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TIPS FOR TEACHERS

ON COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS OF HANDICAPPED STUDENTS

In just a few years' time, Minnesota has made tremendous strides in providing an appropriate education for all its handicapped children. Today's state and federal laws require not only that all handicapped students be served by the public schools, but also that every child receive the form of educational programs and services that meets his or her individual needs. The laws are far-reaching and are making many changes for schools, teachers, parents, and children.

Today's laws recognize what educators and parents long have known: that handicapped children are first children, with individual abilities and needs, and that they can make real progress with well-planned programs.

Parents of handicapped children now are more fully involved in planning and reviewing their children's school programs than ever before. They now have the right to participate in many decisions that once were made by school systems alone. They now are considered an essential part of the planning team with a specific area of expertise, equal in importance to that of teacher, other specialist, or administrator.

Parents have known the child throughout his or her life. They see progress, or lack of progress, in a wider variety of areas than are apparent in the school setting. They can see the effect of current school programs, as well as past programs.

PARENT-SCHOOL COMMUNICATIONS

Parents and schools communicate in a variety of ways, formally and informally. The new special education laws provide for a somewhat more formalized series of program planning conferences, with parental involvement, as well as conciliation conferences or due process hearings when there are areas of disagreement.

But the less formal kinds of communications between parents and school

personnel -- telephone calls, notes, visits to the classroom, conferences -- are still essential to a mutual understanding of what is happening to the child in and out of the classroom.

The feelings that both parents and teachers have toward a handicapped child can stand in the way of effective communication about the child's progress in school. More importantly, such feelings can prevent either a parent or a teacher from evaluating the child objectively and finding the best ways to help him or her. Thus it is essential for both parents and teachers to be sensitive to emotional reactions and to deal with them directly.

PARENTS' FEELINGS TOWARD THE CHILD

Most parents have high hopes for their children. Whether expecting a baby or watching a child grow up, they make plans for the child and imagine what his or her future will be.

As a parent begins to deal with the limitations brought about by the child's handicap, the dreams may be drastically readjusted. The parents may feel the impact of the handicap in a wide variety of ways, depending on the nature and severity of the handicap, their own emotional stability, attitudes of other family members and friends toward the child, and many other factors.

Most parents go through a pattern of adjustment to their child's handicap.

If the child's difficulties have recently been diagnosed, or if the parent has not been able to deal with his or her own feelings, the parent may. . .

(1) Be consumed in his or her own feelings about the handicap.

As time goes on, and parents begin to understand the nature of the child's handicap and the child's need for specialized help, they are likely to move to the point where they can

(2) Evaluate the child objectively and seek help.

Later parents may be able to

(3) Accept and value their child as a unique human being with abilities as well as disabilities.

They may also move beyond their concern for their own child to

(4) Seek to help other parents of handicapped children and to encourage better programs for all children with handicaps.

Teachers and other school personnel may encounter parents at any stage in this process. Communication is most effective when school personnel make the effort to learn what the parents' feelings are.

Following are some of the ways that a parent's feelings toward the child and his or her handicaps may affect the parent's relationship with the child and the school.

(1) Refusal to accept information about the handicap. The school may be "breaking the news" to a parent. Even if he or she has suspected a handicap, hearing the suspicion confirmed may be too much to bear. This may cause the parent to defend the child, accuse the teacher of "having it in" for the child, or being angry at the entire school staff.

(2) Grief. The parent who dreamed of his child as a major league pitcher may just be beginning to realize that the child can never play catch. . . or learn to read. Such a parent may resent "providence", the schools, the other parent, the child himself, or any other target. The parent may envy other parents who appear to have no problems.

(3) Relief. School personnel may be surprised to find that a parent is relieved when they tell him or her of a handicap. The parent may have long suspected that something was wrong and feel reassured when a "label" is assigned to it, so that the child at last can get help. A parent may have felt that he or she was responsible for the child's lack of progress in school.

