

10 Tips for Schools on Avoiding Confrontation with Parents



By Pat Howey, Advocate

1. Treat the parents with kindness and courtesy.

People who are treated with courtesy and kindness are less likely to become angry. If they do become angry, they are more likely to focus their anger away from you if you treat them nicely. Parents are much more likely to file due process hearings or complaints if they are treated badly.

2. Make parents feel like they are an important part of the IEP Team.

See that parents have all of the same information as other Team members. Send them copies of all reports and documents a week before the meeting. Parents who feel disenfranchised are more likely to get angry. When their opinions and views are ignored, they will be angry with you.

3. If you make a mistake, admit it.

Parents understand that we are all human. If a staff member drops the ball, acknowledge it and work toward doing better. It is difficult to get angry with someone who admits a mistake and is truly contrite.

4. Don't let the paperwork overwhelm the meeting.

Given a choice, many parents would prefer that schools do the right thing for their child than to do everything right. Don't get so bogged down in the paperwork that you cannot focus on the child's needs and IEP.

5. Do not engage in "blame the parent; blame the child" tactics.

Some children are difficult to educate. If you have this problem, remember that it is not always the fault of the parent or of the child. Parents understand that schools have limited resources. They also understand that not all schools are able to educate all children in their home schools and in the least restrictive environment. Let parents help you explore all of the resources that are available from your State Department of Education when trying to educate a difficult-to-place child.

6. Do not surprise parents.

Give a draft copy of an IEP to parents ahead of time. No one likes surprises. You will notice that your meetings are more efficient and effective.

7. Ask the parents to provide information about their child before the IEP Meeting.

Include this information in your draft IEP. You do not have to agree with everything the parent says. But if the parent thinks the information is important, you must value the parent's beliefs. After all, most parents know the child the best. After all, they were their child's first teacher.

8. Give parents a copy of evaluation reports before the meeting.

Parents often need time to digest this assessment information. They also need time to think about questions they may want to ask. This is particularly true of initial evaluations when parents are often still trying to deal with the idea that their child has a disability.

9. Don't adopt the "floodgate" mentality.

Administrators sometimes fear that providing a new or unique service will "open up the floodgates." They think they will have to provide the same services to all the other children with IEPs. Remember the "I" in IEP stands for "Individualized." That means not all children need every service. Children are like snowflakes; no two are alike. Providing a service to one child will not open the floodgates to other children unless they have the same unique need as the first child.

10. Remember that every child has strengths.

Often, IEP Teams talk mainly about a child's weaknesses. This discourages parents, especially when their child struggles with a significant disability. It also demeans and devalues the child. Try opening up IEP Meetings with a discussion about the child's strengths. This tends to inspire members of the IEP Team and gives parents encouragement and hope.

About Pat Howey

Pat Howey is an advocate who has helped parents obtain special education services and resolve special education disputes. As a member of the Wrightslaw Speakers Bureau, Pat provides training for parents, educators, and others who want to ensure that children receive quality special education services.

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