



# Developing Long Term Relationships Between School and Parents

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The process involved in establishing a student's individualized education program (IEP) can nurture a climate of trust if certain steps are followed. Ideally, the annual case conference is a systematic process that ultimately leads to effective programming for students on the autism spectrum. In order for the case conference to run smoothly, certain preliminary steps should be taken that involves setting up the meeting, gaining input from all involved, and creating meeting cultures that promote collaboration.

Let's start by setting up the annual case conference meeting. The annual case conference must be set up at a "mutually agreed upon time." This means the school can suggest times. However, parents have the right to say when they can attend if the stated time does not work for them. Each party needs to be reasonable about their request. Attempt to meet during lunch hour, before school, or after school. Give sufficient notice for parents to make arrangements with their employers to get off of work. If a parent does not respond, it is essential to keep trying to meet with them for the conference. Offer to provide transportation to and from school for the parent. If there are extreme health or other circumstances, school staff may need to consider meeting parents at their home. If these attempts don't work, then conduct the meeting over the phone. School districts must make three attempts to contact parents for a case conference meeting. Be sure these attempts are sensitive and responsive to events surrounding the family member's life. Parents are an essential member of their son or daughter's educational team. Also, be sure to let the parent know they can bring a friend, an advocate, or anyone else they feel comfortable with. Being outnumbered by the numerous professionals that typically attend these meetings can be overwhelming to some parents.

Prior to the case conference meeting, provide parents with relevant reports and gather their input concerning their child's instructional program. Being blindsided with reports and goals during a meeting is not the best way in which to establish the ground work for an ongoing working relationship. Providing family members with information ahead of time can create a climate of trust and collaboration. It can also assist families with being able to more effectively participate in the process.

As a case conference coordinator, it is imperative to consider where to sit during the meeting. Perhaps the optimal location is at the foot of the table to be able to see everyone's body language, facial expressions, and how all members are responding. Another spot to strategically sit would be in the middle of the table to show support for both family members and school staff. Think about this decision and arrive to the meeting early to set up.

At the beginning of the meeting, one should plan for a minimum of 15 minutes for each person who attends. At an annual case conference (ACC), if there are four people (e.g., general educator, special education teacher, one parent, and speech clinician) attending, then the meeting will be approximately one hour in length. Sufficient time should be allotted. At times, case conferences can last a longer period of time. In this case, it may be better to reconvene at a later date to conclude the meeting. All parties involved should be sensitive to other demands on staff's and family member's time.

During the meeting, everyone should be expected and encouraged to share information. After all, each person took time out of their busy life to attend this conference. No one person should monopolize the discussion. Important

decisions are being made that will impact a child's programming for the year, and create expectations for all involved. If anyone disagrees with the decisions being made, their voice needs to be heard during the meeting. Once a meeting is over, it is the responsibility of all involved to respect any of the team decisions. Sabotaging an established program because of personal belief systems is simply unacceptable and can unravel a student's program.

Before the parent is expected to sign the IEP, the case conference coordinator needs to be sure the parent/legal guardian is comfortable with everything that was discussed at the conference. Remember the parent/legal guardian has the right to take paperwork home to view, discuss with a friend, or simply think about. Do not pressure parents to sign paperwork associated with an IEP. It is more important to build a trusting relationship with the parent than to worry about getting the program in place immediately. If the parent/legal guardian needs additional time after the meeting to talk about everything that was discussed, make time for this to occur. Some case conference coordinators allow for an hour after a meeting to explain any points the parents are unclear about.

Think of the annual case conference meeting as an important process in establishing a long term relationship. If a student is placed into special education services at the age of three, school staff and parents will be working together for the next 19 years. Let's both try our best to give a good faith effort in this partnership.

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Dubie, M. (2007). Developing long term relationships between school and parents. *The Reporter*, 12(2), 12-13