



Protecting Parent-School RELATIONSHIPS

“Our 7-year-old child has autism. After his aide told us that he has not received all the speech language and occupational therapy (OT) services called for in his IEP, we wrote letters demanding that the school make up the missing sessions.

“Now the teacher and special ed supervisor are angry at the aide. They told her that she cannot tell us anything that goes on at school. Doesn't the aide have a right to communicate with us? Is there any law we can refer to?”

Pete: The issue is not whether or not the aide has a right to communicate with you. The aide is at the bottom of the hierarchy in terms of power. Is it fair to put her in the position of taking your side against her employer? Don't be surprised if she is transferred or fired.

The school is reacting to perceived threats from you by pulling their wagons in a circle. They are preparing to defend themselves. This behavior is not unique to schools—this happens in any organization when there

is a perceived threat from the outside.

As a parent, your goal is to make the school want to help your child and your family. You will not succeed by writing demanding letters or waving law at school personnel.

Pam: How do you react when another person - someone you do not know well - makes demands of you? Does this make you rethink your position? If you are like most people, this has the opposite effect. You are likely to feel angry and defensive.

Restructure Your Relationship with the School

Pam: In our special education law and advocacy training programs, we tell parents, "Unless you are prepared to remove your child from public school forever, you need to view your relationship with the school as a marriage without the possibility of divorce." You need to focus on solving problems while also protecting the parent-school relationship.

Pete: Your child is 7 years old. You will be negotiating with the school on his behalf for many years. Your relationship with the school is polarized. You need to work on restructuring your relationship with school personnel.

Pam: What do you know about your school district? Who is in charge? Is the school's perception of parents of children with disabilities positive or negative? To be an effective advocate for your child, you need answers to these questions.

School Climate

"Climate" is a term that describes the learning environment created by teachers and administrators. What is the climate at your child's school? If your child's school has a positive climate, you will be encouraged to play an active role in your child's education.

School Teams

If you are like many parents, you may not realize that your child's school team has invisible members whom you may never meet. These invisible members are school administrators who have the power to make decisions about special education programs.

Who are your invisible team members? How will these people respond to your requests?

Learn Advocacy Skills

Pete: I do not recommend that you stop advocating for your child. I do recommend that you learn to use effective advocacy skills and techniques. These strategies include writing letters, documenting events, learning to negotiate and persuade. In an article on our Web site titled "How to Disagree with the School Without Starting WW III," Pam and I answer questions about how to disagree with the IEP team. You'll learn about the Rules of Adverse Assumptions, how to use tape recordings and thank you letters to clarify issues, and how to deal with an IEP team bully.

Use Information, Protect Your Source

Pete: In most cases, parents should treat information provided by an aide, teacher, or related services provider as confidential. Use it but do not attribute it to that individual.

If you have questions about services that the school has not provided, write a short letter to request information about the number of sessions provided, dates, minutes. Request to see notes of the sessions. If you find that your child did not receive services that were agreed upon in the IEP, write a letter stating that these services were not provided and ask when the services will be made-up.

When you use this approach, the school will not blame the school employee. Because that person is not blamed or punished, she can continue to provide you with information.

10 Reasons Why Schools Say No!

- 1 The school does not want to change long-standing procedures.
- 2 The school does not want to make exceptions to existing policies or practices.
- 3 The school is afraid of setting a precedent.
- 4 The school does not have the staff to meet the child's needs.
- 5 The staff is not trained to meet the child's needs.
- 6 The school does not have a program to meet the child's needs.
- 7 The school is committed to their one-size-fits all service delivery models.
- 8 The school believes the services your child needs are too expensive.
- 9 The school is overwhelmed by the complexity of your child's needs.
- 10 The school does not understand the legal requirement to provide your child with an individualized program.

Learn to Negotiate & Persuade

Pam: As a parent, it's important for you to understand that you are negotiating with the school for special education services. Here are a few techniques that may be helpful to you as you negotiate.

- 1 Organize your records and files. Date the documents and file in chronological order.
- 2 Describe your concerns (issues) into a 1, 2, 3, 4 outline format. State your concerns in short declarative sentences. Eliminate or reduce adverbs, modifiers, adjectives, and judgments.
- 3 Correlate your evidence (facts that support your concerns) to the issues. 1(a)(b)(c), etc.
- 4 Know what it is that you want.

Pete: You need to learn effective negotiation skills. I recommend reading *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In* by Roger Fisher and William Ury. They teach you how to negotiate "win-win" solutions to disputes without damaging your relationship with the school. I also recommend *How to Argue and Win Every Time*. Author Gerry Spence teaches you how to persuade others to see things as you do, understand your perspective, and WANT to help. *How to Argue* includes wonderful stories about how people dealt with similar situations to yours. Be sure to read the story in Chapter 8 about the mother who wanted her county to fix a dangerous road. After you read this story, you will know what you need to do. **AS**



Pete and Pam Wright have authored several books on advocating for special needs. For more info log onto Wrightslaw.com.