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When the Going Gets Tough, It's Time for Partnerships

By Cherie Takemoto

If teaching children with disabilities were easy, there would be very few conflicts between parents and schools. Teachers would be proud of their work and their students' progress and parents would be thankful that their children were becoming more successful learners and achievers. There would be joy, respect and gratitude that children were getting the help they need.

But, teaching children with disabilities to be successful is a challenging job. Multiple demands make it difficult to devote the time and effort teachers need to so a child can succeed. Sometimes limited resources or lack of help makes it difficult to support learning and development. Teachers who are feeling worried, ineffective or unsupported may feel *personally* attacked when a parent questions why the child isn't making progress.

Parents also may feel it never seems possible to do everything needed to help a child succeed. Parents and children have power struggles over homework, with parents sometimes giving up in frustration and resignation. Uncertainty about why a child is not progressing or what it will take to succeed drains energy and hope. It is heart breaking to see a child failing and fearing that he or she may not be able to realize a high quality of life, now as an adult.

Students with disabilities can feel trapped between high expectations and negative emotions from parents and teachers. They do well, but despite all their efforts, they don't succeed. Even when they do well, they are still far behind their peers. Other children may tease them, or worse, feel pity for them. Students worry that they

will not succeed and sometimes wonder if they should even try.

This is when disagreements among parents, teachers and students begin. Feelings of frustration and powerlessness could be an opportunity to seek help, but instead, some people become oppositional, deny responsibility or assign blame. This signals the start of a frustrating pattern of guilt and anger over what isn't being accomplished. For example, consider a boy who is not yet reading. His mother learns of a new computerized curriculum she believes can work. She is frustrated by her son's reading difficulties and the behavior problems starting at school. This curriculum is expensive, but the school gives in to the mother's requests after several IEP meetings. Getting the program on the child's IEP may be a success for the parent and meet the school's desire to prevent further conflict. Unfortunately, the program may go unused because of limited technical support and lack of free time in the student's life. The student still struggles and the battles between the parent, student and school continue.

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Too often conflict is settled the easy way. One person gives in because it is more difficult to disagree or resolve the real conflict. Parents believe the child can't learn and so don't expect much from the child or the school. An administrator may listen politely as a parent complains about a teacher and then respond by adding new services to the IEP, while allowing the child's learning failures to continue. Students may misbehave to get out of uncomfortable situations when they can't

participate in the "read-aloud" activity. Sometimes this apparent lack of conflict even looks like partnerships.

The measure of a true partnership, however, is not how partners interact when things go well. It is when they interact **as if** things are going well, when they are not. A true test of partnership is how partners interact when things are not going well. Students in special education don't learn easily. Things don't often go well for them. Partnerships are not what happen only during eligibility or IEP season. They are what happen on an ongoing basis.

Sometimes what is **not** said is much more powerful than what is said. Schools are not supposed to tell parents that lack of resources is the reason that they don't provide a service because students are entitled to appropriate services. Parents may demand services be described in great detail on the IEP because of negative experiences with their child's special education services. A student may not ask for a class she would like because she doesn't think that she has a say in her education.

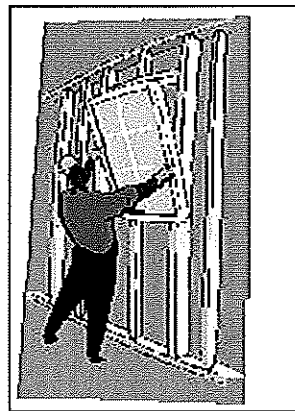
What are some things that can help, when it looks like the family, student and/or school may be headed for a conflict? For many, the first instincts are fight or flight: either build up "ammunition" and defend the strongest position possible or run away and ignore the problem. However, there is a third option: listen and respond to each other's perspectives, experiences and priorities so that you can work toward a mutually agreeable and respectful solution. While this option may be more difficult, it is usually the most successful. For even if a person wins a fight, he or she is still dependent on his or her opponents to carry it through.

Here are some things to consider when worried about potential conflict:

1. **Reflect upon your own assumptions about the conflict.** How does what has happened in the past color how you perceive this situation? Do you have negative experiences that make you less willing to accept the other's perspective? What are some of your unwritten and unspoken rules? How can you check these assumptions with others in this situation?
2. **Share your assumptions and perspectives.** Listen with your head and your heart. What principles guide your actions? What do you

dream about? What worries you? How are you feeling about this situation? Do you share any assumptions and perspectives? What do you question?

3. **Try to think and feel about the situation from the other's perspective.** Listen very carefully and try to think and feel about the situation from the other's perspectives. Don't interrupt! Be sure you understand what they are saying and give them the experience of being understood. What may be causing the other person to take this position? How would you feel if you were in his or her shoes? What is getting in the way of resolution? What might make it easier for that person feel more comfortable with the situation?
4. **Find agreement.** Where do you agree? How can you build on these agreements to address your disagreements?
5. **Reframe the issues.** How can you restate the problem in a way that doesn't place blame? How can this issue become more manageable? How



can everyone share responsibility and credit for success?

6. Identify options and opportunities. How can constraints, negative experiences, and concerns be acknowledged and addressed? Are there assumptions that do not seem appropriate in this situation? How can you build upon each other's

dreams and priorities? What are the expanded opportunities if you work in partnership? Who else needs to be involved in finding solutions?

Partnerships are not easy. Parents and professionals are partners, not necessarily by choice, but because of what the child needs. Since many placements are for one year, the partners are just getting comfortable with each other when it is time to change. With so many

professionals involved in a child's life, and so many children on those professionals' workloads, it can be difficult to take the time that partnerships require to work well. Ultimately, it is the child with disabilities that benefits from the hard work of partnerships. When partnerships do not go well, the child is often caught in the crossfire. However, when parents and professionals work well together, they model skills that will be useful in the future as students take more responsibility for themselves. The child will learn how when the going gets tough, it is time to bring in the partners.

NOTES: Marshall Peter generously collaborated on this article. Marshall is the Director of CADRE (<http://www.directionservice.org/cadre>), which is funded by the U.S. Department of Education to serve as The National Center on Dispute Resolution in Special Education. He has written an article on this subject that can be accessed on his website, http://www.directionservice.org/Working_Effectively.pdf.

Collaborative Problem Solving and Dispute Resolution in Special Education is a helpful manual by Ron Windle and Susan Warren from Hood River School District in Oregon. It can be found on the CADRE site at <http://www.directionservice.org/cadre/contents.cfm>.



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