

Revised December 2015

Building Parent/Professional Partnership Through Communication



Ohio Coalition for the Education of Children with Disabilities

The Ohio Coalition for the Education of Children with Disabilities (OCECD) is a statewide, nonprofit organization that serves families of infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities in Ohio, and agencies who provide services to them. OCECD works through the coalition efforts of more than 35 parent and professional disability organizations which comprise the Coalition.

Established in 1972 and staffed primarily by parents of children and adults with disabilities, persons with disabilities, and education professionals, the Coalition's mission is to ensure that every Ohio child with special needs receives a free, appropriate, public education in the least restrictive environment to enable that child to reach his/her highest potential. Throughout Ohio, the Coalition's services reach families of children and youth, birth through twenty-six, with all disabilities.

OCECD's programs help parents become informed and effective representatives for their children in all educational settings. In addition, youth are assisted to advocate for themselves. Through knowledge about laws, resources, rights and responsibilities, families are better able to work with agencies to ensure that appropriate services are received for the benefit of their sons and daughters.



**OHIO COALITION FOR THE EDUCATION OF
CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES**

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PARENTS COMMUNICATING WITH PROFESSIONALS

Many parents feel intimidated when talking with special education professionals. There is much in our society which encourages us to look at professionals and to accept what they say without question. However, that does not mean you should be intimidated. The discussion is about your child and you know your child better than anyone, giving you the right to help design his/her educational program.

Some guidelines for successful interaction with school personnel are:

- Each time you contact the school, remind yourself ahead of time that you are important and have a right to be involved.
- Prepare for meetings. Know ahead of time the important points you want to make. Make a list to take with you.
- If possible, take someone with you who can take notes, can help you make a point, or who will provide moral support.
- When you do not understand something, ask for clarification.
- Learn to communicate assertively, rather than passively or aggressively.



Assertive - clearly states his/her point of view and takes into account what others have to say.

Passive - discounts his/her own needs and defers to the other person.

Aggressive - discounts others and insists on what he/she wants.

- At meetings, be direct with others. Look at people when you talk to them. Take notes. Sit at the table with the other participants, leaning forward in your chair to show interest, not back in your chair as an observer.
- If you do not get to say everything you wanted to say, don't be hard on yourself. Assertive communication develops with practice. Congratulate yourself for taking the first steps.
- Stand up for your rights and those of your child. However, sometimes it is necessary to compromise. For most people, deciding when to compromise can be difficult. Think carefully about your priorities for your child. Which ones are most important? Which are you willing to negotiate?
- When you have a serious concern, discuss it first with the person directly involved. If that does not produce results, then go to someone with more authority. You will help your own credibility by giving the person involved a chance to make changes before going to a supervisor.
- Let the school hear from you when you are pleased with their actions, not just when there is a problem. We all appreciate positive feedback and you will create a "reservoir of good will" which will help you if problems should arise.



IDEA 2004: Parent Participation

When Congress reauthorized the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 2004 (IDEA 2004), parents were renewed as equal partners in their child's education. Congress said that parents should always be considered as equal partners in every aspect of their child's education. This not only included the Individualized Education Program (IEP) but also identification and evaluation of their child. Congress relied on research which proved that parent(s) were critical to their child's success in school. P.L. 94 -142 in 1975 assumed that parents were partners in their child's education but with IDEA 2004 it is written into law even more clearly.

Congress says: ...Over 20 years of research and experience have demonstrated that the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by strengthening the role of parents and ensuring that families of such children have meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children at school and at home...

Now let's review the federal regulations.

IDENTIFICATION

(§300. 501 (b)(1)(i & ii)(2)(3)(c)) - The parents of a child with a disability must be afforded, an opportunity to participate in meetings with respect to – the identification, evaluation, and educational placement of the child: and the provision of FAPE to the child.



ELIGIBILITY

(§300.306 (a)(1)) – Upon completing the administration of tests and other evaluation materials-a group of qualified professionals and the parent of the child determines whether the child is a child with a disability.

