

Parents...You ARE Educational Team Members and Advocates

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ASDC

Fall Endeavor 2013

As parents, we are the experts on our children. We know them better than they know anyone else and we know what they like/dislike, how they learn, and what they need. Let's face it, unfortunately our kids enter some school settings that are, putting it politely, not deaf-friendly. Whether it is just an uninformed teacher or a hostile administrator, there are times when we will need to stand up for what our children need in order to succeed in school. That means we have to wear yet another "hat"—the hat of special education advocate. But where do we start?

The most important detail to remember is that *you really are the professional when it comes to your child*. Sure, the school staff may hold degrees in various disciplines and they may be experts in those areas, but only you know your child. Some of these staff have never even met your child, so they really need your input and expertise to develop appropriate plans. Do not be intimidated by the "experts" because you are an equal member of the educational team with equal expertise to share. Keeping that in mind, there are other practical ways in which to be the educational advocate your child needs.

✓ **Be prepared for the Individualized Education Program (IEP)/Case Conference meetings**

- Be organized- Put together a binder that you take and use at all meetings; include current medical tests, audiograms, IEPs, educational testing, and copies of relevant communications with the school.
- Know your rights and your child's rights- Every year schools are required to give parents a copy of their parental rights, read this and know what it means. If you don't understand it, ask for clarification until you do.
- Know what the laws pertaining to education say. It is important to know what rights these laws give to our kids. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004) and your state's version of its special education law are the two most important to learn about.
- Know your state's interpreter standards and laws- Require that all interpreters, including substitutes, meet or exceed these standards. Ask to see credentials. If an interpreter does not have credentials, they are not professionally recognized and should not work with your child.
- Make sure that interpreters that will work with your child are attending the meeting as participants, not as working interpreters. Be sure that there is a

different interpreter set up to interpret the meeting. You will want to request this in writing prior to the meeting so that the school has time to make arrangements.

- Know what services are available in your area and on the internet- Most state agencies have a Deaf services center that has this information or can help you find it. These agencies are often under the Health and Human Services Department or the Family and Social Services Department.
- Know what you want for your child- Make a list of your child's strengths and weaknesses to use in developing a plan that best meets these needs.
- Take an advocate with you- Sometimes an objective view is invaluable and it is your right to bring an advocate with you.

✓ **Attend the Case Conference**

- Be aware that if parents fail to show up for case conference meetings, school staff can develop an IEP without them.
- Have your child attend every case conference (regardless of age). This meeting is about them and their needs, having them there reminds the educational team of that fact.
- Develop appropriate goals for your child to meet their needs, not the needs of the school, staff, or program.
- Become part of the solution- School budgets are very tight and many administrators will try to cut corners wherever they can so be sure that your child's right to equal education and equal communication are not among the cuts. If schools say they cannot do something or cannot find the appropriately credentialed staff, ask for proof of whom they have contacted and offer suggestions of others to contact.

The best way to head off potential problems is to be proactive in preventing them from happening in the first place. Here are some ways to proactively address these issues so that they do not become problems.

✓ **Develop a communication plan**

- Address how your child will communicate not just in class, but also during convocations/school-wide meetings, field trips, cafeteria/recess times, bus transportation, and extracurricular activities. (Make sure the school insists that outside groups bringing in presentations have captioned media.)
- Be sure to include social communication.
- Make sure that your child has ASL linguistic models other than the interpreter.
- Include a "plan B contingency"- Accessibility is not an afterthought. Be sure there are specific plans for covering substitute interpreters, CART (if

school servers go down), dead hearing aid or cochlear implant batteries, and non-captioned/inaccessible media.

- ✓ **Incorporate Assistive Technology (AT) and other accessibility features**
 - Insist on meaningful training including troubleshooting for all pertinent staff.
 - Be clear that captioned media is non-negotiable- This is how your child will access audio portions on video material and it helps improve literacy. YouTube and websites (including school websites) are notorious for being non-captioned. Be sure teachers know that these will need to be captioned prior to being shown or not shown at all.
 - Make sure your child is being taught how to use and manage FM systems, hearing aids and cochlear implants independently.
 - Address how student produced projects and school-produced materials need to be accessible- This teaches all students how to implement Universal Design features in their work and respect for each other.
- ✓ **Insist on sensitivity and awareness.**
 - Make sure the school holds Deaf Awareness celebrations and highlights Deaf and Hard of Hearing Role Models.
 - Hold the school accountable for modeling appropriate communication with Deaf and Hard of Hearing people (students, parents, and community members).
 - Ensure that auditory-based projects have an equal visual component that is available to all students, not only the Deaf or Hard of Hearing student.
 - Be sure library materials include Deaf-friendly and ASL resources.
- ✓ **Communicate with teachers and other staff.**
 - Write an introductory letter or make a PowerPoint presentation about your child and their needs.
 - Call a staffing at the beginning of each school year, at the new semester, when there are new teachers or student-teachers, or when needed. Be sure that coaches and club sponsors, staff from the cafeteria, library, nurse's office, main office, and security office, attend as well so that they can ask questions about how best to communicate with your child and plans can be made.
 - Keep in contact with teachers on a regular basis. Let them know about problems right away. Be sure to let staff know when they are doing things right, too. For example, send them an email telling them how much you appreciate them and their efforts on behalf of your child.
 - Be sure you offer your help to school staff when you can.
- ✓ **Develop self-advocacy goals**

- Focus on accessibility- For example, the proper way to handle non-captioned media, interpreters that do not show up or are not an appropriate language match.
- Be sure your child knows how to request interpreters and other services that are available in your area.
- Make sure goals are culturally appropriate for both the Hearing and the Deaf communities. Advocacy and skills checklists are available from Clark and Scheele (2005) and Gallaudet University. See the ASDC website for download information.

Unfortunately, there will be situations where even our best efforts at advocacy can fall short. In these situations, we need to know what to do next in order to ensure that our kids receive the services they need at school.

✓ **Hold the school accountable**

- Know the proper “chain of command” and use it.
- Call new case conference meeting, if needed.
- Do not be afraid to file a complaint with the State Department of Education.
- Do not be afraid to file for a due process hearing- In this situation, the partnership between parents and schools has likely broken down and has become more adversarial. Schools depend on the fact that parents will not file for such hearings because they are time consuming and costly. It is recommended that parents find an advocate or attorney to help with this legal process.

Lastly, I encourage you to take your advocacy to the next level. Here are a few other ways to promote awareness and advocacy in your community.

- Enroll in advocacy trainings and workshops.
- Become active in the Parent–Teacher organization for the school.
- Attend school board meetings.
- Attend law/policy promulgation hearings.
- Become involved in the state chapters of the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) and the Registry for Interpreters for the Deaf (RID).
- Contact the local media.
- Find other parents who are having the same issues. Working together can prove systemic problems exist and need to be dealt with. It is harder for schools to ignore one set of parents than it is a whole group of parent-advocates.
- Become an advocate and use your expertise to help other families.

The motivation for our advocacy is our children and being sure that they get what they need to have language-rich environments and the opportunity to thrive. Best wishes in your advocacy.

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