



Transcript- Episode 69

Completing Unpreferred Tasks Should Not Be An IEP Goal

Hi, everyone, and welcome to Episode 69, *Completing Unpreferred Tasks Should Not Be an IEP Goal*. I don't know, Julie. It should not be anything.

I'm literally sweating. I love this topic so much and I am so passionate about it.

Yeah, so settle in, friends, get a snack, get a blanket, because we're going to be here a while.

If you want to get Julie and me going, talk about IEPs and nonsense, which might be a synonym. The most nonsensical IEP goal that I've ever seen, and I see it everywhere all the time, is goals written around complying with unpreferred tasks or tolerating unpreferred tasks.

And so let's be really, really clear, Kristie.

Let's just say this, Julie. Stop it. I guess it was a short episode.

Thanks, everyone. I guess it was. You've got plenty of time now, friends, to do many other things.

Just think how much time we have freed up in your service delivery minutes, in data collection. I know we're being snarky, friends.

No, but I've got to stay snarky because it's really hard for me.

And if you're sitting here going, like, and you're just very earnestly going, I've always thought this was a good goal because it helps with people's ability to stay focused in school and in life. Okay, then welcome, because we really want to unpack this with you. It's the thing about unpreferred tasks is the goal is not helpful, and it really misses the point of support in general.

And the reason I really think about this a lot is as an adult, we have unpreferred tasks all day long, every day. And many of those tasks we avoid, we modify, we delegate, we redesign, we work around, we ignore altogether.

Julie, will you just say all of those again? And I want people to go, how often when there are dishes to be done, a podcast to be recorded, gas to be filled? I don't know.

Think about something you don't like. And Julie, tell us what things do we do as adults?

We avoid. Always. We modify.

Good one.

We delegate. Oh, yeah. Like, for example, I just married someone only because Ellen does the laundry and it's, like, awesome. Okay. We redesign.

Okay, Mike gets my gas. I understand.

We redesign the task. We work around the task. We do all sorts of things.

And then we expect children, especially children with disabilities, to do the opposite, which is persevere, my child. Keep going. I know you hate this task.

I know it's a problem for you functionally or a problem for you. Or emotionally or sensorily. Sensorily is what I was looking at.

And we're just like, keep going, friends. And so completing unpreferred tasks should not be an IEP goal because compliance is not learning. We can just stop there again.

Compliance isn't learning. What we're doing when we're asking a kid to just stick it out for three more minutes, four more minutes, five more minutes, is we're actually asking them to comply. And it has absolutely nothing to do with learning.

So let's talk about. I think it goes to, like, what is the purpose of education? What is the purpose of the IEP? People are, we worry. I'll say it this way. We worry that if a child doesn't learn compliance, we're teaching them they can get their way.

Oh, yeah. That is a deep, deep worry.

Yeah. And what we want you to remember is that children are not adults. So as adults, we have a prefrontal cortex that's fully formed.

And yet we still struggle with non-preferred tasks. And so what we want to do is look at this unpreferred task. I'll just use worksheet compliance because that's really common.

Like the student struggles to write with a pencil. So we're going to keep working on that. And so the fact that it's unpreferred is because it lacks relevance.

It lacks autonomy. It lacks access. It lacks support.

And none of those things are kid problems. Those are a problem of the task itself. And so when I say worksheet filling out as the task that's unpreferred, that should be a red flag to you to go, well, where's the learning in this task? Well, where's the meaning in that task? Where's the relevance? And it's probably very unidimensional or very prescriptive how I'm supposed to do it.

So it's not just, if we could just make it, if we could just change the task instead of expecting the student, it might become preferred.

Correct. Or at least neutral.

Neutral. Let's try for neutral sometime. Let's go for neutral.

That's what I tell my husband all the time. Just go for neutral. And so sometimes you might not see unpreferred tasks in the IEP goal itself, but instead you might say staying on task, tolerating demands, following directions.

Those would be other goals that we don't want to use in IEPs. Julie, I don't know if I've ever confessed my very worst moment as an early interventionist, even to you.

I'm ready.

I mean, am I? Am I ready? I don't know that you'll ever talk to me again. Okay. So I had a three-year-old, maybe she was three, probably two and a half, which makes it an even sadder story.

And her IEP goal, it was, yeah, she was three, so it was an IEP goal, was to tolerate sensory things in her mouth. So like a spoon, you know, a straw, food. So, you know, to practice tolerating sensory stimuli in her mouth, you know, we would get like a sucker because at least that tastes good.