IEP PROCESS

(§300.321 (a)(1) – The public agency must ensure that the IEP team for each child with a disability includes–the parents of the child.

(§300.320 (a)(3)(ii) - The IEP of each child with a disability must include–a statement of how the child’s parents will be regularly informed (through such means as periodic reports), at least as often as parents are informed of their non-disabled children’s progress.

As you can see, the federal regulations very clearly define the parent's role in the educational process of children with disabilities.



Six Questions PARENTS Can Ask Themselves Before Communicating with Professionals

- 1) Do I feel I am an equal partner with the professionals who are educating my child?
- 2) Do I clearly express my child's needs without undue emotion and with current and precise documentation?
- 3) Do I communicate quickly with professionals when significant changes regarding my child occur?
- 4) When I make a commitment, do I follow through in the manner agreed upon?
- 5) Do I treat each professional as an individual and without prejudice?
- 6) Do I maintain realistic expectations of professionals, my child and myself?

Parents may feel intimidated, frustrated or stressed when meeting with professionals. Their frustration or stress may have nothing to do with school personnel or the meeting itself. Living with a child with a disability can be a challenge not clearly understood unless lived.

Parents have valuable information to share concerning their child. They can communicate information that will aid the teacher in understanding their child's learning style and needs. This will eliminate many trial and error attempts on the teacher's part.

PROFESSIONALS WORKING WITH PARENTS

How to make the most out of a conference/meeting:

- Be positive and friendly. Try to make the parents as comfortable as possible.
- Avoid making parents feel overwhelmed by encouraging them to bring a friend or professional for support and limit the number of persons included in the meeting.
- Maintain a relationship that is warm, yet objective.
- Treat the parent as an equal partner in designing an appropriate education plan for their child. Avoid addressing the parent as you would their child.
- Make arrangements for the parent to visit prospective classrooms before the parent is asked to make a decision regarding the placement of their child.
- Write your reports in clear language. Make sure the parent understands that if a label must be given, it is a shorthand device for communication purposes only and should not be used to explain the child's needs to others. Explain any terminology you may have used as a shortcut for your own use.
- Give copies of the report to parents. They will need the report for their own understanding, for sharing with people closely involved with the child who could not be present, or for use with other professionals.
- Give parents suggestions during meetings, offering more than one alternative so they can make their own decisions. Do encourage parents to offer their own suggestions.
- Do your part to follow through with the decisions that are reached.

- Encourage parents to think about long term goals and career plans for their child prior to the child attending high school.
- Receive criticism openly. Listen and ask questions to clarify parents' concerns so that you fully understand the issue.
This will help to avoid arguments.
- Ask leading questions that will give the parents the opportunity to express their feelings about their child. For example: "How would you describe your child to others?", "What does he/she like to do at home?"
- At the end of the conference/meeting stress to the parents that this is not the end of their involvement. Invite them to the school any time.
- Evaluate the session when it is over. Record important information and impressions. Do this as soon as the meeting ends so it is fresh in your mind and things are not left out.
- Assess your role in the conference/meeting. What were your strengths and weaknesses? How did you communicate? Were you prepared? Ask the parent to evaluate the meeting as well.



Most parents are aware, as are most educators, that it takes both the school and the parents working together for a child with a disability to be successful in the classroom. The key to that success is how well the parent(s) and the school district work together, listening to each other, and focusing on what is right for the student.

Let's look at some things that have to happen before a partnership can be formed.

- Baggage has to be left at the door. What happened last year or even last week cannot be the focus of the meeting. The past must remain in the past, however, we can learn from past mistakes.
- Understanding the other person's point of view is critical. Both parents and professionals need to make an effort to understand each other's role and point of view.
- Parents as well as professionals should always be searching for new and creative ways to serve children with disabilities within the classroom.
- An important component of parents and professionals working together is making sure there are no surprises. Always keep each other informed. This is not a game where one side is against the other. When there is a power struggle taking place the child ALWAYS loses.
- The last, but not least, part of parents and professionals working together is to focus on the student. If both professionals and parents are focusing on the student there will always be a workable resolution to any problem or situation.

