

“How to Avoid IEP Traps”

An Informative and Interactive Skit

Written By: Timothy A. Adams and Lynne Arnold

Narrated By: Timothy A. Adams

Starring

Lisa Ackerman

Lynne Arnold

Becky Estepp

Diane Gallant

Mike Giammetto

Moira Giammetteo

Carl Renold

Melanie Vanciel

Preceded by a Presentation and Brief Overview of the IEP Process

Followed by a Question/Answer and Discussion Session

CHARACTERS:

Diane Conner (mother): LYNNE ARNOLD

Linda Steiner (School Psychologist): LISA ACKERMAN

Carol Williams (Speech Therapist): DIANE GALLANT

Bobbie Wondries (Occupational Therapist): MOIRA GIAMMATTEO

Mike Winsor (School Principal): CARL RENOLD

Loretta Jackson (Special Day Class Teacher): BECKY ESTEPP

Steve Mason (School District "Autism Specialist"): MIKE GIAMMETTO

Alena Hernandez (Early Start Service Coordinator): MELANIE VANCIEL

Narrator/Commentator: TIMOTHY A. ADAMS

SCENE: Great Oaks Elementary School, Grapevine Unified School District

TIME: Present

SETTING: A Pre-School Classroom; two small tables pushed together in the center of the classroom. The IEP Team members are gathered around the makeshift conference table to discuss Tyler Conner—2 years 9 months old. The school principal begins by passing out an IEP Meeting agenda.

CHARACTER DESCRIPTION:

DAD: Rus Conner, a master's degree in electrical engineering, currently employed by an aerospace company based out of Pasadena, California. Is on a prescheduled business trip in Atlanta and is unable to attend the IEP.

MOM: Diane Conner, a BA in History. She worked for a consulting firm until she was 35 years old when she learned she was pregnant with their son Tyler now 2 years, 9 months old. Diane runs a small business selling herbal remedies and vitamins on the Internet.

Rus and Diane Conner have been married for 10 years. Tyler is their only child, diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder at 2 years old.

SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST: Linda Steiner; has worked for the school district for 2 years as a school psychologist. She has assessed approximately 50 children ranging in age from 2.5 to 15 during her

career. She is not married and has no children. She aspires to work as director of the school district's special education department.

SPEECH THERAPIST: Carol Williams; friendly but somewhat reserved. Ms. Williams genuinely cares for all her students. She is one of four very overworked speech therapists in this school district.

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST: Bobbie Wondries; has worked for the Grapevine School District for 10 years. She considers herself a more "traditional" occupational therapist and does not buy into what she calls "all this sensory integration mumbo jumbo" that many of the new Occupational Therapists are touting.

GREAT OAKS PRINCIPAL: Mike Winsor; was recently promoted from Vice Principal. He dreams of attaining that Grapevine Unified School District superintendent job some day. He is very concerned about the recent state budget cuts and how special education costs will effect his general education student population.

SPECIAL DAY CLASS TEACHER: Loretta Jackson; has been teaching children with special needs for 8 years. She has a good heart and cares about kids, but doesn't have very much autism-specific training or experience. Because she and her husband have two children who are district students, she is involved in the PTO.

SCHOOL DISTRICT "AUTISM SPECIALIST": Steve Mason; newly hired by the Grapevine School District to set up an autism program. Has previously served as a school psychologist for another local district and spent the past year attending seminars on Discrete Trial Training (DTT).

EARLY START COORDINATOR: Alena Hernandez; has taken some community college courses in counseling. Alena is fairly new to the IEP process and relies on her supervisor's instructions that state agency services will not continue for children beyond 3 years old. She is unmarried with no children.

ACT I

Mike Winsor: Okay, does everyone have a copy of today's IEP meeting agenda?

IEP Team: [Team mumbles] Yes

[EACH MEMBER OF THE IEP TEAM INTRODUCES THEMSELVES, THEN THE MEETING CONTINUES]

Mike Winsor: We're here today to discuss [fumbles through his papers looking for the child's name] Taylor, oops, sorry I mean Tyler Conner. You know we do so many of these IEPs that sometimes I get these kids' names mixed up.

