



# The *Other Side of the* Desk

Are you a 'challenging parent'?

BY ELLEN NOTBOHM

## WHAT SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS WANT YOU TO KNOW

### AS TRANSITIONS GO, MY SON'S TRANSITION TO JUNIOR HIGH HAD BEEN SMOOTHER THAN ANY PARENT WITH AN INDIVIDUALIZED PROGRAM PLANNING (IPP) IN HAND COULD HOPE FOR.

It had been a very good year with very good teachers. But as the year wound down with alarming speed, the scheduling of the annual IPP meeting just wasn't happening. Repeated requests – at increasing decibel levels – to resource teachers went unresolved amid scheduling problems, administrative issues, illnesses and other roadblocks. When we finally did meet, five days before the end of the school year, I told the excellent resource teacher only half-jokingly, "You're almost there. Only five more days and then you are done with me."

And this excellent teacher stopped in his tracks and looked at me with surprise. "Oh, no," he said. "No. I have had some challenging parents this year, and you are not one of them."

At that, it was my turn to stop in my tracks. What, I wanted very much to know, constitutes a "challenging" parent? It was too intriguing a thought to leave on the table so a few months later, we came back to it. His very thoughtfully painted portrait of a "challenging" parent led me to ask other special educators, teachers of students aged toddler to high school across several different school districts, the same question. And while each came from their own unique situation, the common threads in their thoughts were striking. Here then is the view from the other side of the desk, the voice of your special education teacher:

**Be team-oriented.** A combative attitude does not enhance our ability to make progress with your child. Our relationship should be an alliance, not an adversarial face off. We are all here because of the child; he or she is our common interest, and it is important not to lose sight of that. It is not about me or you, or whether we like each other.

**Give me the courtesy of a clean slate.** You may have had bad experiences with previous teachers or schools, but putting past conflicts or issues onto me, coming in with guns blazing before you even have a chance to get to know me or my program is counterproductive. "This is what has happened in the past and I expect the same from you" is looking for trouble where it's possible that none exists.

**There is a difference between being assertive and being aggressive.** And there is a cost. Teachers appreciate the parent who is a knowledgeable, effective advocate for their child. Knowing what your rights are and knowing the facts on the ground, requesting services and accommodations firmly but respectfully is light years removed from being a fist-pounder.

"We are not here for the money or the recognition," says an elementary school resource teacher. "We are here because we love these kids. In an ideal world, I want to share with the parent any inside perspective I have about 'the system' and how it affects decisions made about their child. But if I sense in any way that the parent will use the information in a way that comes back on me or threatens my job, it is only natural that I will not share."

**Undermining me undermines your child's learning.** Communicating to your child that everything that is going wrong is the school's fault undermines your child's ability to trust me, to comply with necessary classroom boundaries, and ultimately, to learn.

All children, even special needs children, need to assume some level of responsibility for their behavior and its consequences. We are sometimes faced with parents who say, "I cannot believe my child would do such a thing. It must be somebody else's fault. If you had been doing this, he wouldn't have been doing that." Sometimes that's the case. However, when a parent insists it is always the case, I need to gently suggest that a closer look be taken at what is actually going on.

Step back and listen as open-mindedly as possible when faced with information that makes your blood pressure rise. It's very common for children to exhibit a different set of behaviors at school than they do at home.

**Having to be both teacher and case manager can put me in a very difficult position.** Especially in early childhood education, it often falls on the teacher/case manager to identify the fact that my particular classroom or program isn't the best fit for your child.

"Please know," says an early intervention teacher, "that when I tell you we need to transition your child to a different setting, it isn't because I 'don't like him.' Hear me as objectively as possible when I tell you that he is struggling too hard in the current placement and would benefit from a different setting, that we need to modify the IPP and find a better environment."

**Don't assume I know everything about your child.** I may only have the prior year's academic information, and perhaps no personal information at all. Tell me anything you think is important for me to know about your "whole child." Be a resource for us, a bridge between programs. Share with us what has worked or not worked with your child in the past.

We cannot do everything for your child. Your child is entitled by law to a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive setting. That is not equivalent to the best possible education. As one teacher put it: "You get the Chevy; you don't get the Cadillac. You get safe,

reliable transportation but you don't get the CD player and the leather seats." It's a distinction many parents don't understand: that special education is intended to provide for adequate growth, not maximum possible growth.

Federal law mandates that we make sure that kids who have a disability are making adequate progress, as defined and measured yearly in their IPPs. The idea behind it is that without accommodation, they wouldn't make adequate progress in general education, and therefore would not be getting a free and appropriate public education.

A junior high teacher describes it this way: "Let's say you have a 5th Grader who is reading at a 2nd Grade level. It happens; teachers commonly look at their classes and see a developmental range, so there are kids who end up in 4th or 5th Grade reading several Grade levels behind. So we set a goal, in a calendar year, for the child to make a year's growth, which is what his peers would make. But he is still behind, he is not catching up. In order for him to catch up, he would have to outpace his peers. Some kids do that, but it's very difficult and not realistic."

"We have many commitments to multiple content areas. If we were to spend half the day on reading alone – sure, we could catch the kid up. But that's not appropriate because we give up everything else. And so we always have that discussion every year in an IPP meeting. We have a certain amount of time. How do we set goals? How much time do we need to meet each goal? How much are we going to be able to accomplish given math, science, social studies, all of these other content areas required and from which kids benefit?"

**Your child is not my only student.** When I am meeting with you, when we are in a discussion and problem-solving mode – in that moment, your student is the only one I am concerned about. But back in my classroom, I have anywhere from a few to a few dozen other students in my caseload, and I have the scheduling restrictions that naturally come with that caseload. It simply is not possible for the needs of one child to dictate my entire day. Asking that of me is painful for both of us.

**Early intervention works.** Here is an extension of a universal truth: The earlier the better – and the *better* the earlier the better. Catch things early, intervene well, and including your family, not just the school. No one was ever sorry they intervened early, but legions of families regret 'waiting to see if he outgrows it.'

**See the positive in your child.** Have an honest understanding of what the range of your child's disability means, but also recognize his strengths. Too often, the most difficult parents to work with are the ones who cannot see the positive qualities of their kid. Their focus is stuck on what the child can't do. Perhaps they do not

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