

NDSS Parent Information and Advocacy Tips

This is the first in a series of information bulletins from the NDSS policy team to complement its legislative bulletins.

How was school today?

The beginning of a new school year is a good time to share information about parent-teacher communication. It is essential that the communication flow both ways. Parents want to know what is happening at school and they also want to provide information that is critical to their child's progress. Some communication strategies can be established during the IEP planning time. However, the teacher who will implement the IEP for the following school year is often not involved in its development. Therefore, even if a communication plan is outlined in the IEP it may not be appropriate for this teacher.

To work well, the communication plan must meet the needs of the parent, the student and the teacher. That is why there is no "formula" for successful parent-teacher communication. If you make it clear that you are respectful of the teacher's time constraints and paperwork demands, most teachers will respect your need for communication. The key is to be flexible and creative. It is important to emphasize that you want to support your child's teacher by following through at home, but you need information in order to do this. You also want to support the teacher by sharing strategies that have been successful, in addition to any other information that would help your child's performance at school.

One of the challenges of parent-teacher communication is to make sure both parties are clear on the need for high, but reasonable, expectations for the student. It is harmful if the teacher's expectations are too low and it is equally harmful if the teacher is frustrated because he or she thinks the student should be at a higher level or achieving at a faster pace than is reasonable for this child. It is important to check the work that is coming home to see if the expectations have been set at an appropriate level. If the bar has been set too low or too high you can either adapt the homework to model the work you believe your child should be doing or find some other way to communicate the need for different expectations.

The following are tips to assist you in setting up a communication plan. Some of these tips also apply to communication between private service providers (e.g. speech, OT and PT providers) and their counterparts at school:

1. Check with your state Parent Training and Information Center to see if they have information on developing communication plans.
2. Have a meeting with the teacher(s) before school starts to discuss your child and your expectations as well as the teacher's expectations. If possible, have the teacher participate in drafting the IEP that he or she will be implementing.

3. Keep a continuous dialogue with your child's teacher. Communication is not just for problems. You want to hear about the positive things your child has done and the teacher will appreciate your praise and gratitude when appropriate.
4. You can model the attitude you want the teacher to have toward your child. If you show the teacher that you celebrate all your child's achievements, (whether they are big or small, academic or social) the teacher can learn to celebrate with you and see your child through your eyes. If a teacher is only looking at the things your child can't do, you can turn his or her attention to the things your child can do. It is important to share your long-term goals for your child so the teacher understands the big picture.
5. Learn the paper exchange. Does your child bring work home? Does it need to be returned? How much homework? When are tests?
6. Establish a system in which you can receive information and give feedback on the work. Sometimes a simple numerical "code" is helpful to indicate the degree of assistance the student needed to complete a classroom assignment or homework (e.g., #1 for independence, #2 for visual cues, #3 for verbal cues and #4 for one-on-one assistance).
7. Many parents establish an exchange of information regarding behavior. It can be very helpful if behavior problems are approached with similar reinforcements both at home and at school.
8. Communicate with your child's teacher about concerns, issues and medications that might affect your child at school. Help the teacher understand the implications of your child's disability.
9. Request an IEP review if a problem arises that may require a change in your child's accommodations, services, goals and/or objectives.
10. Be respectful of the teacher's time. If you have a number of issues to discuss, you should arrange a brief phone conference or meeting rather than stop the teacher in the hallway.
11. Set up a folder/notebook to keep track of school information: phone numbers, school policies, school calendar, etc.,
12. Participate in school activities, especially the PTA.
13. Volunteer your time and skills to help in the classroom and on field trips. If your job or younger children make this difficult, there are often tasks that a teacher can send home for you to do (e.g., tally book club orders or field trip permission forms).

If you have questions or comments about this information sheet, contact Patty Smith at psmith@ndss.org.

If you or others you know would like to be added to the NDSS mailing list, send name(s) and email address to alauritzen@ndss.org.

Society works to
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full potential

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