



Communication



STOMP

Specialized Training Of Military Parents

Working Together for Military Families of Individuals with Disabilities!

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STOMP -A Project of Washington PAVE

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COMMUNICATION

Open communication between parents and school personnel is vital in developing an appropriate program for a child. Remember that you do not have to be a professional to be informed about your child's rights and what he/she is entitled to by law regarding their education.

Be aware that your body language will show your comfort level when communicating. Sit straight; but relaxed. Look people in the eye while you speak. Convey the message that you are comfortable in your role as an equal partner in the educational process concerning your child.

If you are told your child cannot be given the services you believe they are entitled to, ask to be shown the regulations or the part of the law that precludes it. Anticipate possible replies and practice an appropriate response beforehand. You may wish to take a support person with you when you go to a meeting as it is easy to feel overwhelmed the first few times you are in this environment.

Be assertive not aggressive.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY ASSERTIVE?

Being assertive enables you to act in your own best interests, to advocate for your rights, to express your feelings comfortably and honestly and to exercise your rights without denying the rights of others. It means speaking up, as well as, being firm and consistent.

WHAT IS AN "I" STATEMENT?

An "I" statement is one in which ownership of feelings or ideas is conveyed. Developing assertiveness skills can enable a person to express anger effectively in non-destructive ways. An important step in the non-destructive expression of anger is to take responsibility for your own feelings. Substitute "I" for ITS, YOU, THEY, EVERYBODY and WE. An example of an inappropriate statement would be "everybody thinks this school has a rotten reading program". An appropriate statement would be "I feel this reading program is not appropriate for my child; he/she is not making progress."

WHAT ARE SOME GOOD TECHNIQUES FOR COMMUNICATION?

You can present yourself as being assertive, as well as, self-confident and knowledgeable if you:

- ◆ Keep eye contact when speaking with someone. It is an effective way of showing that you are sincere about what you are saying.
- ◆ Face the person with whom you are speaking. Sit or stand in a relaxed but businesslike manner.
- ◆ Sit or stand straight with shoulders back and head up. Speak in a level, well-modulated voice. Be relaxed, smiling and cheerful.

IS TALKING THE ONLY WAY OF COMMUNICATING?

You are communicating whether or not you choose to speak. Whether you realize it or not, your body is saying things about you at all the times. Some ways of communicating other than words are:

- ◆ Facial expressions such as smiling, frowning, grimacing, raising or eye-brows.
- ◆ Posture should be straight but relaxed whether sitting or standing.
- ◆ Eye contact should be maintained when speaking or listening.

Effective listening is also an important part of communication. Do you listen intently enough to be able to repeat the speaker's statement reasonably accurate? If you find it hard to concentrate, practice listening before you go to a meeting. When you improve your listening skills, you will find you are a better communicator and better able to assert yourself effectively.

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PASSIVE	AGGRESSIVE	ASSERTIVE
Guilty or angry	Self-denying	Self enhancing
Self-denying	Self-enhancing at the expense of others	Self-enhancing
Inhibited, hurt, anxious	Expressive, depreciates others	Expressive, self-assured
Allows others to choose for self	Chooses for others	Chooses for self
Does not achieve desired goal	Achieves desired goal by hurting others	May achieve desired goal

THERE EVER A REASON TO BE AGGRESSIVE OR DIFFICULT?

Suzanne Stevens in her book The Learning Disabled Child: Ways That Parents Can Help, states, "... the hysterical mother can almost be considered a symptom of a learning disability. Hysteria is typical, it is logical and can be productive if used creatively to its fullest extent." Sometimes aggressive behavior will bring immediate, but short term relief. However, educators may feel that irrational behavior is a good reason to exclude the parent from the planning process. If you have acted inappropriately, apologize for your behavior. Then go on; do not refer to it again. If control is difficult for you, perhaps you could do some role playing before a meeting. Take someone with you who can help you stay on track and under control.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE TYPES OF NON-ASSERTIVE BEHAVIOR?

Sometimes parents may feel intimidated, guilty, helpless, frustrated, defensive or angry when they are meeting with professionals. They want to be thought of as “nice” and are afraid to say or do anything that might offend anyone. Other parents may resign themselves to less than appropriate services because they feel “There's nothing I can do about it.”

Some parents are afraid that if they assert themselves, they will cause trouble and it will be “taken out on their child”. Or, they do not feel comfortable challenging what is recommended when they do not agree. The “bombshell” parent may confront the teacher or administrator with anger and frustration, shouting or slamming hands on the desk. Irrational behavior **will** shut off effective communication.

Some parents have complete trust in the school system. “They are professionals; they know what is best for my child.” “I am only the parent.”

ASSERTIVENESS DOES MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THE LONG RUN.

Practice assertive behavior by recognizing your role as an equal partner. Come to meetings prepared. School personnel will be more apt to be responsive to your requests when you convey the message that you know what is appropriate for your child and what your child is entitled to in order to achieve a free and appropriate public education (FAPE).

DOES OPEN COMMUNICATION INCLUDE NEGOTIATION?

Yes. Let the school personnel know what you believe your child needs are, be persistent, but willing to listen to alternatives. School personnel bring a different perspective to meetings. Have documentation supporting your request and stay on task. Negotiating is showing a willingness to concede on an original request by substituting it with constructive alternatives. This means both sides yield to small concessions, but retain their originally stated positions. In that way, no one loses and the child gets an appropriate program.

