

The Importance of Good Communication Skills

Strategies for Team Building

Before beginning the special education process, it may be useful to review the skills that can help you build a collaborative relationship with your school so that you and the school staff can develop an effective special education team. When a student is determined to have learning deficits or a disability, parents often find themselves thrust into a new role as a special education advocate. In addition to learning about their child's specific deficits or area of disability, they also need to learn the skills necessary to communicate effectively with school staff members and to become a member of their child's education team. It is important that you develop a relationship of mutual respect and trust. Parents and staff members need to express thoughts in direct, honest, and appropriate ways while retaining and displaying respect for the rights and opinions of others.

The following hints and tips will be useful when you prepare to attend a meeting about your child, whether it is an eligibility or IEP meeting or an informal meeting to discuss your child's progress and/or your concerns. They will help you become a more effective member of your child's education team and help you develop a positive, collaborative relationship with your child's teachers.

- Assume **honorable intentions** on the part of people who work with your child. This is a phrase developed by the Pacer Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, a federally funded parent information, referral, and advocacy center. Even though parents may disagree with the opinions and decisions of school staff members, they should realize that people are acting out of genuine concern for their child and in what the staff members believe to be in the best interests of the student. Every teacher wants his or her students to succeed, and every teacher and principal wants parents to be supportive and satisfied with the services their child is receiving. Remember that most parents must participate in special education due to circumstance; staff members are there because they have chosen to help children as their life's work!
- Make sure there is an **agenda** for each meeting you attend. (IEP meetings, of course, already have a set agenda.) Get the agenda in advance if possible and/or give the school your agenda (in advance) with a list of things you'd like to discuss. This will allow everyone to be better prepared for the meeting as well as ensure that adequate time is allotted for the meeting and that all your concerns are addressed.
- For both IEP meetings and general conferences, find out in advance how much time will be allocated to the meeting. If you have not completed the agenda items or the IEP by the end of the meeting, **schedule a time to reconvene**. Meetings tend to become unproductive if they are unreasonably long. It is easier to determine the date for a new meeting right then, when people are present and can coordinate their schedules, rather than adjourning the meeting and trying to schedule a meeting later when everyone will have to be contacted individually.
- Keep the meeting **focused and stick to the agenda**. Make sure that your concerns (which should be based on the agenda) as well as those of the school staff, have been addressed. If other issues come up, save them for another meeting unless they are pressing.



- Prepare for your meeting by **organizing your thoughts and concerns**. Use the *Parent Information* form or see Appendix I for a *Student Profile*, to be filled out by parents, that will help you clarify your perceptions of unaddressed needs. You may want to pass out completed copies to staff members.
- **Leave "old luggage" behind** (easier said than done!). Although past experiences may have had an impact on your feelings toward the school system or the school, try not to let those feelings affect the task at hand. Rather, learn from your mistakes and become a better advocate based on your experiences. For example, if you feel that services or accommodations you discussed at a previous meeting were never implemented, you now know that you need to document all important points discussed at a meeting (see the section on notes, below), make sure that everyone leaves the meeting with the same understanding of what will happen, and follow up on a regular basis.
- Take someone with you to the meeting if you feel that you will need support.
- Ask questions or ask for explanations, especially when educational terms that are not clear to you are used.
- Use **active listening skills**. Often, people become so concerned with discussing their issues that they do not pay attention to what others are saying, and a breakdown in communication occurs. Use body language to show people that you are listening to them (keep good eye contact, nod your head in agreement) and reflect back to them what you think they are saying ("Let me see if I understand this correctly. You feel that my son...").
- **Take notes** (or ask someone at the meeting to take notes). Meeting about your child's school program can be difficult and you may be hearing a lot of opinions and new information. Messages may be unclearly conveyed or misunderstood and very often parents and staff members leave meetings with different perceptions of what was said or agreed upon. At the end of the meeting, go back over your notes with the other participants to be sure that what you heard is what they meant to say. Include in your notes the names and titles of staff members who are present.
- **Follow up** an informal meeting with a note thanking the staff members for their time and summarizing the areas about which you reached agreement and/or the plan that was developed.
- Make the goal of any meeting resolution of the issues and by all means **sign** any documents with which you feel comfortable in order to expedite the process. However, **do not sign** any documents with which **you do not feel comfortable or about which you have questions**. Tell the school staff that you would like to take a draft with you if you feel you need to discuss it with others or if you need more time to think about it. If you do this, be sure to get back to the school staff with your decision in a reasonable amount of time (usually no more than ten days). Let the staff know if you are planning to sign the document or if you feel that you need to discuss it further.
- If you are from another culture or a different ethnic background, make sure the **school staff understands your culture and your cultural values**. School staff members may make assumptions based on a lack of understanding of your beliefs. Help them by taking the time to correct their assumptions.
- If you reach a point in the meeting when communication begins to break down, you feel no further progress will be made, or you are feeling frustrated, it is time to end the meeting and agree

on a date to reconvene. This may be inconvenient for the staff members and for you; however, you cannot make good decisions about your child's education if there is a lack of communication or if you cannot think clearly due to your emotions.



