect figure.

It’s almost as if Dr. Phil is on a mission to develop a grown-up version of an IEP, tailored to move each of us toward the healthy weight and lifestyle we should all be experiencing. I wonder… if Dr. Phil were counseling early childhood teachers and support staff, could he as easily help us identify and prioritize IEP goals for young children with special needs? Could he “cut to the chase” and identify those “big dang deal” goals worth writing on the IEP? What words of wisdom would Dr. Phil have for teachers and support staff trying to identify and prioritize IEP goals?

Here is how I imagine a Dr. Phil show might go if he were talking with an early childhood disabilities teacher on the topic of prioritizing IEP goals.

How’s That Working for You? *

Miss Nelly, an early childhood disabilities teacher from Somewhere, Kansas, is sitting in the hot seat next to Dr. Phil. Dr. Phil leans a little closer to Miss Nelly and speaks in that pleasant Texan drawl.

Dr. Phil: “I hear you are having a little trouble identifying IEP goals for a preschool student in your class. I also hear that this is a common problem. Your colleagues tell me that you have a tendency to write a whole lot of goals on every IEP that passes your way. Let me ask you Miss Nelly, how do you go about selecting IEP goals for a given student?”

Miss Nelly: “Well Dr. Phil, I look at the evaluation information and then I write down every possible need I can think of given that information. In Johnny’s case, there are a lot of needs, so of course I have a lot of goals.”

Dr. Phil: “And how’s that working for you?”*

Miss Nelly: “Actually, it’s pretty hard to keep track of everything I am supposed to be working on. It is very difficult to monitor progress as often as I would like, so I don’t do much of that. Truth is, I don’t pay much attention to what’s on
the IEP except when I send out progress reports, and of course when it is
time to write a new IEP at the annual review. You must remember, Johnny’s
IEP isn’t the only plan I am working on. It’s just so much to remember!”

Dr. Phil: “So what you are saying is that you write a whole lot of goals, but
it’s hard to keep track of them? So I ask you again, Miss Nelly, is what
you are doing now working for you? Is it working for Johnny? If the
cat’s in the kitchen, then you had better give him some yarn.”

I’m not sure what point Dr. Phil was attempting to make with the cat metaphor. The
reality is Dr. Phil loses me sometimes. However, I believe he did make a strong case for
Miss Nelly to rethink how she identifies goals on the IEP. Obviously, identifying everything
that was noted in the evaluation as a goal wasn’t working for Miss Nelly or Johnny. This
strategy made the IEP unmanageable and, therefore, ineffective.

You Have to Name it Before You Can Claim It *

Miss Nelly is becoming a little nervous. She has no clue what Dr. Phil might be asking
her to do, and is still wondering what the cat has to do with IEP writing. She gathers up the
courage to speak to this Cowboy of Conundrums.

Miss Nelly: “Dr. Phil, you must understand that the Kansas State Department of
Education (KSDE) has made it very clear that any need identified in the
Present Levels of Educational Performance (PLAAFP) must be addressed
somewhere on the IEP. Like I said, in Johnny’s case there is a long list of
needs, so it seems necessary to make a goal to address each of them. Isn’t
that what I am supposed to do?”

Dr. Phil: “The problem is that you think every need is a high priority, and I’m here to
tell you that just ain’t true, Miss Nelly. The fact of the matter is if an alligator
steals your earring, you had better let him have it. “

Miss Nelly: “If an alligator…wait, I’m not sure…”

Dr. Phil: “Don’t interrupt me here, darlin, I’m trying to make a point. It seems to me
that there is a little confusion on the topic of prioritizing goals. It just so
happens that I have asked my top notch staff to do some research about the
rules and regulations regarding IEP writing in Kansas and I have found some
interesting points that just might help you out.

You are right in stating that needs identified in the PLAAFP must be
addressed somewhere on the IEP; and you are also right that, in most cases,
those needs will be written on the IEP as goals. Here is where the rubber hits
the road, Miss Nelly. It isn’t necessary to write down every need identified in
the evaluation on the PLAAFP, but only those needs that will require specially
designed instruction AND will help the preschool child participate and progress
in appropriate activities. Needs that were identified in the evaluation that will be
addressed just through the experience of participating in a preschool classroom
(without specially designed instruction) need not be listed on the PLAAFP, and,
therefore, will not need to be addressed as goals.

Sure, it’s a good idea to include other stuff, like the strengths of the child,
and an even better idea to include the concerns noted by the parents. Shucks,
that last one is a no-brainer. Can you think of a better way to help prioritize a
goal than to address the concerns of the parents?

The bottom line is, if you write an appropriate PLAAFP, you will have a
much easier time of identifying and prioritizing high priority goals. Write down
those needs you think will have the biggest impact on the life of this child and
his family. From that information you will be able to write high priority goals.
They will both be better in content and less in number, therefore a win-win for
everyone. You have to name it (high priority goals) before you can claim it
(effective IEP).”

Once again, Dr. Phil hit the nail right on the head. There is a direct relationship between
the needs identified on the PLAAFP and the measurable annual goals. In order to identify
really meaningful goals, the PLAAFP should first identify those needs, which if addressed,
will make the most positive difference for the child and his/her family.

Pretti-Frontczak and her colleagues also recommend choosing skills that are:

- Functional, usable, observable and measurable
- Not likely to develop without intervention
- Developmentally appropriate/match child’s developmental level
- Address multiple areas and are generalizable
- A priority to all team members, including parents
- Enhance participation in appropriate activities
- Realistic and achievable as a means to prioritizing meaningful and measurable
  IEP goals.

Would You Rather Be Right or Happy? *

As the show comes to an end, Miss Nelly shares her final thoughts with Dr. Phil.

Miss Nelly: “So you are saying that it is okay to write only those goals that the team,
including the parents, believes will make the biggest impact on the life of the child and
that I don’t need to worry about writing a whole bunch of goals? Does that mean I will
only be teaching Johnny a few things since I have only a few goals?”
Dr. Phil: “Dagnabbit, Woman! If a kangaroo hops on your radiator, don’t you think it would be a good idea to turn off the car?”

Miss Nelly: “Huh?”

Dr. Phil: “Of course you will be teaching Johnny many things that are not specifically written out as goals. Through the course of the preschool day, he’ll be engaging in planned activities built from your classroom curriculum. Many of the skills that were identified in the evaluation, but not identified as needing specialized instruction, will be addressed through the course of the preschool program. Johnny will participate and be supported in those activities just like all the other children. Since you are not doing anything different for Johnny in this part of the program, there is no need for the intensive level of monitoring that is required for an IEP goal.

So, Miss Nelly, given all that I have taught you, tell me now, would you rather be right or happy?”

Miss Nelly: “Well, in this case, Dr. Phil, if I follow your advice, I believe I will be right and happy at the same time. I will be focusing on high priority goals for Johnny – goals that really will make a difference. By writing only the highest priority goals, Johnny’s IEP will be more meaningful and more manageable.”

Dr. Phil: “Gosh I’m good! That’s all for today, folks. And remember: you either get it or you don’t.”*

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This satirical account of the Dr. Phil Show is purely fictitious and should not be interpreted as a factual account of a previously aired episode. Quotes followed by an * were taken from excerpts of the Dr. Phil Show; however, the ideas and opinions expressed in this article are entirely that of the author, Misty Goosen.

Reference

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