Effective negotiating means sharing the information you have, honestly disagreeing and being willing to compromise (*as long as it leads to a plan that benefits your child). You must have a strong belief in your own ability to make a valuable contribution to your child's Individual Education Program (IEP).

WHAT ARE SOME INFORMAL PROBLEM SOLVING TECHNIQUES?

One of the techniques is to be persistent, stick to your point and to keep saying what you want over and over again without getting angry, irritated or loud. Examples are:

Parent: “My child is not making academic progress and he needs vocational education.”

School Official: “With all the budget cuts, we do not have the money to provide that.”

Parent: “I understand there is a budget problem, but my son needs vocational education.”

School Official: “If his behavior would improve, we might be able to find something.”

Parent: “If his placement was appropriate, his behavior would improve. He needs vocational education.”

School Official: “There are students who have greater disabilities than your son.”

Parent: “That is not my responsibility. My son needs vocational education.”

Give assertive responses to old excuses. For example:

School Official: “There is no money.”

Parent: “You will have to find it somehow because there must be money available for services required under Public Law 105-17.”

Have “concession” items, find common goals and establish timelines.

HOW CAN I PRESENT MY CONCERNS IN A NON-THREATENING WAY?

You can present your concerns as questions:

- ◆ “Timmy is so active. Is it possible to give him more opportunities to move around in the classroom?”
- ◆ “At home we notice Mary's speech is hard to understand. Do you think she would benefit from speech therapy?”

When you can present yourself as an interested and concerned parent who is not there to accuse and who can be trusted, you may get some good and useful answers such as:

- ◆ “Yes, I do think Mary does need speech therapy, but I was told my requests had been turned down.”

You can then approach the school administrator in a positive way:

- ◆ “Mary's speech problem is getting worse. She needs speech therapy.”

DO SCHOOL PERSONNEL EXPERIENCE SOME OF THE SAME FEELINGS PARENTS DO?

Yes. Many teachers and administrators have expressed that they, too, may feel frustrated, angry, threatened, insecure, helpless and put down when meeting with parents. Educators have special skills in the field of education, but they can not be experts in every area. Parents must be ready to support educators who say, “I don't know the answer,” by appreciating their honesty and working together to find the answers.

WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

WHEN DO I WRITE A LETTER?

1. When requesting a service for your child.
2. When you are dissatisfied with a service.
3. When you are requesting a meeting.
4. When you are filing a legal remedy/appealing a decision.
5. When you want to set a deadline.
6. When you document a telephone conversation.
7. When you are documenting verbal agreements.
8. When you are pleased about something.
9. When you want to say “thank you”.

WHEN DO I REQUEST A LETTER BE SENT TO ME?

1. When you are denied a requested service.
2. When you have been verbally promised something.
3. When you have been told something you know is not true and/or legal.
4. When you want your letter answered.

ARE THERE ANY TIPS?

1. Use business style letters.
2. Type, if possible.
3. Keep a copy for your file and indicate at the bottom of the letter (cc) to whom you are sending copies.
4. Check your spelling.
5. State your request clearly; keep to the point and send supporting documentation if possible.
6. Use the correct terminology.
7. Use your name (not “John's mother”).
8. Have someone read your letter before you send it.
9. Be clear, concise and as brief as possible.
10. Document **everything**.



IS THERE A SUGGESTED FORM FOR A LETTER?

Street Address
City, State, Zip
Date

Name of Person
Title
School District
Street Address
City, State, Zip

RE: Subject OR child's name and birthdate

Dear _____:

Main reason for letter.

Supporting statements.

Closing statement, request a reply giving timelines (example: 5 working days)

Telephone number where you can be reached, if appropriate.

Sincerely,

Signature

Typed name

(Remember to keep a copy for your file and indicate to whom you are sending copies by “cc” at bottom of letter.)

This sample letter can be used in many instances, like when asking to review, revise or re-write an IEP; when there are changes that need to be made in the IEP such as amendments, or for adding information in regard to a new diagnosis, medications or other info. It can also be used to request Mediation or Due Process Hearing.

SAMPLE EVALUATION REQUEST

Street Address
City, State, Zip
Date

Special Education Director or Program Coordinator
School District
Street Address
City, State, Zip

Dear (Name):

I am requesting a complete evaluation for my son/daughter (Name, date of birth) to determine if my child qualifies as a special education student as stipulated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), P.L.105-17, Section 614 (a) – (c).

I understand that the evaluation is to be provided at no charge to me. My reasons for requesting this procedure are: _____

I would appreciate meeting with each person who will be doing the evaluation before he/she tests my child so that I might share information about (child's name) with him/her. I will also expect a copy of the written report generated by each evaluator so that I might review it before the team meeting.

I understand that I have to give written permission for these tests to be administered and I will be happy to do so upon receipt of the proper forms.

I appreciate your help in this matter. If you have any questions, please call me at (telephone number).

Sincerely,

Signature

Typed Name

Remember to send this certified or hand carry and get a receipt.

(Remember to keep a copy for your file and indicate to whom you are sending copies by “cc” at bottom of letter.)

