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How to Talk So Schools Will Listen

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Teamwork is now a major focus in the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and provides for parents being members of the teams that make decisions about their children's education. Parents are members of these teams and have rights and responsibilities as team members. They are partners in the education of their children.



With this new partnership comes a welcomed responsibility. Parents need to understand and work towards building better partnerships and being an active member of their child's IEP team.

Building Partnerships

Here are some tips for building better partnerships:

- **Practice the art of reframing.** Reframing is stating a problem in a way that makes it more manageable. For instance, if parents are feeling intimidated and overwhelmed by the other members of an IEP team, they might feel like saying, "You always outnumber us and never listen. We're bringing an advocate to the next meeting!"

- Reframing this statement might sound like, "We often feel overwhelmed at these meetings. We would like to bring someone who can help us understand the process and make more informed decisions." It's the same message, stated in a more positive manner.

- **State concerns positively.** Even though you may have some very negative thoughts, remember that you want to state a problem or issue in a way that is more likely to get a positive response from your team members. Remember, "I" messages can defuse defensiveness.

- **Model trust and respect.** When you want to bring someone to a school meeting, inform your team who is coming with you. The school is required to let you know who the other team members are and whom they may be bringing. Do the same.

- **Let teachers and other school team members know your expectations.** Start early. Meet with your child's IEP team to let them know you expect to be an active member of your child's IEP team. Requesting a draft of an IEP, sharing your goals for your child with the teacher, or asking to participate in the preparation of a draft IEP will assist in the preparation of the final plan at the formal IEP meeting.

Work to Build Bridges

Building partnership bridges between parents and schools are possible. Even when

bridges have been burned, they may be rebuilt. The following are some ideas for parents:

- **Share past school experiences.** When parents have experienced difficult times with school in their own school life or their child's school life, it may be helpful to share those feelings with school personnel. "Last year was rough; but we want to start out on a new foot."
- **Make yourself known.** Go to the school. Work with school groups such as the PTA. Be a part of the school community.
- **Determine early in the school year how you will communicate with the teacher and the school.** Find out what is the best way to communicate. Ask the teacher if there is a time he/she prefers to be contacted.
- **Be assertive.** Assertive doesn't mean just agreeing with school personnel because they know best. It is being specific and keeping the focus on the child. What does it take for the teacher to do her job to help the student succeed?
- **Share your knowledge with your child's teacher and with your IEP team.** Who is your child? An excellent tool to use is the Student Profile from PEATC's IEP workshop (available at www.peatc.org). Homework is necessary to complete a student profile. What are your child's strengths and abilities? What is

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it that motivates your child? What are the challenges that you see? What are the adaptations and supports that help your child learn? This is valuable information that could take months for your child's teacher to learn.

- **Have a clear understanding of the contents of your child's IEP.** Share your understanding of goals, supports and accommodations with the team members to make sure there is a common understanding.

IDEA mandates parent participation on critical issues of eligibility, individualized education programs and the placement for children to receive special education services. These are team decisions. Parents have the opportunity and responsibility to participate in these decisions. Partnerships are not always easy; but in the long run, it is the best way to assure a free appropriate education for your child.



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