Diane Conner: [looking somewhat annoyed]:

Mike Winsor: [Turns and looks at Mrs. Conner]: As you know, the Grapevine Unified School District has conducted a full battery of assessments on Tyler and we're prepared to discuss those assessments today. GUSD has done assessments in Speech and Language, Occupational Therapy, Psycho-Education. We're also happy to have Steve Mason our "Autism Specialist" here. [Again, turns to Mrs. Conner] Do you have any questions so far?

Diane Conner: Yes, actually...when the school psychologist, Ms. Steiner, came to our home she said the district assessment team would be writing reports...you know I didn't ever see any reports?

Mike Winsor: Oh, yes, well it's GUSD policy that we go over those reports at the IEP meeting. We really don't give them to parents in advance of the meeting because the IEP meeting is really the time that everyone should be discussing those reports anyway.

Diane Conner: [Responds with some uncertainty] Oh, okay, well I just wanted to take a look and, perhaps be a little more prepared for this meeting. But I guess it's okay if it's school district policy not to give those reports in advance of the IEP.



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Mike Winsor: We have some housekeeping issues to go over first, Mrs. Conner, the law requires us to offer you a copy of your "Parent's Rights" [hands the copy to her and checks off a box on the IEP form], okay, that's done, let's move on. We have some time constraints for today's meeting. I have another meeting in about an hour-and-a-half, so let's try to get this IEP wrapped up for Taylor, [looks to his watch] oh, I'm sorry I meant Tyler. Let's try to get this meeting done as quick as we can—everybody agree? [everyone nods yes, except for Mrs. Conner who looks concerned]. I'm going to turn this meeting over to our school psychologist, Ms. Linda Steiner, okay, Linda go ahead.

Linda Steiner: [Gets out a copy of her report and starts to go over it]. I just want to let the team know that my report consisted mostly of observations of Tyler, I really didn't have time to do any formal testing of him. I did discuss this with Mrs. Conner and she said it was okay that I not do any formal testing. [Mrs. Conner politely interrupts]



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Mrs. Conner: Oh, I'm sorry Mrs. Steiner, but do you have an extra copy of your report?

Linda Steiner: Well, I only have 2 copies, here you go [hands Mrs. Conner the second copy and then starts to review her report]. Okay, now, I saw Tyler on two occasions in two different settings, once in his home for approximately 30 minutes and another time at his private Montessori school. When I observed him in the home, he was playing by himself with several large blocks, he appeared to be lining the blocks up in a straight line. When I approached him and said, "Hello Tyler", although he didn't look at me and kept lining his blocks, he did respond by *playfully* saying "Hello Tyler". I

laughed, of course. I arrived right before Tyler's snack time and Mrs. Conner was pouring cheerios in a bowl to give to Tyler. She walked over to Tyler and gave him a bowl full of cheerios and he looked up and began to cry. I was somewhat puzzled as to why he suddenly started to cry when his mother provided him with the cheerios. Shortly after Tyler began crying, Mrs. Conner attempted to console him and stated, "it's okay Tyler, I'm sorry but mommy doesn't have any baggies to put the cheerios in, all I have is bowls right now, we're out of baggies." I then turned to Mrs. Conner and asked why she had made that statement to Tyler and she said that "ever since Tyler was 18 months old, we've given him his cheerios in a small baggie and for whatever reason, he prefers a baggie over a bowl." She went onto explain that Tyler is very rigid, he doesn't really like change, even for seemingly insignificant things. Shortly after Tyler finished his snack, the doorbell rang and another boy about Tyler's age came into the house. His name was David and was a neighbor boy who lived across the street. David walked over to Tyler, who had finished his snack and gone back to lining up his blocks on the floor. David said hello. Tyler did not respond to the other boy's greeting. David then went over to a toy box that was sitting in the corner of the room and picked out two large toy cars and brought them over to Tyler. David pushed one of the cars over to Tyler and attempted to initiate play with Tyler. Tyler continued to ignore the other boy. I asked Mrs. Conner whether Tyler usually acted this way when another child was present, and Mrs. Conner responded, yes, Tyler likes to keep to himself. He will continue to play with his blocks or sometimes another toy. His play is always independent of the other kids.