SAMPLE RE-EVALUATION REQUEST

Street Address
City, State, Zip
Date

Special Education Director or Program Coordinator
School District
Street Address
City, State, Zip

Dear (Name):

We are requesting a total re-evaluation of our son/daughter, (Name), birthdate _____, under P.L.105-17, Section 614(c). We understand that this testing process will be done in compliance with (cite appropriate sections of state regulations.)

We are requesting this re-evaluation because _____
_____.

We understand that we will be a part of the team that will determine the evaluations that are needed and that we will be required to provide permission to do the re-assessment. We will be happy to sign the necessary paperwork when it is provided. We also understand that we will receive a copy of the results of the re-assessment, and look forward to getting those results.

We appreciate your help and will be expecting to hear from you soon regarding the re-evaluation.

Sincerely,

Signature

Typed Name

Remember to send this certified or hand carry and get a receipt.

(Remember to keep a copy for your file and indicate to whom you are sending copies by "cc" at bottom of letter.)

SAMPLE INDEPENDENT EVALUATION REQUEST

Street Address
City, State, Zip
Date

Special Education Director or Program Coordinator
School District
Street Address
City, State, Zip

Dear (Name):

I am requesting an independent assessment at public expense for my son/daughter, (Name), birth-date, _____. This request is made pursuant to P.L. 105-17, Section 614 (a) – (c).

I am requesting this independent assessment in the area of (stipulate academics, speech, occupational therapy, physical therapy, vocational or vision therapy). I am requesting this independent assessment because I do not agree with the district results in this area. (Explain briefly with what you disagree; i.e., not accurate, no test available in district, not complete, etc).

I understand that a response to my request must be provided in writing by the school district within ten (10) days.

I appreciate your help. If you have any questions, please call me at (telephone number).

Sincerely,

Signature

Typed Name

Remember to send this certified or hand carry and get a receipt.

(Remember to keep a copy for your file and indicate to whom you are sending copies by “cc” at bottom of letter.)

SAMPLE RECORDS REVIEW REQUEST

Street Address
City, State, Zip
Date

Special Education Director or Program Coordinator
School District
Street Address
City, State, Zip

Dear (Name):

I would like to review any and all educational records held in any form and in any location by (Name) _____ School District for my son/daughter, ___(Name)_____, birthdate, This request is made pursuant to P.L. 105-17, Section 615 (b).

I understand that someone will be available to answer any questions I may have regarding my son's/ daughter's school records.

I look forward to meeting with you in the near future. If you have any questions, please call me at (telephone number).

Sincerely,

Signature

Typed Name

Be sure a written request is sent certified or hand carried and receipt received.

(Remember to keep a copy for your file and indicate to whom you are sending copies by “cc” at bottom of letter.)

**SAMPLE REQUEST TO
CORRECT OR REMOVE INFORMATION CONTAINED IN RECORDS**

Street Address
City, State, Zip
Date

Special Education Director or Program Coordinator
School District
Street Address
City, State, Zip

Dear (Name):

Upon review of my son/daughter, (Name), birthdate, _____, records, I find a need to request that (Name) School District remove or correct the information dealing with (give specific area) found in (give document, date and person responsible for document; i.e., psychological evaluation dated 6-7-97 by Dr. Paul Doe). I am making this request pursuant to P.L.105-17, Section 615 (b).

I will expect to hear from you, in writing, within five (5) working days regarding this matter.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Signature

Typed Name

Send certified mail or hand carry and get a receipt.

(Remember to keep a copy for your file and indicate to whom you are sending copies by "cc" at bottom of letter.)

SAMPLE DUE PROCESS REQUEST

Your Street Address
City, State, Zip
Date

(This letter must be sent to either the Superintendent of the Public School your child attends, or to the State Department of Education, whichever is specified by your State or Department of Defense School System)

Street Address
City, State, Zip

Dear (Name):

We are requesting a due process hearing as stipulated in P.L.105-17, Section 615 (e) and (f). This request is made by us on behalf of our son/daughter, (Name), birthdate, _____, (child’s address, if different then yours), who attends _____ school within _____ School District.

We are requesting this due process hearing because _____

To the best of our knowledge at this time, we feel the district should (describe here any possible solutions you feel would alleviate the problem).

Since the district and we are unable to find resolution for this (these) problem(s), we find it necessary to move forward with our procedural rights. We are willing to participate in a mediation hearing as a part of this process, but understand that it will not delay or deny us our right to due process. We are also willing to meet with a hearing officer in a pre-hearing conference. We would like a list of any free or low cost legal/advocacy help available, a copy of our due process rights and a list of hearing officers and their qualifications.

We regret that we have had to come to this method of resolution, but feel it necessary. We expect to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,

Signature

Typed Name

cc: School Principal
Special Education Director
Attorney

(Be sure to send this certified with return receipts requested to insure compliance with timelines. Remember to keep a copy for your file and indicate anyone else to whom you are sending copies by “cc” at bottom of letter.)

