

Engaging Parents in Productive Partnerships



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Educators contend with significant pressures resulting from insufficient resources, inadequate professional development opportunities, and an ever-changing landscape of educational initiatives and mandates. Despite such challenges, school staff partner successfully with parents in millions of meetings each year to create appropriate individualized education programs (IEPs) for students who receive special education and related services.

If you invest early in building trusting working relationships with the parents of students in your school, your contacts with each other can be transformed into more positive experiences. Mutually satisfactory interactions can create a shared history that you can draw upon to prevent disagreements and misunderstandings from escalating into conflict, allowing the time and space to find solutions to challenging situations.

IEP teams are intentionally composed of parents, educators, and service providers who bring different expertise to the development of effective educational programs. This diversity may lead to conflict rather than collaboration. Difficult conversations may ensue when you find yourself at odds with your colleagues or with the parents of students attending your school. These difficult conversations can create stress or anger as strong feelings are expressed or left unspoken.

Fortunately, there are things we can do to communicate more effectively when disagreements occur, opinions diverge and strong emotions are present. The skillful integration of team member expertise, whether based upon personal experience or professional training, is a critical factor in designing successful IEPs. The following strategies can go a long way toward resolving disagreements, improving relationships, and producing positive outcomes for students with disabilities.

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Help People Be at Their Best

It is both considerate and sensible to schedule and plan meetings so critical members of the team are able to attend and participate fully. This means scheduling meetings at times and locations that are convenient for all participants. Being attentive to this detail can significantly improve the likelihood that everyone who needs to attend will be present and able to focus on the student and his or her needs. It is also important to allow enough time to accomplish the objectives of the meeting. Otherwise, discussions and decision-making may be disjointed or incomplete. Sometimes the use of scheduling software programs can simplify this task.

Even though we may be physically present in a meeting, all of us experience times when our capacity to engage with others and focus fully on complex problems is limited. We may be troubled by physical conditions (hunger, forgotten medication, plunging nicotine levels, need for a bathroom break, etc.) or pressing issues (cell phone that keeps buzzing with an urgent call, sick child at home, etc.) that adversely affect our ability to concentrate and contribute. At moments during meetings when any participant seems distracted or distressed, a brief break can afford an opportunity to get back on track. Attention to your own needs, as well as those of others, is helpful for the whole team.



PLAN MEETINGS
TO INCLUDE ALL
MEMBERS OF
THE TEAM.

Treat Others with Respect

Experience teaches us that in most failed relationships, people believe they were not treated with respect and their perspective was not heard and understood. Central to all of our important relationships is the experience that we are being heard, that our opinions are valued, and that we are regarded with interest and appreciation. Without these relational cornerstones, even the most skillful communication risks being misunderstood.

Recognizing and acknowledging our differences in appropriate ways creates a welcoming atmosphere for everyone whose involvement is crucial to a student's educational success. When our own cultural, linguistic, or socio-economic background differs from that of a parent or colleague, interactions may produce unexpected results. Our most positively intended actions may produce negative reactions. Seeking additional information and guidance from the other person can help us connect, so everyone feels included as a valued and important member of the educational team. The assistance of a cultural liaison or someone who can help bridge complex cultural gaps can also be invaluable.



Get to the Bottom of the Concern

When we find ourselves stuck because someone is rigidly expressing a non-negotiable demand, our tendency may be to respond with our own non-negotiable position. This pattern of interaction reduces creativity, discourages cooperation, and might result in a compromise that describes the midpoint between the two positions, but which does not fully address the student's needs.

The statement, "I want Bill's speech to improve," is an expression of a concern about Bill's articulation or communication skills, while the demand, "Bill must have 4 hours of speech therapy a week," is the speaker's perception of how that goal must be met. Likely both parents and educators agree on the goal of improved speech for Bill, but may not agree on the method(s) to achieve that goal.

Asking open-ended questions and listening carefully to the answers usually reveals desires, needs, goals, and motivations that can form the basis for exploring a variety of options. Questions like: "How might Bill's progress differ if he had 4 hours of speech therapy a week?" can uncover unexpected information and may open the path to alternate solutions that will address the underlying concerns and needs that fuel the demand. While the original demand will likely continue to be under consideration, other, more mutually agreeable, options may be discovered. A question such as, "What is your best thinking on this?" may help identify additional approaches that can contribute to an acceptable solution to a problem.