I then saw Tyler on a different day at his Montessori school. When I entered the classroom he was sitting at a small table with another child, he appeared to be drawing or coloring something. He was making a low humming sound while he was coloring. He was also rocking back and forth. I inquired of the teacher, Mrs. Andrews whether this was a typical day for Tyler and she responded, "yes". I also asked whether Tyler's hummed a lot during his class time. She responded, "only when he is coloring or drawing". During both observations, I didn't really observe any behavior outburst, i.e. screaming, or hitting. He appeared to be fairly compliant. He was, however, somewhat distractible. He seemed to be preoccupied with a computer that was sitting in the corner of the classroom

[MS. STEINER CONTINUED GOING OVER HER REPORT AND DISCUSSING HER OBSERVATIONS, SHE DISCUSSED HER RECOMMENDATIONS].

Parents provided me with a neurologist report finding that Tyler did meet the criteria for Autism. So based upon my observations and review of Dr. Tan, the neurologist's report, I feel that Tyler does qualify for special education and I am recommending that the IEP Team consider this report in determining Tyler's eligibility for services.

[THE IEP TEAM GOES ON FOR ANOTHER 30 MINUTES DISCUSSING MS. STEINER'S REPORT]

Mike Winsor: Well, thank you Linda, okay, let's keep this IEP meeting moving, next report...speech therapy is it? Okay, Ms. Williams, go ahead with your report.

Carol Williams: Okay, I barely finished writing my report this morning and didn't really have the chance to make copies. So, let me begin. I did one standardized test, the Pre-School Language Scale 4 and I also took a language sample. On the PLS -4, receptively, Tyler scored in the 7th %ile . That

means he did better than 7% of his same age peers. Expressively, Tyler scored in the 3rd %ile. He did not appear to like the testing, he was very fidgety throughout the process and his attention span during the testing was less than 2 minutes on any given activity. Based on this information, I feel that Tyler would qualify for speech and language services in a frequency and amount to be determined by the IEP Team.

Mike Winsor: Do you have any questions Mrs. Conner?

Diane Conner: Well, I guess...um, Mrs. Williams, you said that Tyler qualifies for speech services, what does that mean?

Carol Williams: That means that Tyler qualifies to receive therapy from the Grapevine Unified School District's speech program. If a child qualifies for speech services, that student will be placed in our program which consists of 20 minutes a week of group speech services.

Diane Conner: [Looks concerned] What do you mean by group speech services?

Carol Williams: Well, Tyler would be in a group of about 5 other student receiving therapy from a speech specialist.

Diane Conner: So, you wouldn't be providing Tyler's therapy?

Carol Williams: Well, no, not at the moment, you see we're a little overwhelmed with the number of cases we have and so I'll be supervising Tyler's group.

Diane Conner: Who provides the speech service?

Carol Williams, As I mentioned before, we have a trained speech "specialist" that provides the service. She's not a licensed pathologist or a credentialed speech therapist, but she's very good. Don't worry Mrs. Conner, I keep close tabs on all my kids. Tyler's in good hands. But actually, Tyler will be immersed in a language-rich program. In a way, he'll be getting speech for three hours everyday.

Diane Conner: [with a look of reluctance] Oh...well, okay.



Mike Winsor: Okay, moving right along. You know, we're really making good time. Okay, next... occupational therapy, Ms. Bobbie Wondries.

Bobbie Wondries: Thank you. Okay, because of Tyler's limited attention span and his age, my report consists of observations. I tested Tyler's gross and fine motor skills.

[BOBBIE WONDRIES CONTINUED PRESENTING HER REPORT, THERE WAS SOME LIMITED DISCUSSION AND QUESTIONS BY THE SCHOOL DISTRICT THE IEP TEAM MEMBERS, THEN A QUESTION FROM DIANE CONNER]

Mike Winsor: Does anyone else have questions for Bobbie?

Diane Conner: Yes, I have a question. I've been reading a lot about something called sensory integration dysfunction. I wanted to know if you think that sensory dysfunction contributes in any way to Tyler's problems?

