

# 10

## Working With Parents of Students With Disabilities

**T**eachers must recognize the important role parents play in the learning process. Acting as allies, parents and teachers can work together to help children succeed. Coordination between home and school environments benefits learners. This chapter stresses that teachers cannot understand the special needs student without effectively including parents and caregivers, understanding their struggles and perspectives as well.

### VALUING PARENTS

#### Understanding Parental Emotions

After parent conferences, teachers have often been heard to say, "So and so is exactly like her parent whom I just met. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree." Unless you have experienced what it is like to have a *special* child of your own, you cannot begin to understand the intricate dynamics involved. The complexities involve more than apples.

The various emotive behaviors parents experience when raising a *special* child can be comparable to the grief or mourning process. Parental emotions can include the following:

#### SHOCK

(plans, dreams, expectations, and lives are changed)

#### DENIAL

(feeling of frustration, can't be happening, not true!)

#### GUILT

(whatever went wrong was my fault, helplessness)

**SHOPPING BEHAVIOR**

(looking toward experts for different diagnosis and strategies)

**DEPRESSION**

(Sadness and withdrawal: I don't want to face the world!)

**HOSTILITY**

(state of anger, despair, overwhelm, exhaustion, pain, fear)

and finally

**ACCEPTANCE**

(courageous, stronger, optimistic)

**Parental Understandings and Reflections**

In addition to experiencing these emotions, parents must often deal with experts who complicate the process. Educators, doctors, friends, family, and well-intentioned others express a range of emotions as well. It is difficult enough to trust or even know your own instincts at this time, let alone deal with how others feel. This adjustment process encompasses a broad spectrum, with parents as the recipient of contrasting emotions, from pity to support.

Sometimes parents themselves are not the ones in denial; it is the interventions of educators or experts that *deny parents* as being the experts, the ones most knowledgeable about their own child's strengths and needs. Caution needs to be exercised since labeling people in any type of holding pattern actually cuts off possibilities for future collaborative planning. Parents are quite often experts on their own children and need accepting ears and advice on how to best meet their children's challenging needs. Other parents or teachers sometimes let prior unsuccessful school experiences interfere with impartiality and objectivity in the planning process.

Parents rarely forget that first disability diagnosis, whether it is at birth, or in the school years. The toll on families is enormous. Marriages are strained as expectations for children become altered, while siblings are also impacted as attention is drawn away from them. Which stage parents are in when the teacher meets them will influence their relationship.

Teachers also need to reflect upon their own reactions, even with things that are not said, since actions or body language can sometimes speak louder than words. The children need to be the common ground for educators, parents, and support systems. Understandings and reflections for all are imperative.

**PARENTS AND TEACHERS AS ALLIES****School-Home Communication**

Parenting a child with special needs requires inner strength and much support from families and friends. Many support groups out there can help parents deal with difficulties that arise. Just knowing that others have

gone through similar experiences helps parents a great deal. Parents can offer each other assistance, guidance, and comfort.

Mutual respect is first and foremost. It is understandable that the whole Special Education process, along with its associated jargon, can be overwhelming. Parents are often outnumbered by professionals at IEP meetings, and feel both threatened and anxious at the same time, trying to get the best program for their child. Families should be well-informed on changing Special Education laws, looking at the safeguards and knowing how to best use them to help their children. Parental voices need empowerment to collaborate with teachers, to make educational decisions based upon jointly decided appropriate services for children. Both teachers and parents are integral parts of this planning process, offering input to address the unique educational needs of each child with a disability. Even offering suggestions to parents such as which books to read with their children or describing some home activities values the parents' roles as well.

### **EMPOWERMENT & COMMUNICATION FOR ALL:**

<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Administration</b>
<b>Children</b>	<b>Parents</b>
<b>Community</b>	<b>Siblings</b>

#### **Frequent parent communication:**

averts problematic situations

sends a message of worth to the parents

tells students that there's a connection between the school and home environments

occurs not only at parent conferences or scheduled IEP meetings, but throughout the school year if necessary

can be verbal or written such as informal notes or letters, report cards, e-mail, phone contact, interim grade reports, checklists, behavioral charts, and/or signatures on tests and homework assignments

