

STRENGTHENING CONNECTIONS:

Effective Communication Between Special Education Teams and Families

Building trust with families of children with disabilities is important for local education agencies (LEAs) to create a collaborative and supportive educational environment. Trust forms the foundation of effective partnerships between families and educators, allowing for the development and implementation of individualized education programs (IEPs) specific to each child's individual needs. When families feel valued and heard, they are more likely to actively engage in their child's education, address challenges constructively, and advocate for necessary resources.

Managing tough conversations in special education requires sensitivity, clear communication, and a focus on collaborative problem-solving. Here are some general best practices:

- 1. Prepare thoroughly:** Before the conversation, gather all relevant information, including existing student data, assessments, educational plans or IEPs, and any concerns or issues raised by parents. Ensure all team members have a clear understanding of the student's strengths, needs, and goals. Support parents in preparing for meetings by providing relevant documents such as student reports or work samples, assessments, teacher input, and progress reports. Meetings should focus on collaborative decision-making, so new information should not be presented to parents for the first time at the meeting.
- 2. Choose an appropriate time and setting:** Scheduling meetings includes notifying parents of the meeting early enough to ensure that they will have an opportunity to attend and scheduling the meeting at a mutually agreed on time and place. Scheduling meetings with families must be done with care and flexibility to demonstrate respect for their time and commitments. Notify parents well in advance, and work together to identify a mutually convenient time and location. Be sure to communicate the purpose of the meeting, who will be present, and what topics will be discussed. Offering multiple date and time options, including after-school hours, virtual participation, or child care support, can remove access barriers. When LEAs prioritize accessibility and comfort, parents are more likely to feel valued, prepared, and willing to engage.
- 3. Start positively:** The tone of the meeting is often set in the first few minutes. When discussing a sensitive issue with parents, begin on a positive note, acknowledging strengths and progress made by the student. Using the "sandwich approach," start the conversation by highlighting their child's strengths, then raise concerns surrounding the difficult topic, and conclude with recounting a positive experience with the child. Centering the conversation with a positive perspective helps foster collaboration and brings about trust and rapport, especially during emotionally charged conversations.
- 4. Active listening, respect, and empathy:** Effective partnerships begin with deep, authentic listening. Parents bring critical insight into their child's needs and experiences, and they must feel heard without judgment. The goal is to find solutions that respect the backgrounds and upbringings of all students. Practice active listening by maintaining eye contact, using open body language, asking clarifying questions and summarizing what you've heard to empathetically understand parent concerns and perspectives. Listen to parents carefully to understand their values, especially if they might differ from your personal views or your LEA's teaching philosophies. While demonstrating respect of diverse cultural, educational, and emotional backgrounds of families, remember that not all parents have the same level of knowledge or confidence when discussing their child's educational experience and needs. Empathy is essential since many parents may be navigating a range of emotions including grief, frustration, or fear. Remember that empathy can be demonstrated by showing the families that you care and are willing to work collaboratively with them even if you cannot address all their concerns.

5. **Use clear and accessible language:** In addition to ensuring parents have access to translation services or other accommodations needed to meaningfully participate in the conversation, make sure the language used is parent-friendly. Explain concepts in a way that is understandable to all participants, and avoid jargon and technical terms. Provide parents with resources or reference documents that explain special education concepts and common abbreviations.
6. **Stay focused on solutions:** Keep the discussion focused on finding solutions and common goals. Set the tone by preparing some potential solutions to share during your meeting but remain open to other options. If possible, provide resources that parents can continue to reference after the conversation.
7. **Teamwork and IEP decision-making:** The purpose of an IEP meeting is to make a joint team decision about a student’s educational needs and the services necessary to support the student in making progress. All members of the IEP team hold equal decision-making power. Emphasize to parents your desire to devise a shared goal that will benefit their child. Encourage flexibility to promote compromise among team members in finding solutions that meet the needs of the student while respecting different perspectives.
8. **Establish a plan for ongoing monitoring and review of the IEP goals and supports:** Schedule follow-up meetings as needed to address any concerns, review student progress, and make adjustments as needed. The LEA should develop and implement a plan for collecting and documenting student data to track progress and inform future decision making.
9. **Document agreements and next steps:** Clearly document agreed-upon actions, responsibilities, and timelines. This helps ensure accountability and follow-through. If consensus cannot be reached on specific issues, document areas of disagreement respectfully in the IEP document and outline next steps for resolution, such as seeking mediation

or revisiting the discussion at a later date. Ensure that decisions are appropriately documented and communicated in the prior written notice (PWN). Be flexible when appropriate and clearly explain timelines for next steps or documentation, so parents know when to expect to receive information.

10. **Follow up:** After the conversation, follow up promptly on any agreed-upon actions or further discussions. This demonstrates commitment and helps maintain trust. Sometimes, a conclusion is not reached, and parents require time to process the discussion and consider their options. Ask parents to talk again once they have had time to think and emphasize your commitment to finding a solution together.
11. **Provide support and resources:** Offer guidance on navigating the educational system, accessing resources, and understanding their child’s rights. LEAs can develop internal documents to support parents in understanding and participating in the special education process, such as input forms, information sheets, and guiding questions. Providing or facilitating connections to community support services and advocacy groups can also be beneficial, including:
 - [DC Special Education Hub](#)
 - [Advocates for Justice and Education \(AJE\)](#)
 - [Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education](#)
 - [Office of the Student Advocate](#)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- [OSSE Parent Participation and Engagement in the Special Education Process Guidance](#)
- [DC Office of the Student Advocate-Effective Communication: When Conflict Arises](#) (infographic)
- [DC Office of the Student Advocate-Effective Communication: General Tips](#) (infographic)
- [Susan Graham-Clay, “Difficult Conversations with Parents: Practical Skills for Teachers”, School Community Journal, 2024, Vol. 34, No. 1](#)