The intensity with which some parents object to a program or plan that they think will not work can be surprising to other team members. This objection is easier to understand if we consider the lifetime commitment that parents have to their children. Parents may fear that they will one day look back and wish they had advocated more strongly for a position that might have profoundly improved their child's life. Acknowledging this perspective and commitment may be helpful when a parent's advocacy seems strident.



Listen Deeply and Demonstrate Understanding

When communication becomes strained and tensions rise, it can be an indication that someone thinks they are being ignored, or believes their viewpoint is not being taken into consideration. Under these circumstances, there is no better course of action than to pause, listen carefully, and then demonstrate to the speaker's satisfaction that you understand his or her concerns. Listening deeply to what a person is saying, both at the content and feeling level, can meaningfully expand our understanding of each other and potentially open up new opportunities for resolving disagreements.

Demonstrating understanding involves reflecting back to the speaker our understanding of the message we received. The reflection may include facts, feelings, values, and other important aspects of the communication until the speaker affirms that his or her message has been accurately understood. When we demonstrate that we fully grasp what someone is saying, he or she becomes more available and more willing to hear fully what we have to say.

When parents feel understood and see their values, perspectives, and expertise about their child reflected in educational plans and interventions, they are more likely to support the resulting programs and aid in their implementation. All of us are more likely to support plans and programs that we helped create.



In Conclusion

Educators devote themselves to developing students and helping them succeed. These few brief suggestions are offered with the hope that they may help you transform potentially disruptive conflict into powerful collaborations that benefit you and your colleagues, parents and, ultimately, the students who depend upon all of you.

Effective, problem-solving processes typically involve all necessary participants, encourage all voices to be heard, explore underlying issues and concerns, and identify mutually agreeable next steps. If educators and parents alike feel respected and well-regarded by the other members of the student's team, they are able to engage more productively in problem-solving. When those closest to the student communicate effectively about their differences and work together to make important educational decisions, everyone benefits.



Role of the Student

Optimally, special education meetings will include the student's input to the maximum extent possible. The student whose IEP is being discussed has more to gain or lose than any other meeting participant. Student involvement increases the possibility that educational programs will reflect student preference and create student buy-in. In the extreme case, student participation may make the difference between a student looking to the future with a sense of empowerment and enthusiasm, or feeling consigned to a life others have shaped that may bear no resemblance to the one he or she desires.



Good IEP Meetings*

IEP meetings are important opportunities to work collaboratively with parents and other team members to develop an appropriate educational program for a student. A few tested strategies can help ensure a productive meeting.

Before The Meeting

- ▶ Explain importance of parent involvement and what occurs at the meeting.
- ▶ Explain who will be there from the school and their role(s) in the meeting. Ask parent(s) if anyone has been left out and invite them to bring anyone they wish.
- ▶ Schedule a mutually convenient time, location, and ample time for the meeting.
- ▶ If possible, help parents with transportation or childcare.
- ▶ Invite parents to review relevant documents prior to meeting and encourage classroom visits.
- ▶ Keep parents advised of progress on an ongoing basis – an IEP meeting is a bad place to spring a surprise.



During The Meeting

- ▶ Make parents feel welcome (greet at door, offer beverage, same size chairs for everyone, brief pre-meeting chit-chat and acclimatization).
- ▶ Ask everyone to introduce themselves and explain their role(s) in the meeting and relationship to the student.
- ▶ Address everyone with the same degree of formality.
- ▶ Speak in clear, plain language – avoid jargon.
- ▶ Have copies of materials available that will be referred to in the meeting.
- ▶ Focus on the child's individualized needs – not resource limitations.
- ▶ Maintain confidentiality – don't discuss other students.
- ▶ Don't hurry. Discuss any time constraints in advance.
- ▶ Be honest and forthright. Trust that the parent is also.
- ▶ Be willing to say, "I don't know, but I'll find out."
- ▶ Provide parents with meeting notes and an action plan.
- ▶ Schedule future meetings, if needed.



After The Meeting

- ▶ Review and evaluate what worked and didn't work at the meeting. Incorporate what worked into future meetings and discontinue practices that didn't work.
- ▶ Build an individualized meeting tip file about each student and family that identifies discussion areas that are potential sources of anger, joy, sensitivity, etc. and review before each meeting.
- ▶ Send home a thank you note appreciating parent's participation.
- ▶ Write down suggestions about things parents can do at home to help.



*Taken from "Tested Tips for Effective IEP Meetings," Marshall Peter, 1990.