(4) Guilt. It is not uncommon for a parent to feel that he or she has con-

tributed to the child's handicap, either by something that occurred before birth or by something that happened early in childhood. Some parents look on the handicap as a retribution for their own past sins.

(5) Overprotectiveness. A parent may try to shield the child from hurt by "protecting" him from the risks and cruelties of everyday living. Or, the parent may do too much for the child, trying to compensate for the guilt the parent feels about the handicap. In either case, the result might be that the child does not have the opportunity to develop his skills or learn to get along with others. Overprotectiveness of the handicapped child may also hurt other members of the family.

(6) Inadequacy. The parent may be overwhelmed by the difficulties of raising a child who is handicapped. The parent may not know other families with handicapped children and may not have had access to information that could be helpful. He or she feels alone. A parent who loses patience with a handicapped child may feel more guilty than a "normal" child's parent would.

(7) Worry about the future. A teacher has the child for a school year, and the school is responsible for the child for only a few years. The parent, however, must look to the future. The parent may worry about the child's social adjustment once he leaves the relatively protective environment of school. The parent also may be concerned over the child's ability to support himself once he is out of school, or when the parents are gone.

Any or all of these emotions may be felt by the parent as he or she talks with teachers or other school personnel. Different people handle their emotions in different ways. Some try to hide their feelings (by holding back tears or simply not talking), expending so much effort to conceal emotion that they do not fully concentrate on the subject of discussion. At the other extreme, a parent may respond so emotionally to any discussion of the child's handicap that the discussion

never quite gets to the point.

If these emotions can be recognized and dealt with, rather than ignored, parents and teachers work more effectively to help the handicapped child.

FRUSTRATIONS THE PARENT MAY BE EXPERIENCING

In addition to the parent's own feelings, he or she may be affected by other frustrations, intensifying the difficulties of communicating with the school system.

By the time the child is in school, the parents may have learned that society's attitudes are not always helpful.

The child's grandparents, other relatives, neighbors, or playmates may have been critical or cruel, perhaps unintentionally.

Physicians, counselors, or school professionals may have avoided "breaking the news" of the child's handicap to the parents or may have misjudged the nature or severity of the handicap. The parents may have been referred to a program or service that was not appropriate to the child's real needs. Or the child may not have received help early enough.

Other teachers in the past may have been ignorant about the handicap or the best way of helping the child.

The parent may feel frustrated with changes in professional opinion -- whether the child should be in a special or "mainstream" program, exactly what the handicap is, what kinds of tests should be given, etc.

The parent may simply be "burned out" after a long series of meetings and conferences about the child; in many cases, the parent feels he has had to "educate the professionals". . . but that the professionals' decisions seldom take parental input into consideration.

Finally, many parents have been forced to "fight for their child" to get an adequate diagnosis and appropriate services. They may have been told that "no

such program is available". . . "there isn't enough money". . ."we don't have the right kind of personnel". . . "maybe in a few years." At the same time, they see the school providing expensive programs that they consider to be less essential. Parents of older children may be especially frustrated as they see time go by without adequate help for their children. When the services finally become available the parent may feel that it's too late to help their child.

Parents who have had such experiences may have negative feelings toward the school, and schools in general. Many parents of handicapped children regard schools personnel as cold and unconcerned, and as looking for ways they can avoid providing services. Even though the school personnel who are currently working with the child may be dedicated and accepting, they may become the target of the parent's built-up impatience, skepticism, and even hostility.

THE TEACHER'S FEELINGS AND FRUSTRATIONS

Teachers, like parents, have feelings toward children with handicaps. Even though they may not have the same emotional involvement with the child, they cannot be totally objective.

The teacher may even have the same sorts of feelings that the parents do, and may "see themselves" in some of the parents' comments about the child. Following are some feelings teachers may experience:

(1) A teacher may like one child less than the others in the class, because of the child's appearance, behavior, or the teacher's feelings about the handicap itself. The teacher may not want to admit these feelings to the parents or even to himself. . . yet they need to be recognized before they can be overcome.

(2) The teacher may feel that the parent is unfairly challenging the teacher's competence, simply because the teacher does not have all the answers.

