

Improving Parent-Teacher Communications

By Tazee Mahjied

When communicating with a parent, one thing holds true: you can only control what one person says -- yourself. While most parents are pleasant, some raise their voices and get upset. It comes with the territory. There are things you can do to help avoid these types of conflicts.

There are three basic principles of communicating that can make the difference between structured resolution and due process. They are reaction, perception and presentation.

Reaction: Know thyself. How do you take things? It's not realistic to be emotionless when being confronted by an emotional parent. If you know your triggers and recognize your feelings, you can do a quick self-inventory and move on to the true purpose of your conversation. Your reaction can guide the entire exchange with a parent.

Perception: How do you see things? Perception is reality. It's not so much what is said, but rather what is heard. You know how you perceive the parent's message. How do you think they'll perceive yours?

Presentation: How you present your point may influence the parent's perception. Body language, facial expression and tone of voice can impact a listener more than the words that are spoken. Some parents may take a little longer to get a clear picture of your intent. Be patient and be willing to take the extra time to ensure that they fully understand what you are saying.

The words that are spoken often don't address the root of the problem. A parent telling someone from the district, "I don't like my daughter's teacher," isn't really the issue. It's a byproduct. Don't get stuck on the byproduct. Taking an active listening course is something that can greatly benefit educators and social workers. There are three points of active listening. They are clarifying, restating and summarizing.

Clarify to get as much information as you can.

Parent: "My son did not eat lunch for an entire week!"

Teacher: "That's not good. Was lunch not offered to him? Did he refuse lunch? What happened?"

Restate by repeating key points in the discussion. It shows you are listening. It gives the parent a chance to hear what he or she has said and the opportunity to correct the listener or possibly change what he or she said.

It allows you to both continue in the same direction.

Parent: "He is refusing to eat because of the noise he makes when he eats. He is extremely self-conscious. He was okay with the group he ate with last year."

Teacher: "The sounds he makes when he is eating keeps him from wanting to eat with his peers."

Summarize by pulling all the facts together. Hopefully, this will lead to a game plan you can both agree upon.

Teacher: "So, what I'm hearing is that your son hasn't been eating because of his self-consciousness about the sounds he makes. Perhaps if we allowed him to have lunch with his friends from last year he would start eating again."

Sometimes there's no easy way to resolve a difficult situation. However, you can avoid the trap of reacting to emotions and harboring ill feelings by maintaining professionalism and demonstrating your commitment to providing the student with appropriate services.

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Learn How Assistive Technology Can Help You

The Alliance of Information & Referral Systems (AIRS) will be holding its annual conference, "Power in Numbers," on Friday, September 30, 2005 at Brookdale Community College's Student Life Center in Lincroft, NJ.

Fred Tchang, Director of Cerebral Palsy of New Jersey's Assistive Technology Department will be presenting "Assistive Technology -- Helping You Reach Your Goals at Home, School, and Work."

Assistive Technology is any piece of equipment that helps a person with a disability achieve. It can be as low-tech as a reacher, or as high-tech as a computer controlled by voice. He will demonstrate some of the assistive technology that enables people with a wide range of disabilities to work, study, and live their lives with greater independence.

For more information on the conference contact Kathy Hiltner at 856-866-1949 or visit www.airsnj.org.

Solutions with Technology

Case Studies & Practical Applications
of Assistive Technology in the Classroom



Interpreting and Implementing IEPs

by Jeannette Van Houten

School bells are ringing all over New Jersey as a new school year begins. Teachers are preparing for all of their new students and familiarizing themselves with the new IDEA regulations. Parents are getting their children ready for new teachers, classmates, bus schedules and routines.

Everyone's looking for a smooth transition. For teachers of students with disabilities, there are a few things you can do to help keep things on track when the children start back. Taking a couple of extra steps at the beginning of the school year may eliminate frustrations later.

Acquire a copy of each new student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The I in IEP is what's key. Since each student's needs are unique, the services and supports they'll need are unique too. And the IEP was written to serve the best interest of the student, so he or she receives the free and appropriate education he or she is entitled to. Consider it a glance at what others found important enough to share about the student.

And while the IEP is paramount and you don't really want to start the school year without having read it, a frequent beginning-of-the-school-year complaint from teachers is that they don't receive IEPs from Special Services in a timely fashion. In many cases, you'll be called upon to implement IEPs that weren't written by anyone in your school; in some cases you'll be working with IEPs that weren't even written in your district. Don't wait for the document to come to you -- reach out for it. That may mean contacting a case manager or even asking the student's parents if you can make a copy of theirs.

Once you've got it, keep a log of the accommodations and goals you know you can accomplish without getting further information. Then make a list of questions you have for the professionals who wrote the IEP. Asking these follow-up questions will not only help you implement the IEP, it will also give you insight into the student.

Toni, a fifth grade teacher, starts a separate sheet of paper for each student. She jots down her questions and leaves space for the answers. Kevin, who teaches high school, uses a system of index cards to keep track of notes and the questions he needs to ask others.

Don't be afraid to ask for examples or samples - these may illustrate what was meant better than just the IEP's description.

It can be quite a bonus if a student arrives in your classroom with the same one-on-one aide he or she was working with in the previous school year. The paraprofessional can really shed light on what's worked in the past. Don't rely solely on an aide's input though -- they might be sharing what works best for them, not necessarily the student.

If your student is old enough, try exploring the student's understanding of his or her modifications and adaptations. Consulting students about their modifications and adaptations gives them ownership. Encourage them to let you know if something's not working. Helping students understand their needs empowers them to ask for what they need.

If a student's IEP includes assistive technology tools or augmentative communication devices, be sure you're comfortable working the devices. Some of these tools may be low tech, but more and more they are becoming quite complex. Ask for training if you need it.

A student's IEP can be wonderful tool as long as teachers use it. Consider it a map to help find what works best for a student.

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