Anyway, I have to finish the story because I think you can fill in the blanks, right? I'm cringing at myself, but it was on her IEP. And at that time we did pull out, pull over, pull aside. So when it was my turn to work with this poor little girl, we would practice that for the allotted minutes.

Yeah. Yeah. Well, your story, I will still talk to you, and I'm sorry that your training sent you to that place.

And I think that's really important because sometimes if you're listening to this podcast, you're going to think they're just making fun of me. They think what I've done is harmful. And the truth is, Kristie, you were trained to think that that was the best thing to do for this child later. Because she needs to be able to eat.

Right. And so the best place to work on eating is during meal times with peers when they're eating, not in the 20 minutes. Or even think about what were we giving her options to eat?

Right. What was the size of the food? What was the smell of the food? What was the texture of the food? You know, like we never looked at, I mean, to my knowledge, no one ever did a deep dive into that. It was just like she needs oral stimulation.

She needs to be able to tolerate sensory input. So practice that. Yeah.

And yes, you want to practice that during meal times when it makes sense in the child's life. And what Kristie is talking about is this concept of let me fix the student by pulling them out and making them do something that they don't prefer. And, oh, it's taking me down several different routes.

But I'll kind of come back to say, think of yourself as an adult. Kristie, I would love to ask you this because I work with you every day. How often do you complete

unpreferred tasks just as assigned with no modifications, no breaks, and a great attitude?

Oh, well, you just lost it with the great attitude. Julie knows me, and like I'll do that suppressed discomfort mask maybe. I don't really mask it very well. I'll comply to please.

I'll do all kinds of like terrible things for me and others, but I don't do it with, you know. A good attitude. A good attitude.

No, I have snark. I throw other people under the bus. I resent.

Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah. It's good stuff.

So essentially we're asking, you know, small children, medium children, and large children to do things that we don't do well as adults. No. And so often, Kristie just mentioned these, but they actually teach kids to mask their distress.

Yeah, for sure. It teaches them to comply instead of advocate. It teaches them to suppress their discomfort.

And what we've got to do is just get really clear that if a student can only meet this goal by being miserable, then it's a terrible goal. I'm going to say that again. If the student can only meet this goal by being miserable, it's a terrible goal, and we need to change the goal.

Yeah. And if it's like be miserable now because your future self will appreciate it, I think that's wrong. Like I think about this little girl who probably has eating disorders, you know.

For sure. For sure. You know, or trauma.

I mean, I'm not trying to be overdramatic, but it's like sometimes we think this will serve you in kindergarten, or this will serve you when you go to the high school, or this will serve you when you graduate. And I don't think we're listening enough to people with lived experiences to say, did that strategy, that intervention actually serve them?

Well, Kristie, I just am being brought back to our friend Otto Lana's words, and he says, honor the no. And what we're talking about right here is when a child's or student's body, soul, mind is saying no, and we're saying yes, keep going.

And so what this actually is doing is not honoring the nervous system of the student that we're supporting. So I know this is depressing. And for those of you who are like, oh, my gosh, okay, I'll delete it.

I know to delete it, but what should I do instead?

Okay. We're going to talk about what do you do instead. You want goals that are actually about access to learning.

You want goals that are focused on engagement, autonomy, dignity, participation, not tolerating something terrible.

And I'm just going to give a quick example of a reframe you might do. Instead of student will complete a non-preferred task for 15 minutes with no more than two prompts, that's the one we just saw last week, it would be student will engage in academic tasks using appropriate supports, choices, and modifications to increase participation and interest over time.

You see the difference? It's a compliance-based goal. Switched into a learning goal that's going to expect some changes to the task in order to increase participation and interest over time.

Sorry. I had to take a breath because it goes back to that what's the purpose of the IEP is all I kept hearing the whole time you listed those things, Julie. And so I know people want to know how do I write it and what's a better way to write it and what's better. But I think it starts even quicker or, sorry, it starts even further back of like, well, what is the purpose of the goal? And I think, for example, like endurance versus duration versus accuracy versus intensity, like we don't even understand those criteria.

So I'm going to put a link in the show notes that kind of helps people understand the differences between those because sometimes we write criteria or write a goal that we think is about one thing and it's not. So I don't know how to say that well because that's probably another podcast or people need to have us come and help them rewrite their IEP goals. But it's like you have to be really clear about what it is you want in the end for the kid.

And if you're trying to fix the kid or you're trying to fix their future self or you're trying to prioritize the comfort of the classroom, we're kind of off base in the beginning. So it's not just taking unpreferred tasks and switching out the words. We have to shift our mindset.

What are we trying to accomplish in the first place? And if we're still trying to fix the student, we're off the mark.