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Resolving Differences

Building a strong collaborative relationship with your school, knowing your rights, and learning to be assertive will all help to ensure that your child gets the services he or she needs. Sometimes, however, despite the best intentions and efforts of staff members and parents, the team cannot reach agreement regarding the appropriate education course for your child. At such times, it is important to understand due process. Due process protects the rights of all participants, the student, the parent, and the school system. Just as parents can invoke due process when they feel the school system is not meeting the special education needs of their child, the school system can also use due process when staff members feel they cannot meet the needs of a student because of a lack of agreement on the part of the parents. Remember that you have the right to challenge the decisions relating to evaluation, eligibility, and placements. Examples may include:

- the local screening committee's decision not to evaluate your child
- your belief that the evaluation is not a true picture of your child
- the decision to find your child eligible or not eligible for special education and related services
- an IEP that you believe does not meet your child's needs
- a recommendation for a placement that you believe does not meet your child's needs

Should you fail to reach agreement with the school staff, it may be helpful to use the following techniques at your next meeting. These techniques come from the literature on mediation, negotiation, and problem solving.

- **Accept the feelings of others about the issue.** Realize that even though you may disagree with another person's opinion or feelings, he or she has a right to have his or her own beliefs.
- **Identify what is important or valued; focus on your child's needs and year concerns, not your position.** Do not go to a meeting with a solution already worked out, expecting that the school will automatically accept and implement your idea. Rather, present your concerns, expressing what you feel your child's needs are and work with the school to find a mutually acceptable solution.
- **Realize that people's perceptions differ.** You and the school see your child in different settings and his or her behavior may vary or be more or less appropriate depending on the setting. You have the advantage of seeing your child in more settings, perhaps with siblings or friends, but the school has the advantage of seeing dozens of children the same age and so may have a different perspective of typical expectations and performance.
- **Accept that some people have emotional commitments to their positions.** People realize that parents have a strong commitment to their child(ren), but parents may not realize that teachers, too, usually have very strong feelings toward the students with whom they work and, like parents, want what is best for them.
- **Realize that people may come to a meeting with different expectations** of what the outcome will be. Keep an open mind and be willing to listen to and consider the ideas of others.
- **Know that some people may lack complete knowledge about the issue.** Be prepared to share your information from outside sources, private evaluations, etc. As a parent you may

want to do your own research about your child's disability and its educational impact so that you come to meetings feeling confident about your knowledge.

- **Understand the procedures and limitations of the system.** It is important to know your rights according to IDEA and other laws governing the education of students with disabilities. However, it is also important for you to realize that IDEA '97 may not specifically mandate some services and/or rights you might feel are important. For example, you may express your preference for a specific teacher to your school principal, but having a child with special needs does not give you any more rights in choosing a teacher than parents of general education students are given. Recognize, too, that while a school system cannot deny services to a student based on its financial limitations, they do not have to offer the optimal program. The school must provide a program that is reasonably designed to offer educational benefit. School systems do have limitations in personnel, budgets, and resources that may make a difference between an optimal program and a beneficial one.

When you cannot seem to agree on a solution to an issue or concern:

- **Agree on a problem statement.**
- **Brainstorm possible solutions.** Express your ideas, even if they sound implausible or far-fetched. The goal of brainstorming is to feel free to generate a lot of ideas without having anyone criticize them. It may be that an idea that sounds far-fetched can later be modified into a plan that is reasonable. Additionally, people feel free to be more creative knowing that they will not be criticized. It is at this point that you can bring up ideas that you have, but be careful not to be critical of, or angry at, suggestions offered by staff members.
- **Clarify and discuss each possible solution.** After brainstorming a complete list, go back over each idea and discuss its good and bad points, trying not to let the criticism reflect personally on the participants.
- **Brainstorm possible consequences** for each of the more probable solutions and discuss why they may not work.
- **Clarify and discuss each of the possible consequences.** Think about what might happen if an idea does not work. Sometimes you would only need to move on to another possible solution while in other instances the consequences of choosing the wrong solution would be serious.
- **Develop a plan and implement it.** Go over it so everyone understands the plan and his or her role in it. Make sure that it is in writing and that each participant has a copy.
- **Evaluate progress** and revise the plan if necessary. Set a date to meet to review the plan with all the participants.

A Summary of Good Communication Skills and Steps in the Decision-Making and Problem-Solving Process

- Assume honorable intentions.
- Get or make an agenda.
- Find out how much time will be allocated to the meeting.
- Stay focused and stick to the agenda.
- Organize your thoughts and concerns.
- Leave "old baggage" behind.
- Take someone with you to the meeting.
- Ask questions.
- Use active listening skills.
- Take notes.
- Follow up your meeting with a letter.
- Sign any documents with which you feel comfortable; do not sign any documents with which you do not feel comfortable or about which you have questions.
- Help school staff members understand your culture and your cultural values.
- End the meeting and agree on a date to reconvene if necessary.

Should You Fail to Reach Agreement With the School Staff:

- Accept the feelings of others about the issue.
- Identify what is important or valued; focus on your child's needs and your concerns, not your position.
- Realize that people's perceptions differ.
- Accept that some people have emotional commitments to their positions.
- Realize that people may come to a meeting with different expectations.
- Know that some people may lack complete knowledge about the issue.
- Understand the procedures and limitations of the system.

When You Cannot Seem to Agree on a Solution to an Issue or Concern:

- Agree on a problem statement.
- Brainstorm possible solutions.
- Clarify and discuss each possible solution.
- Brainstorm possible consequences.
- Clarify and discuss each of the possible consequences.
- Develop a plan and implement it.
- Evaluate progress and revise the plan if necessary.
- Schedule a date to reconvene the meeting and evaluate the results.