

Working with Parents of Children with Exceptional Learning Needs

Kathryn Burke
March 3, 2011
Greater Edmonton Teachers
Association Convention

My Job Today

To provide some perspective on
working with parents of children with
exceptional learning needs

My Family

- ◎ Two sons with exceptionalities:
 - > Both gifted
 - > Eldest has learning disabilities, ADHD, and health issues
- ◎ Husband:
 - > Spinal cord injured
 - > Learning disabilities
 - > ADHD
- ◎ Four (almost 5) university degrees between husband and me

Meet Colin



- ◎ Early risk factors
- ◎ Co- occurring conditions
- ◎ Huge difference between apparent IQ and performance
- ◎ Struggled to succeed in pre-school & early elementary grades
- ◎ **Tested and coded in Grade 3; special education in Grade 4**
- ◎ **Specialized environment, Gr 4-9 & fully included in Gr 10**

What I know to be true!

- ◉ Parents and teachers share the goal of wanting every child to be a happy and successful learner
- ◉ Teachers want to create positive, collaborative and respectful relationships with parents
- ◉ **Emotion, worry, fatigue and possibly living with disability colours the interactions parents have with teachers**

Top Ten List

1

**Don't wait too long.
Intervention of any type is
better if started earlier.**

Top Ten List

1 (b)

Don't assume someone else has spoken to a parent about a child's exceptional learning needs.

Top Ten List

2

Preparation is critical. It will significantly influence the credibility you have with a parent.

Initial steps

- Objective and careful observation
- Gain insight by consulting with others
- Collect & organize work samples
- Be aware of your goals for a student
- Organize your thoughts

Meetings with parents

- Should ideally be scheduled
- **DON'T HANDLE IMPORTANT MATTERS IN A HALLWAY CONVERSATION ON THE FLY IN FRONT OF OTHER PEOPLE AND WHEN THE PARENTS ARE STRESSED**
- Select best venue for meeting
- Privacy is important
- Timing is always tough

My plea to you...

- It is not all about weaknesses
- Talk about a child's strengths, please!

Be self aware

- Recognize your own strengths and weaknesses
- Don't oversell your knowledge
- Don't undersell your knowledge

Consequences of Poor Preparation

- ⦿ Parents may be “put off”
- ⦿ Your credibility will be undermined
- ⦿ Parents may deny issues (but that may happen anyway)
- ⦿ Your relationship with both parent and student may deteriorate
- ⦿ Help/assessment may not occur
- ⦿ **The child may suffer**

Top Ten List

3

Be flexible. Take cues from the parent.

Top Ten List

4

Parents (and families) are not all the same. Consider family circumstances. Respond accordingly.

Family circumstances

- ◉ Respect cultural traditions
- ◉ You may be an imposing figure to some families
- ◉ Family situation – economics, divorce, death, health
- ◉ **Parents of kids with exceptional needs are often fatigued, stressed and worried... this impacts relationships.**

Top Ten List

5

What you say is not always what parents hear (or remember). Plan accordingly.

What you say

Thank you for coming in today to speak with me about your son. It has been wonderful to get to know him this year. He is such a creative person. ...I find now that there has been a bit more time to assess his performance, that he is really struggling with reading and writing. I know that he tries very hard and I am pleased about that. But, he is really having a tough time keeping up with the curriculum. What I would like to suggest is that in order for me to do the best possible job with him as his teacher, I would like to have one of the experts from downtown test him so that we can learn more about how he learns.

Text run through emotional filter!

Thank you for coming in today to speak with me about your son. It has been wonderful to get to know him this year. He is such a creative person. ...I find now that there has been a bit more time to assess his performance, that he is really struggling with reading and writing. *[Oh d@*m! I thought it would be better this year with this teacher.. She is supposed to be so good.]* I know that he tries very hard and I am pleased about that. *[What did she say?]* But, he is really having a tough time keeping up with the curriculum. What I would like to suggest is that in order for me to do the best possible job with him as his teacher, I would like to have one of the experts from downtown test him so that we can learn more about how he learns. *[What is going to happen now?]*

Top Ten List

6

Avoid reactive language. Reactive language will evoke a strong (and generally negative) reaction.

Top Ten List

7

Build partnerships.
Identify common goals.
Build on common
understandings. Learn
from the parent.

Top Ten List

8

Recognize the grieving
process. What may be
impossible at one stage,
may be possible later.

Top Ten List

9

Create an action plan
with the parent.

Top Ten List

10

What you are doing is
important. A child's life may
depend on your actions.

What I have heard from angry parents...

- ⦿ They are not being heard
- ⦿ They are not being respected
- ⦿ They are regarded as stupid, naive, or un-informed
- ⦿ Their opinion is not valued
- ⦿ Their observations are immediately dismissed out of hand
- ⦿ They are frustrated about a system which is not responsive to the needs of their child
- ⦿ They perceive what is happening is different from what is being told

What I hear from happy parents

- ⦿ They are respected
- ⦿ They believe the teacher/school has the technical ability to address their child's exceptional learning needs
- ⦿ They believe the teacher/school wants to do the best for their child
- ⦿ There is high quality communication with the teacher/school
- ⦿ They are a little less worried

Frequently Asked Questions:

- ◉ Should I use email to communicate with a parent? Telephone?
- ◉ What happens if a parent always wants to discuss their child with me and sometimes I don't have time?
- ◉ What if the parent refuses to acknowledge that there is an issue with a child?

This PowerPoint

- ◉ Available to be downloaded at www.LDExperience.ca
 - > Click on Resources → Library to download Adobe pdf of slides

Other Resources

- ⦿ An Accidental Advocate by Kathryn Burke
- ⦿ www.ricklavoie.com
 - › Any of his DVDs and books are wonderful
- ⦿ www.pbs.org/wgbh/misunderstoodminds/index.html
 - › Online interactive experience of being LD
 - › (Just Google PBS Misunderstood Minds)

Discussion & Questions