#### **How Parents Can Understand More**

- Ask questions
- Explain how you feel
- Seek information
- Maintain realistic expectations
- Be patient with yourself, your child, and others
- Learn to express emotions
- Take care of yourself
- Keep daily routines
- Recognize that you are not alone
- Be involved with your child's day
- Maintain positive attitudes

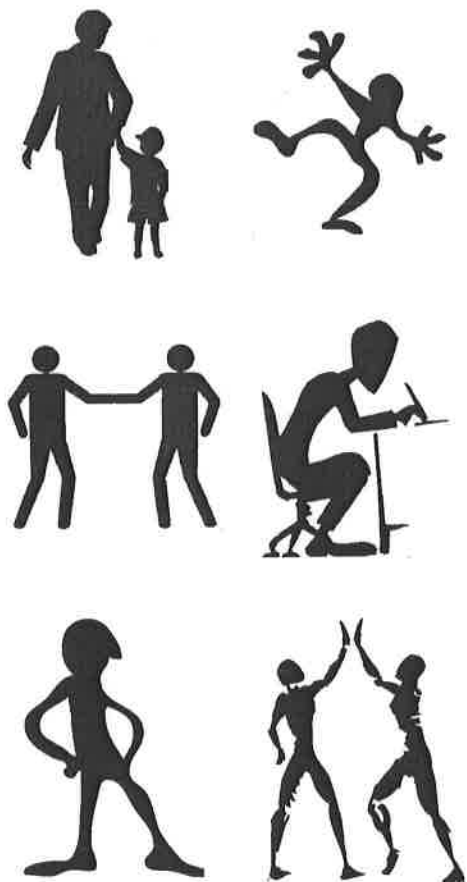
### Parental Input

Child's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What does my child think about school?
  
2. What do I visualize my daughter or son doing in 10 or 15 years?
  
3. What are my child's needs?
  
4. Some words I would use to describe my child are \_\_\_\_\_,  
\_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.
  
5. What are my child's favorite things to do?
  
6. What are my pet peeves about my child's school?
  
7. What do I like about my child's class?
  
8. My areas of expertise are \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ and I am available to talk to  
my child's class on \_\_\_\_\_.
  
9. I'd like to volunteer to help \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.
  
10. Contact me at  
E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_  
Telephone: Home \_\_\_\_\_ Work \_\_\_\_\_  
Home Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**We're All on the Same Side**



**Parents**

**+**

**Teachers**

**+**

**Administrators**

**+**

**Students**

**+**

**Community**

**=**

**Learning**

### Resources and Organizations for Parents

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)  
1110 North Glebe Road, Suite 300  
Arlington, VA 22201  
(703) 620-3660; TTY: (703) 264-9446  
[www.cec.sped.org](http://www.cec.sped.org)

Exceptional Parent  
65 East Route 4  
River Edge, NJ 07661  
(201) 489-4111

Exceptional Parent Library  
(800) 535-1910  
[www.eplibrary.com](http://www.eplibrary.com)

Internet Resources for Special Children (IRSC)  
[www.irsc.org](http://www.irsc.org)

National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities  
*Basics for Parents: Your Child's Evaluation*, a publication of NICHCY  
P.O. Box 1492  
Washington, DC 20013  
(800) 695-0285 (Voice/TTY)  
(202) 884-8200 (Voice/TTY)  
[nichcy@aed.org](mailto:nichcy@aed.org)  
[www.nichcy.org](http://www.nichcy.org)

Parent Training and Information (PTI) Centers  
Contact information may be obtained from NICHCY's individual State Resource Sheets. Each state has a department with a division for Special Education, giving information and help.  
[www.taalliance.org/centers/index.htm](http://www.taalliance.org/centers/index.htm)

Klein, S., & Schive, K. (2001). *You Will Dream New Dreams*. New York: Kensington Books. (Excellent inspirational parental resource)

National Parent Teacher Association  
330 N. Wabash Avenue, Suite 2100  
Chicago, IL 60611  
(800) 307-4PTA (4782)  
[www.pta.org](http://www.pta.org)

National Center for Family Literacy  
325 West Main Street  
Louisville, KY 40202  
(877) FAMLIT-1  
[www.famlit.org](http://www.famlit.org)

Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights (PACER)  
8161 Normandale Boulevard  
Minneapolis, MN 55437  
(952) 838-9000; TTY (952) 838-0190  
[www.pacer.org](http://www.pacer.org)