

IEP Components Series

A Proposed S.M.A.R.T. Framework for Designing Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) for Young Children with Disabilities

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This issue of **NASET's IEP Component series** was written by Arnold Chee Keong, CHUA, MEd/BCSE. Young children with developmental disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder, global developmental delay, cerebral palsy, and Down syndrome is on the rise in Singapore. Children diagnosed with such disabilities at the age of three years or below will undergo an early intervention program to prevent or minimize developmental delays. Teachers in the early intervention sector require to develop an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), a written statement of the educational program designed to meet a child's individual needs. Every child who receives special education services must have an IEP. Educators working with children of various disabilities need to consider several factors in the formulation of an appropriate IEP. Using the proposed S.M.A.R.T. framework, this paper discusses five key elements of designing an IEP (S: Specificity, M: Meaningful, A: Appropriateness, R: Routine-based, and T: Transferability) which educators can adopt so as to improve the quality of written IEP goals and objectives. It is hope with this framework, the child's learning can promote engagement, social interaction, and finally independence.

Abstract

Young children with developmental disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder, global developmental delay, cerebral palsy, and Down syndrome is on the rise in Singapore. Children diagnosed with such disabilities at the age of three years or below will undergo an early intervention program to prevent or minimize developmental delays. Teachers in the early intervention sector require to develop an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), a written statement of the educational program designed to meet a child's individual needs. Every child who receives special education services must have an IEP. Educators working with children of various disabilities need to consider several factors in the formulation of an appropriate IEP. Using the proposed S.M.A.R.T. framework, this paper discusses five key elements of designing an IEP (S: Specificity, M: Meaningful, A: Appropriateness, R: Routine-based, and T: Transferability) which educators can adopt so as to improve the quality of written IEP goals and objectives. It is hope with this framework, the child's learning can promote engagement, social interaction, and finally independence.

Key words: early intervention, young children, disabilities, Individualized Educational Plan

Introduction

One of the most worrying problems among educators and parents in Singapore is the rising number of children diagnosed with developmental disorders such as autism spectrum disorder, language disorder, global developmental delay, and Down syndrome. Such developmental disorders affect their development in cognition, communication, motor skills (gross or fine motor), adaptive skills, and social interaction. After a formal diagnosis from child psychologists in local hospitals, parents are recommended to enrol their children in early intervention centres where their educational needs can be addressed from the relevant therapies received. Children below the age of seven can receive educational services and therapies from any 17 early intervention program for infants and children (EIPIC) centers in Singapore, currently run by 10 Voluntary Welfare Organizations (for more information, refer <https://www.sgenable.sg/uploads/EIPIC%20Service%20Matrix.pdf>).

Teachers working in EIPIC need to develop an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) for every young children with disabilities. An IEP is a written document of the educational program designed to meet a child's individual needs with specific learning goals and short-term objectives. The IEP will be signed by the child's parents and the team members in the early intervention who are working directly with the child. The IEP goals of every children is different as each child has their specific learning needs. For example, a child with global developmental delay might need to strengthen fine motors skills needed for handwriting while a child with language delay might need to stimulate his/her receptive and/or expressive language. Hence, it is important to consider the needs of the child with parental input as it will guide educators to consider the family priorities when writing functional and meaningful IEP.

Proposed S.M.A.R.T. Framework for Designing IEP

Most educators are aware of using the acronym of S.M.A.R.T. (S: Specific, M: Measureable, A: Use action words, R: Realistic and relevant, and T: Time-limited) when writing IEPs. However, goals that are meaningful and functional are not easy to develop as it takes time and practice. Hence, the author of this paper proposes using the same acronym with different denotation (S: Specificity, M: Meaningful, A: Appropriateness, R: Routine-based, and T: Transferability) as a framework for educators in the early intervention programme when designing IEPs. It is hoped that the use of this proposed framework can also improve the quality of written IEP goals of young children with disabilities. Figure 1 below shows the proposed framework using the acronym S.M.A.R.T. for educators when developing IEP for young children with disabilities in early intervention.