SAMPLE
LETTER REGARDING SUSPENSION OF A STUDENT WITH A DISABILITY
NOT RELATED TO WEAPONS OR DRUGS

Street Address
City, State, Zip
Date

Special Education Director or Program Coordinator
School District
Street Address
City, State, Zip

Dear (Name):

We have been notified that our son/daughter, (Name), birthdate, _____, has been suspended for (number of days) from (school name - school district). We are notifying you of our understanding of the procedures that must be conducted in compliance with P.L. 105-17, Section 615 (k), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Our child has an Individual Education Program (IEP) and we understand that because he/she receives special education services, a meeting must be held no later than 10 school days after a decision to suspend/expel has been made, or immediately if the cumulative total of suspensions total 10 school days. We understand that the purpose of this meeting will be to determine if the reason for the suspension is related to his/her disability and to discuss his IEP goals and objectives, placement, and determine if a functional behavioral assessment is needed. We also understand that the number of days he/she can be suspended is not to exceed ten (10) cumulative school days in a given year, without notice of change of placement and all due process procedures since he/she is in special education. Additionally, it is our understanding the school district remains responsible for providing appropriate educational and related services, as outlined in his/her current IEP to include access to the general education curriculum, during the period of suspension.

We would like to meet with you as soon as possible to discuss this. Please call us at (telephone number).

Sincerely,

Signature

Typed Name

cc: School District Superintendent

Send certified mail or hand carry and get a receipt.

(Remember to keep a copy for your file and indicate to whom you are sending copies by "cc" at bottom of the letter.)

**SAMPLE LETTER REGARDING SUSPENSION AND EXPULSION WHEN WEAPONS
OR DRUGS ARE INVOLVED**

Your Address
City, State Zip Code
Date

Superintendent of School District
Address
City, State Zip code

Dear (Name),

We are writing in response to the notice that our son/daughter has been unilaterally placed into an interim alternative placement for weapon/drug violations in compliance with P.L. 105-17, Section 615 (k) (1)(A)(ii) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

We understand that a Manifestation Determination meeting will be scheduled within the next 10 school days to determine if the behavior is related to the disability. We also understand that we will have the opportunity to be a part of the decision making team regarding the interim alternative placement and the provision of services. As this placement will be for up to 45 calendar days, we feel it is important that (child's name) program, as currently outlined in his/her IEP, be followed, and that he/she have access to the general education curriculum, although in a different setting.

We are requesting a copy of all of our procedural due process rights. Please contact as quickly as possible regarding the meeting to determine if this is or is not a manifestation and to talk about the interim alternative placement.

We appreciate your assistance during this difficult situation. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us.

Sincerely,

Your Signature

Your typed name

Send certified mail or hand carry and get a receipt.

(Remember to keep a copy for your file and indicate to whom you are sending copies by "cc" at bottom of the letter.)

SAMPLE EXPEDITED DUE PROCESS HEARING REQUEST

Your Street Address
City, State, Zip
Date

(This letter must be sent to either the Superintendent of the Public School your child attends, or to the State Department of Education, whichever is specified by your State or Department of Defense School System)
Street Address
City, State, Zip

Dear (Name):

We are requesting an expedited due process hearing as stipulated in P.L.105-17, Section 615 (k)(6) (A). This request is made by us on behalf of our son/daughter, (Name), birthdate, _____, (child’s address, if different then yours), who attends _____ school within _____ School District.

We are making this request because we disagree with (determination that (your child’s name) behavior was not a manifestation of his/her disability, *or*, the decision regarding placement of (your child’s name) made because of the discipline procedures). Our reasons for this disagreement are _____

At this time, we feel it is necessary for (name of school district) to (state here any solution you feel would be necessary to resolve this problem, to the extent you know a solution at this time).

We understand that you will be contacting us shortly regarding the date, place, and time of this expedited hearing. We understand that an impartial hearing officer, from the pool of hearing officers for special education hearings, will preside over this hearing.

We are requesting a copy of all of our procedural safeguards as a part of this request. We appreciate your expedient response to our request.

Sincerely,

Your Signature

Your typed name

Send certified mail or hand carry and get a receipt.

(Remember to keep a copy for your file and indicate to whom you are sending copies by “cc” at bottom of the letter.)

SAMPLE LETTER DOCUMENTING A TELEPHONE CALL

Street Address
City, State, Zip
Date

(Name)
Title
Street Address
City, State, Zip

Dear (Name):

Thank you for talking with me today on the telephone. I appreciate your concern for (child's name). I understand from our conversation that you are concerned about OR. As I mentioned on the telephone, I am concerned about _____.

You feel _____ will help and the school has agreed to _____. I also said that I would _____.

Thank you for your help. If you have any questions, please call me at (telephone number).

Sincerely,

Signature

Typed Name

Remember to send this certified or hand carry and get a receipt.

(Remember to keep a copy for your file and indicate to whom you are sending copies by "cc" at bottom of letter.)

SAMPLE LETTER DOCUMENTING A MEETING

Street Address
City, State, Zip
Date

(Name)
Title
Street Address
City, State, Zip

Dear (Name):

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me on (date). Also, please thank (List names) for attending the meeting. I understand that you are concerned about _____ OR, As I reported during the meeting, I am concerned about _____. You feel will help and the school has agreed to _____. I also said that I would _____.

Thank you for your help. If you have any questions, please call me at (telephone number).

Sincerely,

Signature

Typed Name

Remember to send this certified or hand carry and get a receipt.

(Remember to keep a copy for your file and indicate to whom you are sending copies by “cc” at bottom of letter.)