Bobbie Wondries: You know, I hear about sensory integration quite a bit from parents these days and frankly, I don't think there is enough research to support that vestibular or proprioceptive "input" for a child with autism makes any difference whatsoever in calming the child or helping him to focus. Here, I happen to have an article that I'd like you to read. I think it'll show that "sensory integration dysfunction" in children with autism is more fiction than fact. [Produces an article and hands it to Diane Conner]. Although the article was written in 1983, not much has changed in 20 plus years in the realm of occupational therapy.

Diane Conner: [Politely takes the article and begins to scan over it]. Thank you Ms. Wondries.

Bobbie Wondries: You know, if you have any other questions, feel free to give me a call. I wish I could just undo all these sensory integration myths that have overtaken the autism community. It's really unfortunate that a few of my colleagues have caused parents to buy into that voodoo.



Mike Winsor: Well, we only have a few minutes left on my clock, so let's see what was can accomplish in the way of goals and objectives, then we'll talk about services so we can get this program up and running for Tyler.

[BASED ON THE INFORMATION CONTAINED IN THE PSYCHOLOGIST, SPEECH THERAPIST AND OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST'S REPORTS, THE IEP TEAM AGREED ON ANNUAL GOALS AND SHORT TERM OBJECTIVES FOR TYLER. MIKE WINSOR THEN OUTLINES THE GRAPEVINE UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT'S OFFER OF PLACEMENT AND SERVICES FOR TYLER].

Mike Winsor: Based upon the information contained in our assessment reports and the discussion of the IEP Team, it appears that Tyler would be eligible for special education as a child with autism. The placement and services that the school district is willing to provide are as follows:

1. Placement in a special day class, 4 days per week;
2. Speech and Language Services 20 minutes per week in a small group;
3. Occupational Therapy consultation 1 time per month.

Mike Winsor: Well, we did invite Mrs. Loretta Jackson who will be Tyler's new special day class teacher. Mrs. Jackson, why don't you go ahead and tell Mrs. Conner a little bit about your class.

Loretta Jackson: Hi. Where should I start? Okay, my class consists of 3 to 5 year olds with a variety of disabling conditions, essentially a mixed disability class, although, right now, I really don't have any students with a label of autism. I have about 12 kids and one aide who assists me part-time. The class runs 4 days a week, Monday through Thursday from 8:30 AM to 11:30 AM. I am truly excited about having Tyler in my class and look forward to getting to know him.

Diane Conner: Can I ask a question?

Loretta Jackson: Sure.

Diane Conner: You know Tyler is at the local Montessori school and doing well. He has so many regular peer models and I was wondering if the Grapevine School District had any classes similar to where Tyler is attending? If not, couldn't I just keep Tyler at the Montessori to finish out the school year?

Loretta Jackson: Well...[Begins to speak but is interrupted by Mike Winsor].

Mike Winsor: Well, Mrs. Conner, the law requires the school district to make a Free Appropriate Public Education available to Tyler. A public education means that Tyler's classroom placement has to be in a public school environment. A Montessori school is a private school and we really aren't allowed, by law, to provide services or programs at private schools. Besides, as you are aware, there is tuition associated with most private schools and quite honestly, with the state budget crisis, this school district, like everyone else, is really watching how it spends it's money. We only receive limited funding for special education programs from the State and we really don't want to have to take money away from the regular education programs to pay for "extra services" for special education students.

Diane Conner: But what about my first question regarding regular classes in the Grapevine School District? Do they exist?

Mike Winsor: Well, yes, but they're not really set up for the special education population of students. In fact, we have what's called a "Headstart program". It's a federally funded program but there are minimum family income requirements for placement in that program. I suppose you could apply for Tyler, but let's get the IEP Team's opinion on that. Everyone, what do you think about Tyler's placement in the special day class? Should we give it a try?

IEP Team: [Various comments from all members] Yes...uh huh...sure...why not.

Diane Conner: Well, okay.

Mike Winsor: Last but not least, we did bring our autism expert, Mr. Steve Mason. We're truly excited to have him on board with GUSD this year. Mr. Mason, why don't you go ahead and explain your role in Tyler's program.