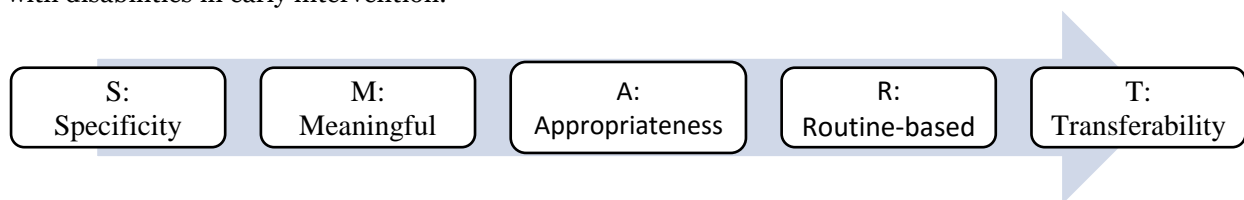


Figure 1. Proposed S.M.A.R.T. Framework for Designing IEP

S: Specificity

Educators should be aware that all IEPs are meant for parents to read. Hence, goals written should be clear, understandable, and well-defined. It is also important to avoid using jargons when developing goals as parents may not understand the terminologies used by the professionals. For example, when a speech therapist used AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication) to teach a child with autism to communicate or an occupational therapist used TD (Tactile Defensiveness) in the IEP, parents may not understand such terms during the case conference. Parents must understand clearly the specific purpose of the goals and it should define what the child will be able to do and the type of strategies educators (teachers and therapists) will use in order for the child to gain mastery of the skills or behaviors.

M: Meaningful

For any child's intervention plan in the IEP, it has to be useful and meaningful so that parents or caregivers can execute at home. In order to achieve this, parents' priorities of the child are important before the formulation of the IEP. In other words, educators need to ensure that the IEP goals reflect clearly the priorities of the parents. In addition, it should be noted that the goals written for the child should be functional. The focus on the learning goals should be targeted on functional skills of the child. For example, skills such as dressing and undressing, teeth brushing, showering, feeding, and toileting are functional in a child's daily living (Herr & Bateman, 2012). Hence, functional goals can be easily implemented as they occur within the child's daily routines.

A: Appropriateness

Goals developed must be appropriate, or suitable, for the child. Many EIPIC centers in Singapore will conduct an initial screening of the child before enrolment to the program. During the screening session, a team usually comprises of occupational therapist, speech and language therapist, and teacher will observe and interact with the child based on his/her current level of skills. In addition, one member will have an informal interview with the child's parents to obtain pertinent information of the child such as parents' priorities of the child (main learning goals), specific behavioral problems, medical conditions, types of medication, and preferred timing of enrolment.

R: Routine-based

Developing meaningful and functional IEP goals is often overlooked amongst educators in the field of early intervention. Providing intervention with functional goals should occur in the context of a child's daily routines (e.g., home, school, community) and such routine activities should be identified by the parents and teachers of the child (Rantala, Uotinen, & McWilliam, 2009). Research has shown that the provision of learning in natural environments effectively promote children's development as compared to traditional intervention models provided in specialized programs (Jung, 2007; Raab & Dunst, 2004). Others showed that routines that occur within natural settings for children provides effective framework to support and sustain early intervention activities (Jennings, Hanline, & Woods, 2012). When classroom activities are embedded into children's daily routines and activities, both children and their caregivers will learn skills that are both meaningful and functional (Kashinath, Woods, & Goldstein, 2006).

T: Transferability

As mentioned in the previous acronym of M (Meaningful), all IEP goals have to be useful and functional for young children in their daily activities. In other words, what the child learns in the school can also be transferred to home, childcare center, and the community. For example, when an IEP goal of teaching a child to scoop and transfer beans/rice from one container to another using a spoon with minimal spillage, this skill can be transferred to feeding, an essential and functional skills as this daily living skill is use in various settings (home, school, and community).

Conclusion

It is hoped that this proposed framework using the acronym S.M.A.R.T. can be useful when developing IEPs for children with special needs. Together with parents' priorities of their child, team members (teachers and allied health professionals) can then develop meaningful and functional learning goals based on the needs of the children in their daily routines. Goals developed have to be Specific (S), Meaningful (M), Appropriate (A), Routine-based (R), and Transferable (T) so that children's learning skills can be generalized across various settings (i.e., people, places, situations). Educators using this proposed framework will help to improve the quality of written IEP goals, and, finally to promote the child's engagement, social interaction, and finally independence.

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About the Author

Arnold Chua graduated with a Master in Special Education from National Institute of Education (NIE), Nanyang Technological University. During the course of study, he was awarded a Dean Award for Research from NIE for publishing a journal paper on “Establishing a psycho-educational profile of a boy with developmental dyslexia: a single-subject case study”. He also obtained a Bachelor of Science in Psychology from Central Queensland University, Australia. In addition, Arnold is a Board Certified Special Education professional registered with the American Academy of Special Education Professionals. He holds a membership in the Fellowship of College of Teachers (FCollT) in London. Arnold has published several papers on learning disabilities in peer-reviewed journals as well as contributing his opinions to the social media to advocate for inclusion for people with learning disabilities. In addition, he has also conducted workshops in preschool centers, Pathlight School, and mainstream Primary schools in Singapore to both parents and teachers. Working in the early intervention sector for several years in both Voluntary Welfare Organization and private setting, Arnold brings him a vast experience in teaching children with learning challenges such as autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, and global developmental delay. He is currently working in SPD as a Senior EIPIC Teacher where he is involved in EIPIC Consultancy Project working in collaboration with KKH in Singapore.