

“How to Avoid IEP Traps”

An Informative and Interactive Skit

Written By: Timothy A. Adams and Lynne Arnold

Narrated By: Timothy A. Adams

Starring

Lynne Arnold

Laura Bono

Scott Bono

Michelle Cowgill

Pam Haselow

Lori McIlwain

Richard Peterson

Preceded by a Presentation and Brief Overview of the IEP Process

Followed by a Question/Answer and Discussion Session

CHARACTERS:

Rebecca Cortez (mother): Lynne Arnold

Ophelia Smith (School Psychologist): Lori McIlwain

Natalie Portsmouth (Speech Therapist): Laura Bono

Roberta Contreras (Occupational Therapist): Pam Haselow

Stephan O’Doul (Special Education Director): Richard Peterson

Melissa Robinson (Special Day Class Teacher): Michelle Cowgill

Phil Little (School District “Autism Specialist”): Scott Bono

Narrator/Commentator: Timothy A. Adams

SCENE: Canyon Elementary School, Woodgrove Joint Union School District

TIME: Present

SETTING: A school conference room; a large table in the center of the room; a whiteboard hangs on the wall to the back of the room. The IEP Team members are gathered around the oak veneer table to discuss Mark Cortez—7 years 4 months old. The special education director stands up and begins writing a meeting agenda on the whiteboard.

CHARACTER DESCRIPTION:

MOM: Rebecca Cortez, a 40 year old single mom with both a BS and MS in psychology. She has worked as a counselor in the State’s foster care system. Her son, Mark Cortez is 7 years, 4 months old.

Mark is a twin, diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder at 2 years old. He was made eligible for special education at age 3 and has been in a Woodgrove School District special day class since age 5.

SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST: Ophelia Smith has worked for the school district for 10 years as a school psychologist. She is currently working on her PhD in educational psychology. She has worked with very few children with autism in her 10-year career but is beginning to “learn the ropes” as she puts it.

SPEECH THERAPIST: Natalie Portsmouth is the director of Woodgrove’s speech therapy department. She has been a speech pathologist for 15 years. She has been commissioned by the Special Education Director to set up a “more efficient” way of delivering services to a large population of students who require speech and language support. She sees herself as “practical” and prefers to assign only speech therapy assistants to deliver services to students. She also has a reputation for recommending only group speech services but will occasionally acquiesce during IEP discussions and support a recommendation for “small” group therapy to certain children who she feels are particularly severe.

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST: Roberta Contreras has worked for the Woodgrove School District for 2 years. She spent most of her 7 year career as an Occupational Therapist working in private practice but in a hospital setting with adults recovering from strokes.

SPECIAL EDUCATION DIRECTOR: Stephan O’Doul is a 30 year veteran of the Woodgrove School District special education department. He longs for what he feels are the “good old days” when he didn’t have to worry about “Mainstreaming” and “Full Inclusion.” He wishes he could just reopen that segregated “special education campus” that was closed last year because of pressure from the State Department of Education.

SPECIAL DAY CLASS TEACHER: Melissa Robinson has been a special day class teacher for 3 years. She teaches mostly children with autism. The school district has taken an eclectic approach with her training in an attempt to “cover all the bases” regarding methodologies for teaching children with. Although she considers herself “trained” by the school district’s definition, she is by no means an “expert” in any teaching style.

SCHOOL DISTRICT “AUTISM SPECIALIST”: Phil Little has Bachelor’s degree in social ecology. He is a career sampler. He has worked in a number of different fields including managing the electronics department at the local Wal-Mart. When the Woodgrove School District began to expand its Autism Department, he was “trained” along with 5 others who went through a crash course on Autism and related disorders. He did not apply for the position but was recruited by Stephan O’Doul, special

education director while Stephan was at Wal-Mart looking to purchase a new tape recorder for use at IEPs. Phil could not define Autism 2 years ago.

STEPHAN O'DOUL: Well, I think that everyone should know one another by now, this is, of course, the 4th IEP we've have this school year so far. As I understand it, Mrs. Cortez has requested this meeting to discuss the possibility of increasing the amount of time this youngster is mainstreamed with our regular education students. I've had a chance to meet with the case carrier and Mark's SDC teacher, Mrs. Robinson. So, let's get Mrs. Robinson's opinion...oh, by the way, for purposes of this meeting, I am serving as the district designee and the regular education teacher...I don't like to pull our regular education teachers out of their classes for these IEPs. They work so hard preparing their curriculum, and it's such a disruption to their day. [GLANCES OVER TO MRS. CORTEZ AND SMILES]. I'm sure you understand, Mrs. Cortez.