VERBAL COMMUNICATIONS

INVITATIONS TO COMMUNICATION

- ◆ “Tell me about it.”
- ◆ “I would like more information about that.”
- ◆ “I would be interested to hear what you think.”
- ◆ “Why do you think that?”
- ◆ “Let's discuss it.”
- ◆ “I do not clearly understand. Could you put it another way?”
- ◆ “What does this mean?”
- ◆ “This seems important to you.”
- ◆ “Tell me the whole story.”

These kinds of responses say:

I respect you as a person.

I might learn something from you.

I really want to hear more.

Your ideas are worth listening to.

I care for your opinion.

I want a working relationship.

I want the best program for my child.

EFFECTIVE LISTENING INVOLVES:

Being silent - listening through an entire explanation.

Using words which convey acceptance of the individual and respect for his/her thoughts.

Creating a warm atmosphere for talk.

Relaxing.

Trying to identify the feelings behind the words.

Showing a range of possibilities and other points of view.

Making positive comments.

Being satisfied with increased understanding and awareness.

NEGOTIATION

Negotiation is back and forth communication designed to reach agreement when two or more parties have some interests in common and some that are opposed. Negotiation is give and take; it is not a debate.

In every negotiation, three crucial perceptions are generally present:

1. Information: The other side seems to know more about you and your needs than you know about them and their needs.
2. Time: The other side does not seem to be under the same kind of organizational pressure; time constraints and restrictive deadlines you feel you are under.
3. Power: The other side always seems to have more power and authority than you think you have.

All power is based on perception. If you think you have it, then you have it. If you think you do not have it, even if you have it, then you do not have it. In short, you have more power if you believe you have power and view your life's encounters as negotiations.

Negotiation should produce an agreement through a consensus process. It should improve or, at the very, least not damage the relationship between both parties.

Remember that there is no one solution to a problem. Make a clear attempt to understand the facts and always emphasize the areas of agreement.

Negotiation does not force a solution; it helps people to arrive at a mutual solution.



Adapted from materials prepared by:
Roger Manus (Advocacy and Legal Consultant/Trainer) and Bonnie Larson.

WHAT DOES EACH PERSON HAVE TO OFFER?

It is very important for all those involved in planning a child's educational program to have a clear understanding of their role and the roles of other participants. Parents, teachers, specialists and administrators all have important information to share and skills to contribute to the planning process.

PARENT

Parents often contribute information that can be obtained from no other source. Parents know their children in a way that no one else does and very often provide the missing link in helping others work effectively with a particular child.

When we look at the amount of time parents spend with their children, it is obvious that they observe their children in situations and environments that professionals just do not have the opportunity to share. In the home setting, parents observe their children's self-help skills. Can Johnny toilet himself? Does he brush his teeth independently? Can he choose his own clothing and dress himself?

With the help of skilled professionals, parents can compose a comprehensive medical and developmental history of their child. Information regarding medical problems and/or medications may be extremely useful to those working with a child. (1)

Parents have the opportunity to interact with and observe their child in a family setting. How does Susan get along with her brothers and sisters? Does she relate better to males or females? Can she deal with a large group of people or do large groups have a negative effect on her behavior? How do family members relate to Susan? Does she play with children who are her own age? Does she lose her energy at certain times of the day?

As parents, we develop style and techniques of dealing with our children's behaviors. Through a process of trial and error, we learn which methods are most effective for our particular child. The sharing of this information with a child's teacher or therapist can be of tremendous help.

Parents have observed their child from birth learning and acquiring new skills. How does Nancy learn best? Does she show certain patterns in learning skills? Does she show an inclination to certain types of learning?

In sharing out-of-school time together, parents see what special interests their child has. This can prove to be extremely helpful to understanding what a child finds to be fulfilling and reinforcing. Does Ralph have a special toy? Does he enjoy listening to music or playing sports? Does he respond well to verbal praise? How does your child do in other settings such as Sunday school, YMCA's, Special Olympics or scouting activities? A child's teacher(s) can often incorporate these ideas into an enjoyable and motivating learning environment.

(1) For information on how to create and maintain a home file, see our Home Files & Records packet.

TEACHER

The teacher can see the overall picture of the child's socialization skills within the school setting. Does Sarah get along with her peers? Does she initiate contact with her peers or does she play alone? Does she cooperate/participate in-group games? Does she have a sense of being part of an activity?

Teachers know of, or have access to, resources available within the school. He /she will know in what ways your child will benefit from being included in the general education curriculum. The teacher can assess whether certain educational materials are appropriate for a particular child. Teachers can also develop new materials or adapt old ones to meet the particular needs of a child. Teachers should share this information not only with parents while planning for a child's individualized education program (IEP), but also with other teachers and professionals working to implement the goals and objectives/benchmarks on the IEP. Finally, this information should be shared with administrators, whose job it is to project the need for future change, as well as, growth of programs and facilities.

SPECIALISTS

Any number of specialists whose training has been in a specific area relating to children with disabilities and/or education may be employed by a school district. Included in this group could be communication disorders specialists (speech therapists), occupational therapists, physical therapists, social workers, educational audiologists, learning disability specialists, reading specialists, behavioral specialist and psychologists. Specialists are invaluable in helping to identify, evaluate, plan and implement programs for children with disabilities.

