

# The Importance of Good Communication Skills

## Strategies for Team Building

Before beginning the special education process, it may be useful for you to review the skills that can help build a collaborative relationship with your child's school in order to develop an effective special education team. When an eligibility committee determines that a student needs special education services, parents often find themselves thrust into a new role as a special education advocate. In addition to learning about their child's specific needs, parents also need to learn the skills necessary to communicate effectively with school staff members and to become integral members of their child's education team. It is important for parents to develop a relationship of mutual respect and trust with school staff members. Parents and staff members need to express their 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 preparing for 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 promote 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 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.
- Make sure there is an agenda for each meeting you attend. Get the agenda in advance and/or give the school your agenda with a list of things you'd like to discuss before the meeting. This will allow everyone to be better prepared for the meeting and will 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 as well as those of the school staff have been addressed. If other issues come up, save them for another meeting unless they are important to the discussion.
- Prepare for your meeting by organizing your thoughts and concerns. Use the *Parent Information* form or see Appendix F for a *Student Profile* to help clarify your perceptions of unaddressed needs. You may want to pass out completed copies to staff members.
- Leave "old baggage" 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 may not pay full 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 conveyed unclearly 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 10 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.

## **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 educational supports 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 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 school staff members, 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 your concerns, not your position.** When you meet with school staff members, present your concerns, expressing what you feel your child's needs are, and work with the school to find a mutually acceptable solution. Collaborating on a solution is more likely to result in all team members being invested in it, as opposed to you or a staff member deciding on a solution unilaterally and expecting others to accept it.
- **Realize that peoples' perceptions differ.** You and the school see your child in different settings, and his or her behavior may vary depending upon the setting. You have the advantage of seeking 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 may have a different perspective of typical expectations and performance.
- **Accept that some people have emotional commitments to their position.** 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 ideas of others.
- **Know that some people may lack complete knowledge about the issue.** Be prepared to share information from outside sources, private evaluations, etc. As a parent, you may want to do additional research on your own about special education programs and services that may be available for children with disabilities. This may help increase your understanding of your own child's needs and better prepare you for your meeting with school staff members.
- **Understand the procedures and limitations of the system.** It is important to know your rights according to IDEA 2004 and other laws governing the education of students who need special education services. However, it is also important for you to realize that IDEA 2004 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 or assistant principal, but assigning teachers is ultimately the decision of the principal for all students in the school, including those who receive special education services. Recognize, too, that school systems do not have to offer the optimal program. The school must provide a program that is reasonably designed to offer educational benefit.

**When it appears that you cannot reach agreement about 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. 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 and discuss why they may or 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 will 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.
- **Establish a plan to evaluate progress** and revise the plan if necessary. State a date to meet to review the plan with all the participants.

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## **A Summary of Good Communication Skills and Steps in the Decision-Making and Problem-Solving Processes**

- 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 School Staff Members:**

- 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.