MRS. CORTEZ : [LOOKING EMBARRASSED, SHE NODS HER HEAD].

STEPHAN O'DOUL: Okay, Mrs. Robinson, let's hear what you think about how our regular education students will be able to tolerate Mark. I understand his behaviors have improved though?

MELISSA ROBINSON: Yes, Mr. O'Doul, you're correct, Mark's maladaptive behaviors have decreased quite a bit. To prepare for this IEP meeting, the School Psychologist, Mrs. Smith and I went ahead and did some data collection and some informal testing... [PAUSES AND LOOKS OVER TO MRS. CORTEZ]. Oh...I've been so busy, Mrs. Cortez, I didn't even think to mention it to you. After the IEP, I have a form for you to sign. The form simply says that you approve of the assessment that I did, Okay? [GLANCES TO SPECIAL ED DIRECTOR AND SILENTLY ASKS FOR SUPPORT]

MRS. CORTEZ: [APPEARS SOMEWHAT CONFUSED] Well sure...I guess?

STEPHAN O'DOUL: The paperwork's a formality Mrs. Cortez. I'd hate to tie Mrs. Robinson's hands waiting for paperwork to start her testing. You see?

MRS. CORTEZ: I suppose that makes sense.

STEPHAN O'DOUL: Okay, good. So, let's move on.

MELISSA ROBINSON: My assessment included an observation of Mark's behaviors over the course of one entire school day. I had my classroom aide observe Mark from about 9:15 A.M. through the end of the school day—about 2:20 P.M. I noticed a lot of what occupational therapists call, “sensory seeking” behaviors—*toe walking*, somersaulting during class time, and attempts to headstand, especially during non-preferred activities. I also noticed some self-stimulatory behavior—mostly eye-blinking and video talk.

STEPHAN O'DOUL: Please explain what you mean by video talk?

MELISSA ROBINSON: Well, Mark will often repeat, over and over again, words or phrases he's heard or seen from a movie or TV show. He usually repeats lines from the *SpongeBob Squarepants* cartoon. This and other behaviors can be disruptive, but we seem to have them under control in the Special Day Class setting.

STEPHAN O'DOUL: Well, this is a real concern for me. Although the law says that school districts are required to mainstream students when appropriate, we are not required to put a child who is potentially disruptive into a general education classroom. [TURNS HIS ATTENTION TO MARK'S MOTHER AND HALF ATTEMPTS TO LOOK SINCERE]. Mrs. Cortez, we truly want to comply with the law, and, of course do what's most appropriate for Mark, but if it's not in the best interest of our general education population, I really can't be spending my time as Special Ed Director answering angry letters and phone call from parents of our regular students who are upset because their son or daughter's education is being negatively affected by Mark's outbursts. You know just last year, we tried putting a child like Mark in Mrs. Johnson (one of our third grade teacher's) class and it was a disaster. The constant interruption by that child drove two students' parents to remove their children from the school. We simply cannot repeat last year.

MRS. CORTEZ: [VISUALLY UPSET]. Mr. O'Doul, I take great offense to your assumption that Mark's behaviors are somehow so disruptive that they would prevent him from participating in regular education classes at all. For the most part, Mark is a well-behaved child. He simply needs occasional redirection from say, an aide and he'll be fine. You know he's the highest functioning student in Mrs. Robinson's class? In fact, at the past 3 IEP meetings, I've brought up the district providing an aide for Mark during his mainstream time, and I've never really gotten a straight answer. [LOOKS TO MRS. ROBINSON]. Mrs. Robinson, what do you think about an aide for Mark? I just

want him to be with his typical peers and I think he'd really be challenged more and learn faster if he were in a regular 1st grade class for more of his day.

MELISSA ROBINSON: Well, umm... [SHE IS INTERRUPTED BY THE SPECIAL ED DIRECTOR]

STEPHAN O'DOUL: Mrs. Cortez...believe me, I truly understand your concern, but if you're suggesting that we hire an aide just for Mark, first of all I'd have to get the district's approval for that and second, I really don't know if an aide for Mark would even fit into our budget this quarter. You know, it's a crying shame that the federal government and all those bureaucrats in Washington can't see clear to send our state department of education more money. I apologize, I didn't mean to get off on a tangent.