There are two jobs that are the hardest in the world. The first one is being a parent and the second one is being a teacher. It just makes sense for the two to work together. Parents cannot look at professionals as if they have all the answers. Professionals cannot look at parents as if they do not have the knowledge to help with their child's education. No one knows a child better than the parent.

Treat people as if they were what they ought to be and you help them to become what they are capable of being.

~ Lao-tzu (604-531 B.C.)

EMOTIONAL STAGES

All parents who have a child with a disability struggle with the emotional issues. They go through many stages of feelings.

- Disbelief – that their wonderful gift is not perfect.
- Guilt – what could I have done differently?
- Fix mode – what can I do to fix my child?
- Reality – my child is not broken. He/she does not need to be fixed.
- Education – how can I better understand my child's disability and provide, to the best of my ability, what my child needs to be successful.

Parents go through these stages not just once, but every time there is a transition in their child's life.

- Pre-school – my baby is not a baby anymore.
- Kindergarten – this is a hard step even if your child doesn't have a disability. How will the other students accept my child? Will the regular education teacher know how to accommodate or modify the general education curriculum to meet my child's needs?
- Middle school – the parent now has to work with 7 or 8 teachers instead of one. All of the fears of acceptance from peers and teachers resurface.



- High school – time is short to provide the student with the necessary skills to become an independent adult.
- Graduation – how can there be enough supports put into place so if something happens to the parent(s), the student will become a successful adult?

Even parents who know they are going through these stages, and why they are going through them, can't stop them. The reason is their child is their very heart. They give school professionals the very best they have, their child.



When dealing with people, remember you are not dealing with creatures of logic, but with creatures of emotion, creatures bristling with prejudice and motivated by pride and vanity. ~ Dale Carnegie (1888-1955)

IDEA 2004 REQUIREMENTS

Prior to IDEA '97 children with disabilities were not always exposed to the general education curriculum, sometimes allowing very little progress to be made. However since IDEA '97, children with disabilities are not only to be exposed to the general education curriculum, but they must also progress in the general education curriculum. IDEA 2004 continues this requirement, adding functional goals:

§300.320 (a)(1)(i) – The IEP for each child with a disability must include-how the child's disability affects the child's involvement and progress in the general education curriculum (i.e. the same curriculum as for nondisabled children).



Regular education teachers are required to be part of the IEP process. They should be one of the IEP team members according to the requirements of §300.321 (a)(2).

§300.321 (a)(2) – The public agency must insure that the IEP team for each child with a disability includes-at least one regular education teacher of the child (if the child is, or may be, participating in the regular education environment).

Parents can assist classroom teachers to know how their child learns best. Who would know better how a child learns? Parents are the ones who taught their child to walk, talk, and interact with other people.

For many years some regular education teachers did not have students with disabilities in their classroom. Now they not only have children with disabilities in their classroom but they also are required to be active in developing and implementing the child's Individualized Education Program. The regular education teacher does not only have to communicate with the special education teacher but also with the parent. Listening actively to the parent about what is going on at home can help decide if the student is progressing in the general education curriculum.



How does the child behave at home?

- Angry
- Upset
- Overwhelmed

How much homework is the student doing each night compared to their classmates?

Does the regular education teacher understand the modifications and accommodations?

Are the modifications and accommodations working? (Modifications are changes made to "What" students are expected to learn. An accommodation refers to "How" the general education curriculum will be presented to the student with disabilities so that he/she can understand it.)

Does the regular education teacher understand the child's disability?

Does the regular education teacher have planning time with the special education teacher to help with lesson plans?

The deepest principle of human nature is the craving to be appreciated.

~ William James (1842-1910)



THE KEY TO COMMUNICATION

The key to communication is not what you might think. Most people think of communication as talking to each other. It is true you must talk to each other but the most important part of communication is listening! The key to communication is to make sure there is no misunderstanding between the two parties trying to communicate.

