

Steps to Success: Communicating with Your Child's School

We hope these steps to success will be particularly helpful to parents who are new to the special education process.



Getting Started

First, understand that your role as a parent is unique. No one knows and loves your child the way that you do. You are the expert on your child. And, while you may not have all the answers, you want your child to be successful in school and in life. Your passion, as a parent, can help you communicate brilliantly, and sometimes, it can overtake you.

Step 1. Be mindful of your emotional pressure gauge as you work with your child's school.

If you expect to have difficulty when meeting school personnel, your mind and body will be primed for battle. How can you communicate successfully if you are on the verge of overflowing in anguish and outrage? Don't let your mind go there. Keep thoughts of past or present problems at school, worst fears, and other negatives from creeping into your mind. Focus on your goals and the view that the school wants to do their best for your child. Keep telling yourself that you and your child will succeed.

Step 2. Prioritize and Plan.

What's the most important thing that needs to be accomplished for your child? Make a

list of the issues, questions, and possible solutions. Rank them. Decide if there are any you can pass on and which ones must be addressed. Plan how you are willing to give and take in order to achieve the higher goal. Map out what you need to say and practice if that helps. For example, *"What's most important for Sally right now is..."* or *"We really need to focus on..."* Referring to these notes, with key phrases jotted down, can help keep you and the meeting on track.

Step 3. Actively listen to understand the other person's perspective.

If you don't understand what someone is saying, tell him/her. Be direct. For example *"Can you explain it in a different way or give me some examples?"* or *"I am having trouble fully understanding what you are saying"*. Keep asking and wait for responses until you do fully understand. Resist any temptation to answer your own questions or put words into someone else's mouth.

Step 4. Clarify your statements if you see a puzzled expression on someone's face and ask for clarification in return.

Paraphrase, or restate so that you and others are clear in your understanding. For example, *"I must not be explaining this clearly, what I am trying to say is..."* or *"It sounds like you're saying...is that right?"* Often, the process of clarifying one's understanding provides an opportunity to clear up a misconception or correct misinformation that could be critical. So, don't overlook the value of this technique!

Step 5. Have options in mind and offer them for discussion, as needed.



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As a parent, you're in a good position to present alternative solutions that might not occur to those who work for the school system. For example, you might say, ***"Let's do some brainstorming on possibilities and see what we can come up with. How about...?"*** And if you have done some research, you will come in with ideas ready to share. It's also important to make sure that the focus stays on your child and meeting his or her needs. Sometimes, words like the following can help tighten everyone's focus: ***"I just haven't seen the kind of progress that Jordan needs to make. What other options can we consider for him?"***

Step 6. You're only human.

If someone has been particularly helpful, acknowledge his or her efforts. Sometimes, especially when frustrations rise, acknowledging what has gone well, and how hard everyone has worked, sweetens the air a bit and makes it possible for everyone to feel better and push towards the finish line.

If by chance you make a mistake, or cause offense, say you're sorry. Making an apology says that you're only human and helps to humanize what is often a formal process and sends the message that you can be forgiving of others' mistakes. "Please and thank you" go a long way in keeping conversations civil.

In the end, ask for the "yes".

As you communicate and negotiate, you will uncover areas where you and the school agree. You may agree on the issue but not on how to address it. This is when it can be helpful to restate and discuss

options in a problem solving way. This means presenting and fully analyzing proposed solutions on their own merits. It also means asking some direct, yet polite questions. For example, ***"I'm still puzzled. Why isn't this an option?"*** Additionally, words that recognize the desires and difficulties for schools to meet every child's needs, while refocusing on your child, can lead to a greater willingness to put forth extra effort. For example, ***"I appreciate the huge responsibility and demands facing our school system. I understand there is never enough resources to meet all children's needs in the way that we want. I truly do. I know there's a way for us to work this out, so that Sally gets the services she needs."***

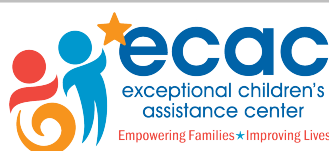
Talking the talk.

So, in a nutshell, when talking with staff and administrators at your child's school, you're likely to be successful if you can:

- ✓ Keep your cool
- ✓ Focus on the positives
- ✓ Be clear about your goals
- ✓ Listen, ask questions, clarify
- ✓ Keep the focus on your child's needs
- ✓ Present options in a collaborative way
- ✓ Ask for the "yes."

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