MRS. CORTEZ: [UNSYMPATHETIC AND ANGRY]: For the past three years, Mr. O'Doul, my family has been funding an in-home behavior invention program for Mark to the tune of \$150,000, so don't talk to me about budget!! If I wasn't for us, Mark... [MRS. CORTEZ IS INTERRUPTED BY THE PSYCHOLOGIST]

OPHELIA SMITH: [ATTEMPTS TO LIGHTEN THE MOOD]: If I can interject... as Mrs. Robinson mentioned, she and I conducted an assessment of Mark and if you'd give us just a few minutes to finish our assessment discussion?

THE IEP TEAM: [IN UNISON, THE IEP TEAM ACKNOWLEDGES AND AGREES, MRS. CORTEZ CALMS DOWN]

OPHELIA SMITH: Well, you know, I really think Mark would do well with an increase in his mainstream time. Right now, he interacts with typical peers at recess and lunch periods. Perhaps we could start Mark in a non-academic subject, like Music Appreciation, it's only 1 hour per week. The students meet in the auditorium. I believe they are currently learning how to play the fluteophone.

MRS. CORTEZ: Mrs. Smith, at Mark's triennial IEP earlier this year, you said that Mark was at grade level in Math and Reading. If that's the case, why can't we consider Mark for mainstreaming during one or both of those subjects?

OPHELIA SMITH: Well, that would be an IEP Team decision. Certainly, if mainstreaming Mark into those subjects were deemed "appropriate" by the IEP Team, then it could be done. At this point, we haven't heard from the rest of our Team members. Phil Little is our autism expert, what's your opinion Mr. Little?

PHIL LITTLE: Well, I see Mark about once every month. I do a quick observation of Mrs. Robinson's class (no formal assessment of course) for about 20 minutes, just to see how the kiddos are doing. Frankly, Mark is performing tremendously well in that Special Day Class. Mrs. Robinson is just a jewel of a teacher [WINKS AT MRS. ROBINSON]. She has Mark reading simple stories to the rest of the class. It seems to be working so well in terms of Mark's interaction with his peers and it's my philosophy, "if it's not broken, why fix it?" I really don't think it would be a good idea to start to transition Mark out. We've worked so hard to extinguish these maladaptive behaviors Mrs. Robinson was talking about earlier, and I really don't want to take a step back.

MRS. CORTEZ: Mr. Little, I'm not clear, how would Mark do in a regular education 1st grade class for Math and Reading?

PHIL LITTLE: [HESITATES TO RESPOND, LOOKS TO MR. O'DOUL, MR. O'DOUL NODS AN "OKAY" TO ANSWER]: Well, I'm not a regular education teacher, but from a behaviorist's point of view, I suppose he could "function." [POSES A RHETORICAL QUESTION TO MRS. CORTEZ]. But really, Mrs. Cortez, do you want your child to simply "get by" or to flourish? I just don't see why Mark's program should be changed now.

MRS. CORTEZ: I suppose we have a difference of opinion, Mr. Little. I just don't see why Mark cannot spend more time in regular education, especially for the academic subjects he's doing well in. I understand that Mark needs extra help, but really, he not a bad kid and all he would need is redirection by an aide. Why can't we just try Mark for 30 minutes per day in a 1st grade math class?

STEPHAN O'DOUL: Mrs. Cortez, let's table this issue briefly and give Mrs. Portsmouth our speech therapist, and Roberta Contreras, our Occupational therapist some time to review Mark's progress in their programs. Mrs. Portsmouth?

[MRS. CORTEZ PAUSES AND THEN POLITELY TURNS TO MRS. PORTSMOUTH]

NATALIE PORTSMOUTH: Although I do not provide direct therapy to Mark, I supervise those that do. Right now, Mark is receiving 30 minutes per week of small group instruction delivered by one of our speech assistants, Andrea Thomas. His sessions really seem to be going well. According to Ms. Thomas, Mark is engaged during the sessions and spends quite a lot of time talking about his favorite TV show, SpongeBob. We'd like to continue these sessions, but with a larger group of students. In fact, we'd like to do his speech therapy with the entire special day class. I'm going to

propose that his services be increased from 30 minutes to 45 minutes with the rest of his class. How does that sound?

MRS. CORTEZ: Well, I'm currently paying for speech therapy through my insurance company and the speech therapist that he's seeing has talked about Mark's need for individual speech, one to two times per week. Is that something that the district could provide?

