



Setting the Stage for Parent-Professional Collaboration

Contributed by Dr. Cathy Pratt, Director, Indiana Resource Center for Autism

Susan Moreno, M.A., MAAP Services, Inc., PO Box 524, Crown Point, IN 46307

Supporting an individual with an autism spectrum disorder can present special challenges for both parents and professionals. When problem situations occur, it may be difficult for family members and professionals to work together in a positive manner on behalf of the individual. Clearly, effective communication is essential to ensure that all involved in the individual's life have accurate and important information to guide programming decisions. The following list presents helpful hints for maintaining effective, consistent, and honest communication.

- Reach an agreement about how often and in what format communication can best take place. Determine methods for maintaining ongoing communication, such as telephone calls, written journals, or other systems. Remember that the professional's primary responsibility during the school or work day is his or her students or employees.
- Frustration will naturally occur when two parties attempt to negotiate important issues. Keep communications as positive and free of blame as possible. Parents need to hear about successes, not just failures from teachers. Teachers need support and information from parents rather than angry phone calls. If tempers flare, postponing calls or meetings to allow a little cooling off time can be an effective beginning to problem resolution. It is always important for parents and professionals to thank each other when they do something positive, even if it does not work out perfectly.
- Honesty is vital. However, honesty does not preclude tact. Know when to be blunt and when to be diplomatic. Reserve judgement. There is always more to the story than one knows.
- Present information in a clear fashion and do not use jargon. Professional jargon can be both intimidating and confusing for family members.
- At the beginning of each partnership, it is important for parents and professionals to convey to each other what they realistically expect. When expectations change, the other party should be informed. Parents should be consistent in their expectations of professionals and the services desired. Professionals should never expect a parent to accept the argument that your service delivery system cannot afford what their child needs.
- Discuss problems as soon as they arise, rather than waiting for them to get out of control. If teachers do not have the answer to a problem, admit it and involve the parent in problem solving. Parents should not be afraid to ask questions about any aspect of their child's treatment or programming.

Working together takes commitment, time, and consideration by all involved. When parents and professionals cannot work together constructively, the child is the one who loses! But when good communication, mutual respect and sensitivity, and good faith efforts on everyone's part to resolve problems is the foundation of parent-professionals collaboration...all three are winners!

Pratt, C. & Moreno, S. (1995). Setting the stage for parent -professional collaboration. *The Reporter*, 1(1), 3.