Good communication involves continually showing your respect for others by giving them the courtesy of your undivided attention, responding to their comments by sharing your perspective on what is being said, and presenting information you have to share in a brief and to the point manner. An effective way to be sure you are listening is to repeat what you heard.

Mrs. Smith: "Paul is having trouble getting his homework handed in on time. He can only get his homework handed in on time 3 out of 5 days in a week."

Mom: "What you are telling me is Paul is not getting his homework in on time. When he does get his homework in, it is only 3 days a week."

"I know that he has been doing it, because we follow the assignment book that he brings home every night. I am surprised he is not handing it in, because we work on homework an average of 2 to 3 hours a night."

In the example above Mom repeats what the teacher is saying so she lets the teacher know she is hearing what is being said. It also validates the teacher's concern.



Now let's look at the situation in a different way. Mom does not repeat what she hears the teacher saying.

Mrs. Smith: "Paul is having trouble getting his homework handed in on time. He can only get his homework handed in on time 3 out of 5 days in a week."

Mom: "Paul and I work 3 hours on homework every night. You cannot tell me he does not bother to hand it in. He would not work all night and not want credit for it!"

When mom answers in this manner it sounds like she is attacking the teacher. If mom had taken the time to repeat what the teacher was saying, she would have validated the teacher's concern and started the conversation on a positive note.

The second part of listening is to allow the speaker to finish talking. Do not assume you know what the person speaking is trying to say. Once the person has finished talking try waiting 3 seconds before you start talking. Three seconds does not sound like a long time but when you want to say something it can be forever. This three seconds allows the person talking to know you have been listening, and helps you to listen and not just focus on what you want to say.



Rest assured that, generally speaking, others are acting in exactly the same manner that you would under exactly the same circumstances. Hence, be kind, understanding, empathetic, compassionate and loving.
~ Gary W. Feenchuk

Sensing

Be aware of things around you. Try to feel the tone of the conversation. Be attentive; responsive. Recognize and be sensitive to other people's behavior. Is the speaker worried, unsure, or confident?

Interpreting

Be sure you understand correctly. Concentrate on the message the speaker is sending and the meaning of what is being said. Repeat what you heard for clarification and to check your perception.

Evaluating

Assess; examine carefully what was said so that your response will be appropriate. Try to read the body language of the speaker.

Responding

Attend to the speaker; show your interest. Ask for clarification, (could you explain?). Allow a moment before responding. Give your feedback by nodding or briefly commenting.

SIER runs in order. "**S**", or **Sensing**, must happen before "**I**". "**I**", **Interpreting**, before "**E**". "**E**", **Evaluating**, before "**R**", **Responding**. Any other order of communication and a breakdown will occur in the communication process.

The purpose of using SIER is to listen to **WHAT** is being said and not to what we **THINK** is being said. We listen faster than the average person speaks. Most people skip right to the response step and do not give ourselves time to hear and process properly.

Even though we may use SIER as a rule to communication, the attitude and behavior of parents and educators can help or hinder the situation. Check your attitude at the door. By staying focused and making the most of your conversations and communications, the eventual winner will always be "**THE CHILD**".

BODY LANGUAGE

We do not only communicate with words, we also communicate with our body. 93 percent of all communication is non-verbal. Many people have the ability to read body language very easily. Unfortunately, a lot of us do not. Here are some easy hints to reading body language.

(Remember these are not foolproof and there can be cultural exceptions. See page 22.)

- If a person is sitting in a chair with their arms folded it may be an indication that they are not open and not ready to hear what you are saying.
- If a person is sitting with their arms open and leaning forward this could be an indication they are listening and open to what is being said.
- When someone is leaning toward you while you are talking they are either agreeing or attentively listening to you.
- If a person does not look at you while you are talking they either may not agree or they may not be listening.
- If a person does not look at you while they are talking to you, it may indicate that they think you will disagree with them.
- If a person is leaning away from you while you are talking, it may mean that they do not agree or are threatened by you.
- If a person leans away from you with their legs crossed, it could indicate they are closed to what you are saying.
- If a person is sitting with their legs crossed at the ankles, they may have come into the meeting planning to disagree, but may be indicating that they might change their mind.
- If a person is sitting with their arms folded and their legs crossed at the ankle you may have said something that might have offended them.

