

Tips for Parents

Right now the process of advocating for your child seems overwhelming. There are new relationships to build, IEPs to write, meetings to go to, and inevitable conflicts to negotiate. And then there's the challenge of your child's file. Remember as you gain experience the whole process will seem less daunting. Below are a few pointers to help you develop your skills in the some crucial areas. Remember, there's no substitute for practice, but hopefully these quick tips will help you get started on the right foot.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Knowing how to deal with people can make all the difference in successfully negotiating for your child. Here are some tips on how to deal with some of the more challenging individuals you might run into as you advocate:

1. The job of a gatekeeper is to keep people from bothering their superiors with unnecessary questions. Remember that they're doing their job, even when they're making your job much more difficult. Getting angry with them won't help. Try to present your case to them logically and be persistent. Call as many times as you need to in order to make headway, but always be polite.
2. Make sure you have yourself under control whenever you engage in a conversation with anyone at your child's school.
3. Making people feel at ease with you is an incredible skill.
4. When suggesting new ideas, do not attack. Acknowledge the power and skills of the person on the other side. Suggest that your ideas might make things go smoother, but do not insist. Be firm and confident, but not overly aggressive.
5. Listen to people who know what they're talking about, but make sure you know enough yourself to be certain of the accuracy of their statements. If you don't know if what they've said is true, ask for some time to research.
6. Seek to maintain a business relationship with your child's school. Don't bring too much personal information into your relationships.
7. Remember that you are an outsider to the school culture. Treat it with respect. Even if you think you know all there is to know, someone will undoubtedly surprise you.
8. Many school systems feel threatened by someone who is assertive and knowledgeable. When you speak or bring up points in writing, try to keep from threatening the knowledge or credibility of any members on your child's team.

IEPs (INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLANS)

IEPs are documents that plan how your child will receive a free, appropriate education. To make your child's IEP effective, review the following as you work with your school system:

1. Know your child's current level of performance. Use objective data, such as psychology evaluations and tests.
2. Know what specific goals and objectives, such as the exact behavior or skill, that you feel your child should attain. For example, if your child is having trouble reading at her grade level, know exactly at what grade level she is currently reading, her reading-level goal, and the date by when she should attain this goal. (A good argument for having a plan!)
3. Question language that is vague or unclear. For example, insist that objective measurements (like test scores) be used to assess your child's success, not teacher statements or grades.
4. Review and revise your child's IEP at least once a year.
5. Expect and hold the school to the agreed upon method of reporting your child's progress.

MEETINGS

Meetings can be frustrating and terrifying. And yet, meetings can be the center of action for your child's education. Learn to use them to the best of your advantage:

1. Try to keep the conversation focused. Don't allow the meeting to derail.
2. Be positive. Suggest solutions. Don't wait for someone else to come up with the next idea.
3. Go to meetings with support. When both parents are present, they are more formidable and powerful opponents. If your spouse cannot be present, enlist another family member or friend to go with you.
4. Suggest tape recording the meeting. Check your state's regulations on this before suggesting it to the school.
5. Treat everyone in the room, including yourself, with respect.
6. Make eye contact.
7. Don't let yourself be rushed or bulldozed if you are running out of time. You can always schedule another meeting.
8. Always debrief after the meeting. Write down what you remember, including key points and important resolutions. Add your own opinions. Do this immediately.

RESOLVING CONFLICTS

Negotiating with your child's school is not always easy. Here are a few pointers that might help you get what you want without making enemies:

1. Don't forget that in a lot of conflicts, both sides can be right.
2. Keep in mind that many school systems fear the expense of special education programs.
3. Try to see your requests from their side. Ask yourself how you and your child appear to the school. How can you bring both views into line?
4. Always approach conflict with civility and respect for the person on the other side. Never seek to blame or find fault. Do not speak with scorn.
5. Ask lots of questions so that you can understand the point of view from the other side. This will help you find solutions advantageous to both sides.
6. Try to make your child seem as "real" as possible. Tell about your experiences with your child as a way to help people understand what your child really needs.
7. Compromise may be the key to getting most of what you want, even if you can't get all of what you want. (A good argument for making a plan that prioritizes what you want for your child.)
8. Keep a paper trail. Even though litigation is never anyone's first choice, being prepared for it can save you a lot of trouble later.

THE FILE

The most important thing you can do in your efforts as an advocate is to keep records. And to keep them organized. Documentation is the only way you can truly know the progress your child is making and the way he is being treated by the school system. Documentation is also the only way you'll be able to convince your child's team of the validity of your child's needs. When you develop your child's file, keep the following pointers in mind:

1. Keep a list of all the people who have ever seen your child for whatever reason. You can organize your list by services, for example, medical, psychological, etc. You can even be more detailed if your child has particular needs by organizing by specialty, for example, ophthalmology.
2. Get a complete record of all your child's medical files. You usually need to send a written request.
3. Get a complete record of your child's educational files. Again, you usually need to send a written request.
4. Make copies. Never give your originals to anyone.
5. Date all documents and file them in chronological order. This makes accessibility easy. You don't have to remember the name of the doctor, clinic, or school.
6. If you make notes (like dating) on your documents, use pencil.
7. Use a three-ring notebook, so that you can easily add or access documents.
8. Create a table of contents so that you know what you have.
9. Add new information to your file immediately

Also, your child's records are only kept for a certain time period. Usually it is 7 years after they turn 21, please make sure you have their last IEP and Psychological Evaluation prior to this time.