Steve Mason: Thanks. Well, I've been asked to join Tyler's team in a consultative capacity. In a sense, I am really here just to make sure that everything with Tyler's program is running smoothly. I will go into the class on a monthly basis and do observations and maybe gather some data on Tyler's performance. I will also occasionally do some very limited testing of Tyler. [He pauses and Diane Conner speaks up]

Diane Conner: So, um...do you provide any direct services to Tyler? I've been researching therapies for autistic children and I keep seeing things like Applied Behavioral Analysis, ABA—it's called.

Steve Mason: Actually, based on the information that we have from the assessments GUSD did, it doesn't seem that Tyler has any serious behavior problems warranting any direct behavior intervention like an ABA program. He's distractible, but over all, he's a pretty compliant kid. We really only provide behavior intervention to more severe students. Our district uses the Discrete Trial Training methodology for students. Really, it's good news that Tyler doesn't need this type of therapy. But if he did, that training would really occur in the classroom, by the special day class teacher, Mrs. Jackson.



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Diane Conner: In speaking with other parents and doing research on the internet, even kids like Tyler, who don't have serious behavior problems can really benefit from ABA. Is that correct? Doesn't the IDEA require that Tyler's school program be individualized to meet his needs?

Steve Mason: Well, again, it's GUSD policy to only provide behavior intervention to students with serious behavior problems like kicking, biting, screaming and severe tantruming, and we really don't see that in Tyler.

Mike Winsor: [Adding his comments] Well, not only is it GUSD policy, but the state education code outlines what school districts must provide for special education students. We follow the ed code's requirements and the ed code would supercede the IDEA.

Diane Conner: [Looking confused]. Well, I just thought that the school district would be able to provide some kind of intervention program for Tyler. I'm not just talking about compliance and addressing tantrums. What about actually teaching Tyler skills in a one-to-one type setting. The research seems to show that one-to-one programs have been extremely effective in helping kids like Tyler.

Mike Winsor: [Looks at his watch and with a tone of annoyance says] Mrs. Conner, really we don't have a lot more time to discuss. I'm truly sorry, but I have to run to another meeting. Perhaps the early start coordinator would be able to help us with this behavior program issue. I hear that Early Start provides those types of programs to kids. [Turns to Alena Hernandez] Is that true Ms. Hernandez?

Alena Hernandez: Um...well...Tyler was just referred to our agency by parents about three month ago and now that he's turning 3 years old, it's our job to transition his services to the school district. In other words, we really aren't allowed to provide any services to Tyler after his 3rd birthday.

Diane Conner: But I thought that if the school district didn't want to provide a service that Tyler needed, then Early Start would provide it.

Alena Hernandez: Actually, in speaking with my supervisor on that issue, it's my understanding that we don't provide any services after age 3.

Diane Conner: [Looking very disappointed]. Oh.

Mike Winsor: Okay, so, time's almost up on this meeting. Let me read over the notes that I've been taking during the meeting and if I can just get everyone's signatures on this IEP before you leave.

[MIKE WINSOR QUICKLY READS OVER THE IEP NOTES]

Mike Winsor: Okay Mrs. Conner, [showing Diane Conner the IEP document] I will just need you to sign right here where it says, "I consent" to the placement and services offer.

Diane Conner: Well, I have some concerns about the services and classroom you've offered to Tyler. Do I have to sign today?

Mike Winsor: If you don't sign today, we can't get Tyler's program up and running and it really delays the process. It's best if you sign right now, otherwise, Tyler won't get any special education services.

[DIANE CONNER THINKS TO HERSELF ABOUT THE PRINCIPAL'S STATEMENT. ALTHOUGH SHE IS CONCERNED ABOUT THE OFFER, SHE SIGNS THE IEP ANYWAY BECAUSE SHE DOES NOT WANT TYLER TO LOSE SERVICES FROM THE SCHOOL DISTRICT]

Mike Winsor: Great, well, we're all done. Thank you everyone for your participation. Looking at my watch, I've gotta run. If anyone wants a copy of the IEP, my secretary will be happy to make you run you a photocopy. This concludes our IEP meeting for Tyler Conner.

