



BRINGING PARENTS ON BOARD: A MATTER OF TRUST

All educators are faced at one time or another with the dilemma of securing parent participation in their child's education. Why is it important for parents to participate? In all settings, research shows that parent/family involvement has a significant positive impact on student outcomes. In special education, parent involvement is also critical for many additional reasons. From the CalStat generated report "Partners in Decision Making: Parents Tell Us How":

- Parental approval is mandatory before decisions are made regarding their children
- Compliance with IDEA is met when parents are involved in all levels of decision making
- Ensures parents are kept informed about their child's progress
- Brings school districts and California's education system into compliance with state and federal laws
- Informed Parents can help take a load off the professionals

While most of us are aware of the many reasons it is important to have parents involved, how to make it happen often poses a challenge. Some barriers that have been identified by parents and professionals include:

- Lack of trust
- Lack of information/knowledge
- Not understanding process, lingo, structure
- Lack of parent input on meeting time and location
- Transportation
- Language difference
- Reading level of written documents (Californian's average a 4th grade reading level)
- Lack of child care
- Taking time off to attend meetings

Of the barriers identified above, trust touches the majority. Without trust, little productive work can occur. Who wants to come "on board" a ship whose destination we are unsure of, where the crew does not speak the same language, that we have no experience or guidance that allows us to prepare for the ride, that is taking us on a journey into unfamiliar and sometimes scary territory, and that might not appear "sea(trust)worthy"? Trust is built over time and addressing the barriers above, and others not identified here, can go a long way towards building trust into a relationship with parents. A more productive and effective iep team will result when trust has been established and ongoing efforts to maintain and continue to build that trust are prioritized.

Following are a few suggestions for tools to use towards building a trusting relationship, starting with a "welcome aboard" kit to support parents on their journey.

Consider developing a folder for parents to help them organize ieps, reports, handouts, communications, etc. Include a quick reference phone sheet with whom to call for what question or concern in your district and beyond. Put in a pen and any other small item, such as a refrigerator magnet or keychain with a positive message about the partnership ("None of us is as skilled as all of us!") Include a phone log to help them track their calls. Provide handouts on topics of interest such as "Helping your child with homework" "Toileting" "Problem behavior" "Assertive communication" etc. Provide *user friendly* information on assessments, iep process, parent rights (what it means), IDEA. Develop a resource guide for both local and national resources. Create a guide to acronyms and the role of the professional. Consider creating short video tapes on some of the topics named above. Provide a parent lending library. Include list of available books and tapes in your "welcome" folder. Include parents in trainings.

Facilitate parent meetings by providing a place to meet, topics of interest, child care and refreshments. Get out information on meetings through radio, newspapers and consumer friendly fliers. Identify and provide parent mentors for new parents. Find out what barriers the *parent* sees to participation. Following are a few resources you might find helpful in further developing a positive partnership with your parents:

Books

Canter, Andrea & Carroll, Servio: Helping Children at Home and School: Handouts form Your School Psychologist. NASP. 1998

Dunst, Carl et al: Enabling & Empowering Families Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books, 1988.

Real Life Storybooks

Focus on real-life disabilities, diseases and problems, and pave the way to social/emotional growth and greater understanding. Their books address everything from Autism and Asperger's Syndrome to AIDS awareness to sexual abuse to the issues surrounding self-esteem and the overweight child.

<http://www.reallifestories.com/index.html>

Woodbine House

Publishes The Special-Needs Collection, a series of almost 50 books on disabilities and related topics, including ADD, autism, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, learning disabilities, spina bifida, early intervention, inclusion, special education, and more.

<http://www.woodbinehouse.com/home.html>

Websites

CalStat: www.calstat.org

Good resource for information on collaboration. Also several good publications

Circle of Inclusion: <http://www.circleofinclusion.org/>

E-READY "TeachersFirst's resources for Gifted and Special Education" <http://www.teachersfirst.com>

The National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities: www.nichcy.org

This is an excellent resource for information and handouts for parents.

Parent Resources

Family Resource Center on Disabilities

20 East Jackson Boulevard, Room 900

Chicago, IL 60604

(800) 952-4199 (Voice/TTY; toll-free in IL only)

Parents Helping Parents:

The Parent-Directed Family Resource Center
for Children with Special Needs

3041 Olcott St.

Santa Clara, CA 95054

(408) 727-5775

Publications available in Spanish

Spanish speaker on staff

E-mail: info@php.com

National Parent Network on Disabilities

1130 17th Street N.W., Suite 400

Washington, DC 20036

(202) 463-2299 (V/TTY)

E-Mail: npnd@cs.com