- If a person is looking at you and is leaning toward you with their arms not crossed, but might have their legs crossed, this could indicate they are in agreement with what you are saying.
- If a person has their legs crossed and is shaking their foot, this could indicate they are angry or upset with what you are saying. (This is a person you might not want to push.)

Watch for a person's ears, neck, or face to turn red. This usually indicates a person is having some kind of reaction to what you are saying. Even if a person is pleasant and smiles, their body language gives them away.

These are not always indications of a person's thoughts and/or feelings. There are always exceptions.



CULTURAL, SOCIAL, AND ECONOMIC FACTORS

One area that needs to be addressed and can be one of the exceptions to body language is the area of culture. Understanding the culture of the people who are meeting with you can make the difference between good communication and bad communication. This applies to both professionals and parents.

Understanding the cultural, racial, social, and economic factors of the participants in the meeting will help everyone feel like a valued member of the team. When there are misunderstandings during the communication process disagreements can happen.

In the Native American culture, it is disrespectful for a young man to look an adult in the eye. Example: A psychologist tests a child and reports the child was not paying attention because the student did not use eye contact. This does not mean the child was not paying attention. If the psychologist knew the culture of the young man, his test results might have been different. The regulations are very specific in this area:

§300.304 (c)(1)(i)(ii) Each public agency must ensure that tests and other evaluation materials used to assess a child under Part B of the Act – (i) Are selected and administered so as to not be discriminatory on a racial or cultural basis; (ii) Are provided and administered in the child's native language or other mode of communication and in the form most likely to yield accurate information on what the child knows and can do academically, developmentally, and functionally, unless it is clearly not feasible to so provide or administer.



There are some parents who do not feel comfortable in the school environment. When a parent is not comfortable for any reason, having a meeting somewhere other than the school will put the parent at ease. Remember the law states meetings should be convenient not only to the district but also for the parent.

§300.322 (a)(1)(2) Each public agency must take steps to ensure that one or both of the parents of a child with a disability are present at each IEP meeting or are afforded the opportunity to participate, including – notifying parents of the meeting early enough to ensure that they will have an opportunity to attend: and scheduling the meeting at a mutually agreed on time and place

Always take time to understand all the members of the IEP team.



OTHER WAYS OF COMMUNICATION

Communicating by Telephone

No parent likes to receive a call from the school and at the same time, no school principal wants to have to call a parent. In order for parents and school districts to work together there may be times when a phone call will be necessary. Knowing how to talk to someone on the phone is a communication skill. Many of the same principles are used on the phone as in person.

Before you make a call, plan what you are going to say before you call. It is helpful to write down exactly what it is you want to say. When you call, ask if the professional has a few minutes to talk. If this is not a good time, ask when you should call back.

State why you are calling and briefly outline what you would like the outcome of the phone conversation to be. If possible, do not use the phone to solve problems. Instead, use the phone as a way to set up a problem solving meeting.

Always try to end the conversation with a positive statement. Avoid using the telephone for criticism.



If you are the one receiving the call, repeat back what is being said. When you are on the phone you do not have the advantage of seeing the person speaking, so listening becomes even more important. The tone of your voice, even if you are smiling, can be detected just by careful listening.

When speaking on the telephone, you should wait 2 seconds after the speaker stops talking before speaking. Try to keep your tone even and avoid becoming upset. If things get out of control the person receiving the call may just hang up. When this happens you have lost communication with them and they will have trouble talking with you again. This is not an "I am right, you are wrong" situation. There is a child in the middle of this struggle. No one wins in a power struggle, especially not the student.

Communicating Through Letter Writing

Another form of communication is letter writing. It is always wise to put everything in writing. We do not always hear what is being said. Clarify what you believe was agreed to by putting the facts down in a letter. Then if there is a misunderstanding it can be corrected.

