



Practical Strategies for Helping Parents in Conflict: Assisting Divorced or Estranged Parents Through the IEP Process

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September 11, 2014

11:30 am – 12:45 pm PACIFIC TIME

Note: The PowerPoint is currently available on the CADRE website
www.directionservice.org/cadre/feinbergwebinar.cfm

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Practical Strategies for Helping Parents in Conflict: Assisting Divorced or Estranged Parents Through the IEP Process

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Issue that has not received much attention in the literature but an ever-greater discussion item among practitioners:

What do administrators, teachers and related service providers do when parents [married, divorced, separated, never married] engage in highly contentious behavior during IEP meetings?



What is Contentious Behavior?



You know it when you see it....

- ❖ Off-task sidebar conversations
- ❖ Criticism by one parent toward the other parent for alleged offenses unrelated to topics for the meeting
- ❖ Bringing up issues that are designed to be a source of embarrassment to the other parent
- ❖ Overtures to team members to establish alliances with them so that they will support the "good" parent against the "bad" parent
- ❖ Verbal and/or physical aggression



What is Contentious Behavior? (cont.)

You know it when you see it...

- ❖ Nonverbal behavior: eye rolling, sighs, head shaking
- ❖ Participation by unwanted individuals:
 - former in-laws
 - new partners or spouses
 - advocates or attorneys hired by each parent
- ❖ Disagreement by one parent with recommendations of the team in order to annoy the other parent
 - Example: Parent withdraws permission for testing after approval is granted by the other parent





Why Does This Happen at IEP Meetings?

- ❖ Main reason: the parents may only be in the same room during IEP meetings > tempting to use this forum to express anger, anguish, rage from failed relationships
- ❖ Presence of the other parent can be a source of extreme discomfort
- ❖ Idea that the other parent has a role in educational decision making can be resented by one parent, particularly if that parent has primary day-to-day care of the child



Seeking Guidance...

- ❖ IDEA makes the assumption that parents speak with one voice and will have similar views in educational decision making
- ❖ IDEA is silent in regards to the role of custodial/noncustodial parents in educational decision making

In Order to Explore This Issue...

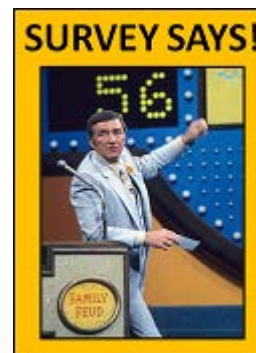


CADRE conducted:

- ❖ A literature review
- ❖ Online survey (n=154 respondents)
- ❖ Interviews with a broad range of stakeholders (n=35: parent center leaders, mediators/facilitators, program managers, advocates/attorneys, teachers and administrators)

Results...

- ❖ Conflict between parents at IEP meetings is a pervasive concern for school personnel in all parts of the country and among all groups – urban, suburban, rural; and across parental educational levels
- ❖ Administrators/team members reported they lacked strategies to deal with awkward, time-consuming and unproductive meetings
- ❖ Administrators/team members were privy to family issues that went well beyond what would be expected in an IEP meeting





New CADRE Resource

In the Best Interests of the Child: Individualized Education Program (IEP) Meetings When Parents Are In Conflict

Published Feb. 2014

www.directionservice.org/cadre/bestinterests.cfm

Authors: Edward Feinberg, Ph.D., Philip Moses, M.A., Anita Engiles, J.D., Amy Whitehorne, J.D., Marshall Peter, M.S.



What are some strategies that can be considered by school teams?





Team Self-Assessment

- ❖ How are parent-to-parent conflicts handled now? Discussion among stakeholders including parents who have participated in IEP meetings
- ❖ Self-assessment can be incorporated into a larger school improvement or professional development plan
- ❖ Questions to pose:
 - *“What is the comfort level among team members when conflict is expressed between parents?”*
 - *“How do team members respond to conflict?”*



Team Self-Assessment (cont.)

Questions to pose:

- ❖ *“Is there a preference by team members for one parent over the other? How is that expressed?”*
- ❖ *“Do both parents feel that they have been treated with respect by team members?”*
- ❖ *“Do team members intervene when parents argue?”*
- ❖ *“Are there back-up strategies when it becomes clear that parents cannot both be at the IEP table?”*



Team Planning Meetings

School personnel can plan how they will deal with parental conflict:

- ❖ What are potential stressors that might disrupt the meeting?
- ❖ How will team members keep the meeting focused on the student and his/her educational needs?
- ❖ How have conflicts been handled in previous meetings? What did/did not work?
- ❖ Who will take the lead should there be conflict between parents?



Pre-Meeting Phone Call to Each Parent

1. Lead person can call parent to discuss meeting agenda, scheduling, location, who will attend, and reinforce the importance of parental participation.
2. Discuss current legal decision making status, divorce decree, changes that may have occurred.
3. Discuss who will attend the meeting, whether the other person knows those who are attending, and how that person will be received by the other parent.
4. Explore if conflicts are anticipated and invite ideas as to how they should be handled.



In the likelihood that there will be high conflict situations or when there are restraining orders

- ❖ Electronic communication can be used and parents can be in separate places [Skype, teleconference, Internet-based video conferencing]
- ❖ Separate meetings should be avoided; this is time-consuming for team members and does not give each parent the chance to hear contributions to the plan proposed by the other parent





The IEP Meeting

1. Meeting time: Scheduled at a time that is convenient for each parent.
2. Arrival/waiting area: May need to have separate areas; front desk person should be prepared.
3. Some teams have snacks and drinks available; there should be water and tissues.
4. Meeting space: Plan carefully – parents should not be expected to sit next to each other.
5. Introductions and name cards.
6. Review: Schedule/time allocation/what needs to be accomplished.



Rules of Etiquette

- ❖ Focus on child's educational needs
- ❖ Ask parents to bring a picture that can be placed on the table or ask each parent to show a brief video of the child
- ❖ Everyone will have the opportunity to participate
- ❖ Speaker will not be interrupted
- ❖ Use plain language; minimize jargon or acronyms
- ❖ Electronic devices are silenced
- ❖ Use parking lot to save topics for later discussion





During the Meeting

- ❖ Stay strengths-based: *"What are you most proud of that your child is doing?"*
- ❖ Use of sentence stems: *"What is most important to me about my child ____"; "I want my child to ____."*
- ❖ Functional/practical: *"During the next year what would you like your child to do that s/he is not doing now?"*
Despite parental conflicts, this can be a key question for consensus.
- ❖ *"What are your thoughts about how we can all work together to make this happen?" "What can the school do?" "What are other people or activities in the child's life and how can they help to achieve this?"*

Dealing with Conflicts During the Meeting...

- ❖ Breaks, caucuses
- ❖ Use of Third Party Process:
 - Facilitation
 - Mediation
 - Consensus Development Conference



Achieving Closure

- ❖ Sign off/agreement/permission by both parents
- ❖ Designated person and process for follow up concerns
- ❖ Telephone call to each parent the day after the meeting



Discussion





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www.directionservice.org/cadre/inclusivelistingwebinar.cfm





Upcoming Webinar:

Restorative Justice Practice in Special Education:
Resolving Conflict and Promoting Equity for Students
with Disabilities

Presented by
John English

November 6, 2:30-3:45pm ET (11:30-12:45pm PT)

For more information and registration:

www.directionservice.org/cadre/restorativejustice.cfm