The specialist is often the one to evaluate a particular child in a specific area: i.e., speech and language, hearing, muscular control, etc. While evaluating the child, the specialist has the opportunity to make observations about a child's learning abilities. The specialists can interpret the results of the test or evaluation and can share that information with parents and teachers. They can explain how the results of an evaluation can influence the plans while developing an appropriate educational program.

Specialists are knowledgeable about many techniques and assistive technology devices that can be used in working with a child with a disability. A physical therapist can offer suggestions on recreational equipment that can be used for therapy as well as on modifications to the classroom. The reading specialist is familiar with a variety of materials especially designed for children with reading differences. The occupational therapist can provide information on improving eye-hand coordination. They can also offer suggestions on adapting existing materials to the special needs of a child.

Depending on the school district, the specialist may be the one who actually carries out a planned program for the child with a disability. In other districts, the specialist may serve in a consulting capacity. In this case, they can design and set up programs to be carried out by someone else. The specialist could train the classroom teacher, an aide or the parent and closely supervise the service being provided. This type of information sharing provides benefits to all the children not just the child receiving services. The newly acquired skills learned from the specialist help parents and teachers become more aware of the different individualized needs of all children.

ADMINISTRATORS

There are several different administrative levels within a given school district. The administrator is responsible for the management of a school district or an individual school. Administrators are responsible for knowing and carrying out the laws regarding education, school policies and procedures within their district. The superintendent oversees this on a district level. The principal is similarly responsible for this within a particular school.

They know or have access to information on resources and services within their district and state. With the input of other school personnel, they can assess whether the needs of the children with disabilities in their district are being met and plan to meet the changing needs of these children.

Administrators are responsible for supervising all school personnel and coordinating their activities. They have the power to delegate responsibilities to the appropriate people. The superintendent is informed of a request for special education and then he/she will filter the information to the person responsible for special education in that particular school district.

The superintendent also acts as the representative of the liaison to the local school board in his/her district.

OTHERS

Within a given school district there can be several other school personnel who play a role in the planning of appropriate education programs. They may be administrators of specialists; i.e., the Director of Pupil Personnel Services, guidance counselor, special education regional representative, etc.

The status and responsibilities of these people vary from district to district.

- ◆ Director of Pupil Personnel Services. In many districts, the Director of Pupil Personnel Services is responsible for coordination of special education. This person may be the chairperson of the district evaluation/placement team. They are knowledgeable about special education and related services in the school district. They may also be known as Director of Special Services or Coordinator of Special Education.
- ◆ Guidance Counselor. Frequently is a member of the evaluation/placement team. Their particular expertise may be in the areas of scheduling and program coordination. In some cases, they may be directly involved in the child's program in a counseling capacity.
- ◆ Special Education Representative. Plays a variety of roles, ranging from program development consultant, coordinator of teacher inservice training and, in some instances, assistance in program planning for an individual child. They are knowledgeable regarding special education.

Get to know if your school system has any of these positions and who these individuals are.

TEN STEPS TO TAKE . . .

When you are in conflict with your school system

The right of parents to question actions or decisions of schools is clearly written into the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and regulations for Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Both laws provide legal options for exercising your right to protest. However, before you take legal steps, you want to use every available channel of communication with school representatives to try to settle disputes through understanding, negotiation and possibly mediation.

It is important to be aware of the people to whom you can turn for advice - and the key officials with whom you should discuss your problems. Here is a checklist you can use to help you take constructive action when things seem to be going wrong. Remember that your child with a disability has the right to a free appropriate public education (FAPE). This right is guaranteed by law.

1. Talk with your child's classroom teacher and to other school personnel who are aware of your child's needs, such as the counselor, nurse, school psychologist or social worker. Naturally, not all of these people are involved in every situation. Discuss the problem you see with any and all of the staff members or specialists who do know your child to see if adjustments or changes can be made through new understanding and effort.
2. If these first steps do not work, be sure to find out who among these school people will be willing to help you go further. Is the teacher sympathetic to your needs? Will she stand by your request? Does the counselor have information that will help? Ask them if they will be willing to come to meetings with you later or to supply letters or statements in support of your position.
3. Discuss your concerns with other professionals outside of school who know your child, such as your family doctor, pediatrician, psychologist, audiologist, neurologist or other specialists. Will they support your efforts to get the requested services for your child? Will they write letters or come with you to important conferences to answer questions? Will they express their views on a tape recorder - for you to bring to the school?
4. Remember to keep notes on your conversations and a file of up-to-date records. This is invaluable.
5. Discuss your complaints with the school principal. Have a clear idea of your reasons for requesting a change in your child's program and present your documentation. Be straightforward and self-assured. You are an equal partner in this and other school conferences. It is neither necessary nor productive to be aggressive or apologetic. Approach it as a situation in which both of you are seeking a solution to a problem.
6. Go directly to your district director of special education or director of pupil personnel services if the school is unable (or unwilling) to change its decisions. If no such staff positions exist in your district, contact the superintendent of schools. The superintendent is responsible for all school programs in the district and must be involved if other officials are unresponsive. Again, your notes, records and other files should be in order. Use them. In all of these conferences, it is important to know what part of the federal and/or state law protects your child's rights.

