

Working Effectively with Schools and Other Service Providers

By Marshall Peter

Marshall Peter is Executive Director of Direction Service, where he has worked for 24 years. This article draws on his experiences as an advocate for more than 500 families.

The world is increasingly complex and difficult to negotiate. As a result, parents may experience difficulty as they seek services for their children from schools, community agencies, medical practitioners, insurance companies and other organizations and individuals. Disagreements and tension often arise.

These situations are even more commonplace when the children have special needs. Although conflict can be frustrating and emotionally draining, it also provides an opportunity for enhanced understanding and informed partnerships that advances the best interests of children.

The following ten suggestions, while directed especially at parents who have children with disabilities, may be helpful to all families.

- ◆ **Take someone along.** Schools and agencies can be intimidating and overwhelming environments. Having a friend accompany you can increase your comfort level and make it easier to actively participate in meetings or discussions. It is not as important whom the person is, as that he or she is there to provide you with support.
- ◆ **Listen.** Many disagreements are based in misunderstandings about each other's positions and perspectives. Rather than preparing your next set of remarks, make a conscious effort to listen to what the other person is saying and making sure that you understand them. If you demonstrate your understanding through repeating it back or paraphrasing, the person you are speaking with may feel less of a need to think about what they are going to say to you next to help you understand them. Instead, they'll be able to focus their attention on understanding what you have to say.
- ◆ **Use the power of silence.** The pacing of much of our communication creates the expectation of rapid response. We have limited tolerance for silence. In fact, resisting the temptation to provide a "knee-jerk" response and instead being quiet gives the participants in a discussion the opportunity to consider what has been said and to clarify or make the best offer. Silence is a very important part of communication.
- ◆ **Positions/interest.** The confusion between positions and interests often creates a needless obstacle to the resolution of a disagreement. An interest is the end goal or desire. A position is a statement of how that goal can be achieved. Interests may be non-negotiable (I want Bill's speech to improve) while positions (Billy must have 4 hours of speech therapy a week) are. Clearly defining the interest and testing for agreement that the interest is reasonable and shared can create a basis for exploring a variety of options that probably will include the original position, but may also include other more mutually agreeable options.

- ◆ **Evaluate compromises.** Sometimes a school or family is willing to compromise on a position in order for a resolution to be reached. When that occurs, it is important to specify the conditions that will indicate that the agreed upon strategy is working and the specific action to be taken if the strategy doesn't meet the criterion for judging it a success. For example, a parent wants three hours of one-on-one reading instruction for their child, Sally. The school district representative believes that one hour will meet Sally's educational need with other program enhancements. If the parent were willing to give one-hour a try, he or she would agree with the understanding that on a given date, Sally would be evaluated. If Sally meets an agreed upon criteria, the present level of service would be continued. If, however, she does not meet the criteria, a different type or amount of service would be provided without additional negotiation.

- ◆ **The power of "I don't know what you are talking about."** Many professionals have highly specialized language that can be difficult to understand. The obligation to engage in good communication is shared by the sender and the recipient. If the recipient does not understand, and conveys that to the sender, it is an expression of self-confidence and security, rather than an expression of ignorance.

- ◆ **"If this were your child..."** While parents are experts on their children, it is sometimes difficult to wade through the enormous amount of information necessary to make a specific decision about a child and his or her needs. When called upon to make a complex decision about your child, valuable insight can be gained by asking a trusted teacher or service provider, "If this were your child, what would you do?" Sometimes providers may talk in generalities and avoid specifics. This question invites a highly trained and experienced practitioner to connect with you on a personal level.

- ◆ **Prepare questions.** School and other meetings are a rare opportunity to discuss your child's needs and concerns. Take the time before meetings to organize your thoughts and prepare a list of questions and concerns. This "vaccination against frustration" can save much time in follow-up calls and meetings.

- ◆ **Get involved.** If your schedule permits, look for opportunities to get involved. Volunteer at your child's school or other community events. Join boards and task forces. Subscribe to newsletters and make donations to organizations you value. Give time and energy to political campaigns. These sorts of activities will help you get access to valuable information and to make connections with important people who can be powerful allies. Most important, your efforts will provide needed support to organizations and causes that matter to you. Don't be concerned that your contribution is too small as all gifts are valued and appreciated.

- ◆ **Acknowledge good work.** All too often, people who do good work are taken for granted. In fact, taking the time to thank people is not only a positive thing to do, but also encourages them to do more good things. Supporting people who do well is often much more productive than criticizing people who do not.