NATALIE PORTSMOUTH: Mrs. Cortez, in my 20 years of experience, I've seen very few students that need individual speech therapy to benefit from their education. Mark is a very high functioning child. Based on what I've heard at today's meeting, it sounds as if he's performing well in a group setting...and his conversation skills, especially on preferred topics of discussion—like SpongeBob, really demonstrates that he has the ability to interact better in a group speech session. He is such a social child, I would really hate to take him out of his peer group during speech and limit his ability to socialize with his peers.

MRS. CORTEZ: I just don't understand why my private speech therapist would continue to recommend individual speech for Mark if it wasn't good for him?

NATALIE PORTSMOUTH: You know, Mrs. Cortez, these private clinic-based recommendations are very different than our educational speech/language recommendations. I really think that limiting Mark to a one-to-one clinic type setting would be a disservice to him and would prevent him from generalizing the language and skills he learns to other settings—like the classroom. Another issue is there is a severe shortage of speech therapists right now. Even if we wanted to, the district simply doesn't have enough speech therapists to provide one-to-one service to Mark.

MRS. CORTEZ: Does the district ever contract out to private speech therapists? Mark's private therapist has offered to increase his weekly sessions and is willing to contract with the district.

NATALIE PORTSMOUTH: The district doesn't use outside therapists. So, unfortunately, that's not really something we could do.

MRS. CORTEZ: [LOOKING DISAPPOINTED]: umm..okay.

STEPHAN O'DOUL: It looks like we're finished with speech. Any other questions for Mrs. Portsmouth...No? Okay, let's move on to our final report from the Occupational Therapist, Roberta Contreras. Roberta?

ROBERTA CONTRERAS: I have seen Mark on a consultation basis for 1 hour per month since the beginning of the school year. He seems to be progressing just fine. I also spoke with Mrs. Robinson regarding some of the sensory issues that she has seen in the classroom and have made some suggestions to her on how to implement a sensory diet for Mark to try to address the toe walking, somersaulting and headstanding during class time. Also, Mrs. Cortez, many of the sensory diet activities I'm going to recommend are things that you could do with Mark at home as well. You might want to consider purchasing some of these recommended items for use at home.

[THE IEP TEAM SPENDS THE NEXT 20 MINUTES DISCUSSING A SENSORY DIET FOR MARK].

STEPHAN O'DOUL: We had tabled the mainstreaming discussions but now that we're finished with Speech and Occupational Therapy, let's try to wrap up the mainstreaming conversation, so we can move on to the district's offer. Let's get Ophelia Smith and Mr. Little's final recommendations on mainstreaming for Mark. Mr. Little?

PHIL LITTLE: Well, I recommend that Mark's program remain status quo at least until his annual IEP in May. At that time, let's talk about increasing Mark's mainstream time for the 2006/2007 school year.

STEPHAN O'DOUL: Mrs. Smith?

OPHELIA SMITH: Yes, everything appears to be working well for Mark, so I will go ahead and defer to Mr. Little's recommendation.

STEPHAN O'DOUL: Any other comments from District staff regarding mainstreaming?

DISTRICT IEP TEAM MEMBERS: [MUMBLING NO'S]

STEPHAN O'DOUL: Mrs. Cortez, based on today's discussions, our offer of a *free appropriate public education* for Mark is as follows:

1. Mark will remain in Mrs. Robinson's special day class for the remainder of the 2005/2006 school year. Discussion regarding mainstreaming will take place again at Mark's annual IEP in May 2006;
2. Speech and Language Therapy per Mrs. Portsmouth's recommendation will be amended to 45 minutes per week with his entire class;

3. Occupational Therapy services will remain at 60 minutes per month consultation with the classroom teacher. We will also add the sensory diet that Mrs. Contreras proposed.

Mrs. Conteras, will you please provide me the list of sensory diet activities so I can include them on this IEP Addendum form?

MRS. CONTERAS: Yes, of course.

MRS. CORTEZ: If it's okay, I'd like to take the IEP home with me and not sign today.

STEPHAN O'DOUL: It's your choice Mrs. Cortez, although we must receive your signed IEP form back within a week's time. Also, don't forget to sign the assessment form we discussed at the beginning of the meeting...remember, it's just a formality. We look forward to hearing back from you Mrs. Cortez.

This IEP meeting is adjourned.