You're right, Kristie. This is like a portal into a much bigger discussion. And it is what's on our IEP goals and why should they be there. So I'm really glad you're putting that resource. And I do want to tell people about the resource that exists for this particular podcast.

Oh, good point. And it's called *What is the Learning Goal Really?* And it's a practical resource guide for writing IEP goals that support learning, not compliance. And so I'm not going to really explain it to you all, but you're going to want it, you're going to need it, and we give several reframes.

The only thing I do want to share that's in this particular one is red flag versus green flag language in IEPs. And so I'm just going to share some red flag language. We'll tolerate, we'll complete a non-preferred task, we'll remain on task, or we'll comply with directions.

Those red flag pieces of language signal endurance and not learning. And now I'm going to share green flag language. We'll access, we'll engage, we'll demonstrate understanding through, we'll use supports to participate.

Those phrases signal learning with access. And in that resource we give you lots of before and after examples, and I really recommend that you play with these ideas in your own IEPs, literally taking out the goal and examining it and rewriting it to make it be about learning, about access, and about inclusion.

Yeah, so definitely the download for this episode is at inclusiveschooling.com/download69, *What is the Learning Goal Really?* And it's doing some of this mindset work as well as there are steps to really identify what you're trying to work on, think about what you need to shift in terms of your mindset, and then there are several examples of before and after that'll start to give you an idea of how you take what we've talked about today and actually apply it to real life goals for kids.

Okay, so grab that resource today. We're going to end this podcast with just a last bit of information, which is completing unpreferred tasks should never be a goal in an IEP, but learning and access engagement should be the goal in an IEP. And when we stop teaching kids to endure school and start designing school that's worth engaging in, everything changes.

So if you haven't been to our website at inclusiveschooling.com, come check it out. We have lots and lots of professional development about how to do just that.

SHOW NOTES

What This Episode Is About

“Student will complete non-preferred tasks...” If you’ve written or seen this goal, you’re not alone — and this episode is for you.

In this episode, Julie and Kristie take on one of the most common (and problematic) IEP goals in schools today: **compliance-based goals disguised as learning**.

If you are:

- Writing or reviewing IEP goals
- Supporting students with behavior or engagement needs
- Trying to reduce power struggles and resistance
- Wanting goals that actually improve learning and access

This episode will help you rethink what IEP goals are *really* for, and how to write them better.

Key Takeaways

- Completing unpreferred tasks is not a learning goal, it's a **compliance expectation**.
 - Many IEP goals unintentionally focus on endurance, obedience, or suppression instead of learning.
 - Adults don't complete unpreferred tasks without support — so expecting students to do so is unrealistic.
 - When a task is “unpreferred,” it often signals a **problem with the task — not the student**.
 - IEP goals should focus on **access, engagement, and participation**, not forcing compliance.
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Episode Download / Handout

What Is the Learning Goal — Really?

This practical guide helps educators and leaders **rewrite IEP goals so they support learning — not compliance**.

Inside the download, you'll find:

- A 4-step framework to evaluate any IEP goal
- Clear guidance for identifying surface-level vs. real learning goals
- Examples of common compliance-based goals, and how to rewrite them
- Red flag vs. green flag language to use immediately
- A powerful mindset shift: support the task before changing the student

Why download it?

Because many IEP goals *sound* reasonable, but aren't actually about learning. This tool helps you pause, rethink, and write goals that truly support access, engagement, and growth.

👉 Download at: [inclusiveschooling.com/download69](https://www.inclusiveschooling.com/download69)

Practical Moves for IEP Teams

- Ask: *What is the actual learning goal here?*
- Remove the task, does the goal still make sense?
- Identify the skill that transfers across settings
- Redesign the task before changing the student
- Build in choice, flexibility, and supports
- Use the “adult reality check”: would this be reasonable for an adult?
- Focus on access, not endurance

Because if a student has to be miserable to meet the goal... it's the wrong goal.

Additional Resource

REVISED IFSP/IEP GOALS AND OBJECTIVES RATING INSTRUMENT: This framework helps teams evaluate whether IEP goals are truly “IEP worthy” by examining measurability, functionality, generality, and instructional context. Importantly, it reflects IDEA requirements that goals be measurable *and* functional; not simply academic in content. The tool can support conversations with administrators by shifting the focus from “*Does every student have an academic goal?*” to “*Does every student have goals that support access, participation, and progress in daily routines?*” It provides a research-grounded way to ensure goals are high quality, legally sound, and connected to meaningful participation, with academics embedded when appropriate.



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