7. Bring your complaint before the local school board if none of these approaches work. Increasingly, there are members of school boards who are deeply concerned about special education and they may be able to take action on your behalf. Even if their actions do not bring about immediate results that help your child, school board members, in the long run, see to it that education programs are developed, teachers are trained for new responsibilities, and that schools are accessible as well as capable of meeting the special needs of children with disabilities.
8. Get in touch with your state or DODEA (Department of Defense Education Agency), director of special education. He/she should have information and advice you can use. State Departments of Education and DODEA are responsible for carrying out the provisions of Public Law 105-17. Explain fully what you see as a violation of your child's right to a free appropriate public education under the law. Find out what action they can take to help the situation.
9. States are required by Public Law 105-17 to appoint compliance officers to investigate problems and monitor the implementation of the law. Find out if your state department of education has appointed someone to fill this position. Contact this officer for further advice, clarification of your rights under the law and suggestions for action.
10. Locate appropriate resources! In addition to reaching and conferring with these key people, it is extremely important to get support and information from other well-informed resources. They include:

Members of state and local chapters of parents and advocacy organizations such as the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities, The ARC, National Association for the Deaf, United Cerebral Palsy - and groups representing other disabilities. More and more parents are now trained and ready to go with you to school meetings, help decide what to do next, how to present your case. If you have difficulty locating parent groups concerned about your child's disability, contact one of these organizations:

- National Information Center for Children & Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY) at 1(800) 695-0285(v/tty) or <http://www.nichcy.org>
 - Your State's Parent Training and Information Center (PTI), that can be found through the National Alliance for Parent Centers at: www.taalliance.org, or call 1-888-248-0822 (nationwide)
 - STOMP at 1(800)5PARENT(v/tty) or www.stompproject.org.
- ◆ Advocates with special knowledge about the rights of children and youths with disabilities. The number of centers providing advice and assistance in obtaining appropriate school programs is growing. Parents do not necessarily need the aid of a lawyer, but they often do need someone who understands the law and the school bureaucracy thoroughly. Protection and advocacy centers are set up in every state for children with developmental disabilities. Check also with area college and university departments of special education.
 - ◆ The people you have gathered as your own advisors can help counsel you about next steps if all your efforts to come to agreement break down. That is

when you need to decide whether to call for a due process hearing before an impartial hearing officer, as provided by Public Law 105-17, or to take other legal action. This is your right and it may turn out to be necessary; but before you move into legal action, be sure that you have done what you can to solve problems through the methods already outlined.

Education encompasses many phases for many individuals. It must begin early; it must be continuous; it must be designed to fit the needs of each individual; it must be coordinated by the state agency assigned the responsibility for providing education for its population. Until the individual with a disability becomes self-sufficient and self-supporting, tremendous expense is involved. The duration of this period could be from birth until death, as many people will not reach a level of self-sufficiency.

It probably will be necessary to have more than one meeting to settle things. When meetings are held, make clear that you would like to have other people present who know your child and are familiar with the problem. Ask to have them included so that the discussion will be as productive as possible. Many problems can be settled just this way.

The federal laws lay out specific steps and timelines for due process hearings and appeals. Write to your state Department of Education for information about state rules and regulations regarding this process. Find out if a manual describing educational rights has been written for your state - and get a copy. Take time to study your alternatives and get all the help you can from other parents, teachers and advocates so that you can be as effective as possible in defending your child's rights.

Adapted from an issue
of Common Sense From Closer Look.

PARENT MISHANDLING OF PROFESSIONALS

As in any human relationship, there are always two sides to a story. Parents have been guilty of mishandling professionals.

Shopping around. Parents have been guilty of “shopping around” for a professional who will give them the answers they want to hear. This is a waste of energy and time for both parents and professionals. Once parents have received several similar opinions from experts on a certain question, they should cease asking about it. They should then expend their energy on trying to find the best possible services for their child.

Unfair expectations. Some parents place professionals on a pedestal - expecting them to have all the answers and to take on the responsibility of making all the difficult decisions concerning their child. This is unfair; no one person is able to know all there is to know and should not be expected to. In fact, it is dangerous for parents to assume that professionals are omniscient in their field. It is also good to obtain several opinions about a problem before trying to resolve it. Since parents are the legal guardians of their child, they should assume the responsibility of obtaining recommendations from professionals and then make their own decisions about what is best for the child.

Dishonesty. Sometimes parents are not honest with themselves or professionals about their feelings. It may be difficult for a parent to admit to a professional that he/she does not really want to, or is not capable of, taking on another responsibility (working with a child at home, going through parent training, participating in team meetings, etc.) that demand more of his/her time and energy. Parents are not traditionally supposed to feel this way, although many do. However, if the professional does not understand a parent's limited amount of resources, he/she cannot give a workable recommendation to the parent.

Unwillingness to listen. Some parents feel their authority or integrity is threatened by professional advice. They adopt the attitude that “no one is going to tell me about my kid.” “I know what's best for him.” This attitude prevents parents from taking advantage of a professional's expertise.

Unreasonable demands. In some cases, parents tend to demand unreasonable amounts of attention and time from professionals. Parents may harass a professional for information that he cannot give them. In their frustration with inadequate programs, they may attack a professional who is powerless to remedy the situation.

PROFESSIONAL MISHANDLING OF PARENTS

Professionals have been partially responsible for creating barriers between themselves and parents of children who have disabilities. Many of these barriers have been the result of professionals mishandling parents.