(3) He or she may feel that parents and other school personnel do not appreciate the teacher's efforts.

(4) The teacher may feel inadequate, in terms of training and experience, to

deal with a child with a particular handicap. He or she may feel the school has not done its part in providing support services, preparation time, or inservice training.

(5) The teacher may feel that his or her class is impossibly large, or that too many children with handicaps are placed in it, or that "normal" children are suffering because of the amount of time the teacher must devote to handicapped children.

(6) The teacher may feel that laws requiring parental involvement simply make the teacher's job more complicated.

SOME WAYS TO ACHIEVE GOOD COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS

As teachers and parents begin to recognize and become sensitive to each other's feelings and areas of expertise, they can work together to help the child. Here are some ways to reach this goal:

(1) Consider parents your partners in an honest team approach to helping the child. Avoid divisions into "we" and "they".

(2) Keep in touch. . . as frequently and informally as possible, through notes, phone calls, visits. Try to provide as much positive information as possible about the child and his or her progress. This sets the stage for a more relaxed, trusting atmosphere when it's time for a more formal meeting.

(3) Don't stop communicating because the parent does not respond to your efforts. He or she may simply be disillusioned because of past experiences with professionals. Keep showing that you care!

(4) Listen to parents. Remember that they have valuable insights and information about the child. They know what "turns him on" to learning and what "turns him off" and causes difficulty that could be avoided. They may be able to tell when the child is responding well, or not so well, to the school program. Encourage

them to tell you anything that might help you help the child.

(5) Present your information and ideas as clearly as possible. Allow time for explanation and questions. Have material available in writing, so the parent can share it with others at home.

(6) Avoid professional jargon. It may be easy, among other professionals, to use "shortcut" words or initials to describe concepts you all understand. But if the parent does not understand your terminology, he or she may well feel you are trying to appear superior or to intimidate.

(7) Communicate with other school personnel who are working with the child. Find out what's happening in physical education or special tutoring, for example. When a program planning conference involves other professionals as well as the parent, plan together the ways you might put the parent at ease. You might begin by asking the parent about his or her own concerns. Be sure to make it clear what each staff person does and the progress each has been able to observe. If there are differences of opinion, explain and interpret them clearly. Most parents will respect these differences and be glad that they are brought out, rather than hidden.

(8) If the parent is emotional or hostile, let him "get it out of his system", so you can get on to a discussion of the child's program needs.

(9) Be honest about the reasons for any changes in the child's program, even if the reason is administrative efficiency (e.g., availability of a particular staff person) rather than being directly related to the child's learning needs.

(10) Put the parent in touch with advocacy groups representing handicapped persons (such as Associations for Retarded Citizens, Associations for Children with Learning Disabilities, and the many other groups that may be organized in your community). Such groups can help the parents with their own questions or difficulties in raising the child. They can help the parents find services they will need in the

future. The advocacy groups may also be able to help your school by seeking public support for better services. You can also help parents by encouraging your school district to develop parent education programs for all parents of handicapped children.

(11) Feel free to admit to parents your own doubts, lack of knowledge, or inabilities. This will strike a responsive chord among parents who have had the same doubts about themselves. No one really expects you to have all the answers. . . but you should know where to go for assistance!

(12) If you are giving the parent major new information about the handicap, particularly if it is negative, do so gently, in lay language, and with strong assurance that help is available. Point out the child's strengths as well as weaknesses.

(13) Reassure the parent that he or she is doing a good job with the child. Avoid assuming that parents are responsible for a child's previous failures. This will free the parent to be honest about reporting problems at home.

(14) Empathize with parents. Recognize that they are dealing with a difficult situation. Be willing to cope with their emotion and let them express it openly. . . so you can get on to effective communication. Let them know you are both on the same side. . . the child's!

Throughout the process of informal and formal communication, remember that sharing information and ideas helps you and the parents "recharge your batteries". Communication helps everyone concerned find renewed energy to help the child. . . and that's what it's all about!

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