When you receive a phone call, remember the communication guidelines discussed in this section and after you are off the phone, take time to write down what was discussed during the phone conversation.



Date

Mr. John Smith, Principal
Green Middle School
100 Main Street
Field, OH 55555

SAMPLE

Dear Mr. Smith:

I am writing in regard to our phone conversation on Thursday, [date]. During that conversation, you expressed your concerns about Paul's failing grades.

I understood you to say that you felt the major factors contributing to his failing grades were not paying attention in class and misbehaving. You felt that if he just tried harder he would be receiving passing grades. Paul believes that he is trying as hard as he can and cannot achieve passing grades because he cannot read the textbooks.

Since you have attended Paul's IEP meetings, you know that Paul has been diagnosed with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder and a reading disability.

I agree with you that his failing grades have documented that his current IEP is no longer appropriate in meeting his needs. I am requesting that you refer Paul for a reading evaluation to determine the specific areas of reading where Paul needs specific, research-based instruction from a qualified reading instructor.

Prior to this meeting, please provide me with a written report of the reading specialist's findings. Paul needs an IEP that will accommodate his specific disabilities and give him the opportunity to experience success as a student.

As you suggested, I agree that a follow-up IEP team meeting is necessary. As a team, I believe that we can work together and write an educational plan that will meet Paul's individual needs and will make learning a positive experience for him.

Thank you for your concern about Paul. I look forward to hearing from you with some possible times and dates for the IEP team to meet.

Sincerely,

Susan Jones
Phone: 740-555-5555

Putting everything in writing will avoid any "he said, she said" about the details of the issue.

Notice in the sample letter that Susan Jones gave the principal the opportunity to agree or disagree with her interpretation of the phone conversation. By stating "if there are any other concerns that I have not addressed please let me know," gives the principal an opening to add or disagree with what was being stated in the letter. If the principal does not disagree with this letter, what is in writing may be considered to be true. However, it is always best to have a response from the principal.

REQUESTING A MEETING

When you request a meeting or you have a concern you want to discuss it is always wise to put it in writing. Parents and professionals are both very busy with life. It is not that the person you are trying to communicate with does not want to see or speak with you. They just might have a lot of responsibilities.

Putting things in writing not only documents your need for a meeting or a conversation, it also becomes a permanent record of the event. This helps everyone to follow through with issues addressed in writing.



December 1, 2015

Mr. Lion, Principal
Howard Elementary
147 Center St.
Columbus, OH. 22222

SAMPLE

Dear Mr. Lion:

I am writing to request an IEP team meeting for my daughter, Deborah, who has a learning disability.

I would like to discuss her educational program. She seems to be failing in Geography. I am concerned that the Geography teacher does not fully understand her disability.

I would like to go over the accommodations set up on her IEP to help her be successful in the general curriculum. With the help of the team members, maybe we will be able to find out the reason for her frustrations in this class.

I am available any time after 1:00 P.M., any day except Fridays, for a meeting.

Thank you for your attention to my request. I may be reached at 740-874-4598 during the day and at 740-874-5821 after 1:00 P.M. I will expect to hear from you within 5 days, so that Deborah can get the help she needs as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Emily Green
67 Farm Ave.
Columbus, OH. 22222

If you are angry, always wait 24 hours before sending your letter. Give yourself time to cool down and make sure what you have in writing is what you want to have as a permanent record.

WHY IS COMMUNICATION SO IMPORTANT?

Does this seem like a stupid question? You might think so. But how many times do we forget why we are trying to communicate in the first place?

There is not a teacher who goes into teaching because they dislike children. There is not a parent alive who would be trying to work with their school system if they did not love their child. Why communicate? Because the parents cannot do it alone and the school cannot do it alone. We are the ones setting the example for children. So let's put our best foot forward and try, for the sake of the most important thing in this world, our children, who are all of our futures.

The best influence a child can have is a caring adult worth emulating.



This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

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