Professional ignorance. Many professionals in the medical and behavioral sciences still have very little knowledge of some disabilities. Rather than admit their ignorance, they give parents misleading information. Sometimes they may not even recognize a disability in a child.

Professional hopelessness. Some medically oriented professionals view disabilities as “incurable diseases”. Therefore, anyone who has a disability is a hopeless case. Parents often sense this defeatist attitude and either adopt it or resent the person who holds it.

Referral ad infinitum. It is well known that some parents “shop around” in the hope of finding answers to their questions that are satisfying to them. However, in many cases, professionals have referred parents to other experts. These referrals may be made because the professional does not wish to be the one to tell the parents the bad news. Or it might be that the professional does not feel he/she has the expertise to discuss a particular disability with the parents. Unnecessary referrals lead parents on wild goose chases and frustrate their efforts to find help for their child.

Veil of secrecy. Parents are too familiar with the veil of secrecy many professionals try to place over information about a child. Most parents want to know about any important information concerning their child no matter how threatening or uncomfortable the professional may think it would be for them to hear.

Tune out syndrome. Too many times professionals have been guilty of disregarding information or questions parents have about their child.

Professional omniscience. Many professionals are guilty of trying to impress parents with their great knowledge. They often use terminology that is difficult for a layperson to understand, although the concepts may be very simple. They have excluded parents and their children from the decision-making process, assuming that only professionals have the wisdom to make final decisions about other people's destiny.

Parents as patients. Many professionals consider parents prime candidates for psychotherapy. Instead of receiving information about their child, parents may be offered counseling to help them accept disabilities and relieve themselves of the depression caused by it. This counseling is unrealistic because it is impossible for parents to accept their child with a disability without some sorrow. In fact, these responses are really quite normal.

WAYS TO SEE AUTHORITY

Webster's dictionary defines authority as; "power to influence or command thought, opinion or behavior . . . persons in command . . . a convincing force." When dealing with the special needs of your child, this authority can seem to be a stumbling block or insurmountable obstacle. No one individual has full authority over the needs of your child. It is a team effort. Team members come from varying backgrounds as well as areas of expertise. Each member of the team is very important, but is only a part of the whole picture. You, as a parent, are an important member of the team; you are the expert on your own child.

This partnership will include a variety of individuals besides you and school district personnel. It could include doctors, attorneys, law enforcement officers, potential or present employers, neighbors, friends or relatives. When thinking of your child, you may see him/her at home, play, work or school. Your doctor sees him/her as someone with certain health needs. School personnel see him/her as one of the students requiring special educational services. Each of these is a true picture, but just part of the whole picture. Children must be seen as a whole person, not just the special needs they may have in some areas. Only when we all combine all our knowledge of the child can we get a complete, accurate picture. We need to recognize each of our points of view as having value. Thus, the importance of the "team".

Other team members can sometimes intimidate parents. Recollections from our childhood come to mind like unwanted visitors: "Listen to the teacher, she knows best." "Take your medicine as the doctor says and you'll be fine." Again, we feel like the new kid in school thinking: "Will they like me?" "Will I do all right?" "What if I can not think of anything to say or, worse yet, what if I say or do the wrong thing?"

All of these fears can intensify our frustrations and limit our ability to recognize our important role on the team. These fears may cause us to keep quiet even though we have something to say. These fears may cause us to leave a meeting feeling angry and frustrated. This, in turn, may cause us to express our anger in other areas or be less trusting and willing to work cooperatively.

It is only when we recognize our role on the team that we can work effectively for our children. To facilitate this, we may want to seek opinions and information from a variety of sources, including our children. We can then talk with other team member's confidant in our opinions and ourselves recognizing the importance of what others say and gaining the respect of other team members.

Then we will really be able to see ourselves in an effective partnership.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO RESOLVE YOUR PARTNERSHIP PROBLEMS

PROFESSIONALS:

1. Report social as well as academic information.
2. Keep written records of behavior incidents and classroom worksheets.
3. Report only behavior relevant to school situations.
4. Encourage parents to have regular conferences.
5. Be honest with your self and with parents.
6. Go out of your way to involve both parents.
7. Provide written feedback or follow up of conferences.
8. Convey that your interest is the beginning, not the end, of your involvement.
9. Be prepared and able to document your concerns.
10. Describe – do not diagnose.
11. Gobbledygook is out!

PARENTS:

1. Remember the ultimate responsibility for your child is yours.
2. Report social as well as academic information.
3. Give honest feedback.
4. Make your own decisions.
5. Know your resources.
6. Do not fall into the trap of being defensive
7. Ask for and read materials related to your child's disability.
8. Learn to keep records of all visits, phone calls, names, questions, answers and dates.
9. Talk with and ask questions of as many professionals as possible.
10. Join a parent support group.
11. Think of your life with your child with a disability in the same terms as life with your other children.

BOTH:

1. Listen to the child (only she/he can give that point of view).
2. Inform yourself of community resources.
3. Stay in close touch with each other.
4. Be prepared and able to document your concerns.
5. Admit when you do not know why he/she does what he/she does.
6. Remember there is no such thing as a one shot, final and unchanging diagnosis.
7. Do not keep secrets from each other.