

Background

As a key member of your child's IEP team, you are required to communicate with many people throughout the school community. You will often need to speak with teachers, administrators, therapists, and other school personnel. Using effective communication skills will enhance the family-school partnership and help ensure that your child's IEP is being effectively implemented.

This page is designed to help you develop effective communication skills by using some simple, proven strategies:

1) **Be Prepared.**

- Know **who** you will be meeting with and plan the most effective way to approach her/him.

Example: *You have been playing phone tag with the school diagnostician for a week. Try e-mailing* her/him instead. Many busy people prefer e-mail and will respond more quickly to this form of communication.*

Example: *You are at an Open House with a line of parents behind you waiting to meet the teacher. This is your opportunity to introduce yourself and tell the teacher that you would like to arrange a meeting. Ask the teacher how she/he likes to be contacted. Then follow up the next day. You recognize that this is not the time to discuss your child's situation in-depth as the teacher will be distracted and hesitant to speak freely about your child in front of other parents.*

- Know **what** you want to say and **be specific**. Plan ahead so that you'll be able to clearly state your concern, ask for support, and offer a possible solution. Try not to get off on tangents: This only dilutes your message. Remember that teachers, principals, and other school personnel are very busy doing the job of educating our children. Educators will appreciate your respect for their time and issues.

Example: *You will be meeting with the principal regarding your son's unmanageable amount of homework. While you have made attempts to speak with his teachers ([Who to call link](#)), you have not been successful in getting them to implement the modification for decreased homework assignments. You know from past experience that the principal is very busy and is always concise in her communication style. She is also action driven, so she will be looking for you to state the issue and give a suggestion for how to solve it. It would be useful for*

you to write down a bulleted list to refer to so that you can be concise and don't miss a point.

2) Be a good listener. Communication is a two-way process. Being a good listener is imperative to building a team to support your child. Listen and acknowledge what you hear before expressing an opinion. An important listening strategy involves your **body posture**. Even if you disagree with the speaker, use the following actions to let him/her know that you are interested in what he/she has to say:

- Making eye contact
- Smiling
- Nodding head in agreement or understanding
- Leaning toward the speaker
- Opening your body posture (not sitting with arms folded)

The way you verbally **respond** to the speaker also lets them know you are listening and encourages communication. Some response strategies include:

- **Restating or paraphrasing** – “I hear you say that the preferential seating as we designed it is not working.”
- Reflecting– “What I hear you saying is that if we tried the same reading strategies at home, we might see better results for Joe.”
- **Summarizing** – “It sounds as if the strategies you are using with Joe’s behavior are really working and if you can teach us how to use them at home, we will have better results.”
- **Questioning** – “What can I do to support you in getting Anthony’s modifications done before the lesson?” (Avoid “why” questions because they make people defensive.)”

Difficult Situations

Nothing brings out the Mama Bear (or Papa Bear) instinct in parents faster than difficult situations at school. While attack-mode may be one way to make a point, it is rarely the most effective way to get long-term results that benefit your child. Here are some ways to deliver your message without creating barriers to communication:

- Use **“I” statements**. Beginning your statement with “I” versus “you” is more direct and less threatening to the other person.

Example:

Say...

“I” have a very busy work schedule and only have 30-minutes each evening to assist Jimmy with assignments.

“I” feel as though I am not making my point clear. Let me try again.

Instead of...

“You” are sending home too many assignments for me to assist Jimmy with.

“You” are not listening to what I am saying.

- **Cooling down period** – If you find yourself in a situation where communication is beginning to break down due to sensitive topics or lack of consensus, request a brief break. Physically getting away from the situation can help everyone collect his/her thoughts and emotions.
- **When others speak louder, you speak softer** – Other people will have to lower their voices in order to hear you, which will help to calm things down.
- **Strategic silence** – Sometimes just listening and not saying anything is the best approach. Take a breath and give yourself a chance to process the information at hand.

Always remember to be specific when communicating about your child. And encourage school personnel to do the same.

Example: Parent to Teacher

Instead of...

“Mackenzie was being difficult this morning and almost missed the bus. I hope you have better luck with her at school!”

Say...

“I had a difficult time awakening Mackenzie this morning. She didn't want to eat her breakfast or get dressed. I took her temperature, and it was normal. However, she was up later than usual last night and may be overtired. Please be aware that she is having a rough day and give her a little extra time to transition. If she is still ‘out of character’ by lunchtime, please give me a call.”

Things to Consider Before Using E-Mail

When using e-mail, always remember to word your communications in a professional manner. It is easy to become “conversational” when using e-communications, and this can make your message sound trivial or disrespectful to the recipient. It is a good idea to read the message aloud to yourself or someone else to determine if you are writing in a professional tone. Make certain you have composed your message clearly, concisely and professionally before hitting “send.”

Be especially cautious when you are angry. Write your e-mail, but don't send it right away. Save it as a draft or print it out, and give yourself time to cool down. If the issue still warrants attention after a day or two, re-read the message to ensure you have used the effective communication strategies listed above. Remember that this document may end up in your student’s permanent file, and you are more likely to get results by addressing the issue in a manner that earns you respect.

Before your next meeting, you may want to complete the following exercise, drawing on the strategies you have just learned.

[Effective Communication Exercise](#)

[Communication Exercise Answers](#)

In all your communications with school personnel, try to stay positive. Remember the ultimate goal is to build a strong team to support your student. The very fact that you visited this page shows that you’re well on your way. Good luck!