CADRE
the center for appropriate dispute resolution in special education

Steps to Success:
Communicating with Your Child's School

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If you have a child who is receiving special education services, you're more than likely to be very involved with your child's school and teachers — including planning, reviewing, and assessing your child's educational program. Over time, you will learn a lot about the special education process and how to communicate and negotiate on your child's behalf. While your knowledge, skill, and confidence will naturally increase, there are some specific communication skills that can help you be most successful in developing and maintaining a strong partnership 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 with 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 positively 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 one(s) 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:

"What's most important for Jordan right now is..."
"We really need to focus on..."

Referring to these few 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 or her. Be direct:

"I just don't understand what you are saying. Can you explain it in a different way or give me some examples?"

"Is there something you can show me, in writing, so I can fully understand?"

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.

To be understood:

"I must not be explaining this clearly, what I'm trying to say is..."
"Here's a copy of... Let's look at this together. It shows that..."

So that you understand:

"It sounds like you're saying..."
"If I understand you correctly, you're saying... Is that right?"
"Is that written down anywhere so I can read it?"

Often, the process of clarifying one's understanding provides an opportunity to clear up a misconception or correct misinformation that could be critical to finding a satisfactory solution for your child. So, don't overlook the value of this technique.

Step 5 HAVE OPTIONS IN MIND AND OFFER THEM FOR DISCUSSION, AS NEEDED.

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:

> *"Let's do some brainstorming on possibilities and see what we can come up with. How about ____?"*

And, if you've done some research, information gathering, or obtained any formal recommendations:

> *"Here's a recommendation from...that has proven successful for other students. We should seriously consider this for Janey."*
>
> *"Let's try this for 8 weeks and see how it goes."*

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:

> *"Jordan's dad and 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 their 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" also go a long way in keeping conversations civil, and not surprisingly, helps everyone say "yes."

IN THE END, ASK FOR THE "YES."

As you communicate and negotiate, you will uncover areas where you and the school are in agreement. You may agree on the issue that must be addressed, but not be in full agreement on how to address it. This is when it can be especially 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 such as:

> *"I'm still puzzled. Why isn't this an option?"*
>
> *"Jordan needs this. Who has some ideas on how we can make it happen?"*

Additionally, words that recognize the desires and the 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 and think more creatively about ways to say "yes" to and for your child:

> *"I appreciate the huge responsibility and demands facing our school system. I understand that there's never enough money, nor enough staff to meet all children's needs in the way that we all want. Truly, I do. You are responsible for meeting many children's needs. My number one job is to see to it that my child's needs are met. None of us has an easy job."*
>
> *"I know that there's a way for us to work this out, together, so that Janey gets the services she needs. How are we going to do this?"*

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 meeting your child's needs.
- Present options in a collaborative way; for example, say, "we can" instead of "you should."
  Say, "yes, and..." instead of "yes, but..."
- Ask for the "yes."

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Supporting the prevention and resolution of disputes through partnership and collaboration

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https://www.cadreworks.org/resources/cadre-materials/steps-success-communicating-your-childs-school

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