

Chapter 8

BUILDING & MAINTAINING EFFECTIVE PLANNING TEAMS



Building & Maintaining Effective Planning Teams

In Chapter 6 we discussed the importance of family/professional collaborative relationships. Effective medical and educational planning for children with special health care needs requires meaningful parent participation in the development of a child's goals. In order to be the best advocate for your child, it is critical that you work effectively together with his or her medical and education teams, with both shared goals and mutual respect. This requires building and maintaining strong relationships with the key people involved with your child.

5 Reasons to Advocate for Your Child:

- You know your child best
- You have the unique ability to understand your child's needs
- You are responsible for your child's welfare
- You are a role model for your child
- You have the right to make decisions on your child's behalf

Identify Key Players

The first step in the process of building strong relationships is to identify the key players in the process. Typically, along with yourself and your child, members of medical and education teams include physicians, nurses, specialists, case managers, therapists, special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators. Consider anyone who can be a resource for you in navigating the medical or education systems. As you identify the key players in the process, keep a list of their names, contact information, and the role they play.

Establish Relationships

The key to building strong relationships with medical and education professionals involved with your child is approaching each relationship as a professional one. It is critical to set the tone from the start with professionals, especially in your on-going dialogue during the course of appointments and meetings.

- Arriving on time, following-up on discussions, and being an active participant in the discussion are essential to creating a professional tone.
- Approach each key person as an expert in his or her field. They have valuable experiences to bring to the table.
- Acknowledge their ideas and suggestions and do not be afraid to offer your own ideas and input.
- Discussions with medical and education professionals about your child's plans are often difficult and can become highly emotional. To the degree possible, effective advocacy requires containing those emotions during the discussions so that you can better focus on the issues at hand.
- Before appointments and meetings, outline what you have in mind for your child and send it to the team members so that they have an opportunity to review your ideas and goals in advance.
- It is helpful to bring someone with you who can listen and take notes.

Be Prepared for Your Team Meeting

Below is a checklist of things you might consider doing before, during and after your team meetings to ensure that you are a collaborative member of the team.

BEFORE A TEAM MEETING

- **BE PREPARED**

Prior to any meeting, always identify your objective. Make a list of your goals and what you hope to accomplish at the team meeting.

- **BAKE COOKIES**

Bring food, cookies, chocolate or fruit to your team meetings. It not only lightens the mood, but it gives you something to stick in your mouth if you feel the need to say something you might regret later.

- **INVITE A FRIEND**

If appropriate, invite a family member, friend or advocate to the meeting. Having someone at the meeting for support enables you to stay focused.

- **BE ON TIME**

Plan ahead so that you can arrive on time for your child's team meeting. If you are going to be late, be courteous and call to let someone know when you will arrive.

DURING A TEAM MEETING

- **CELEBRATE**

Start every meeting with members sharing celebrations in their lives.

- **BE RESPECTFUL**

Be considerate of other team members, even if their views conflict with yours. Be careful with your words and actions, especially when you are upset.

- **ASK QUESTIONS**

Remember the saying "there is no dumb question". If you do not understand something that is being discussed, ask questions.

- **LISTEN**

You cannot listen with your mouth moving. Let other team members know you are listening by looking at the speaker, nodding occasionally and not carrying on side conversations.

- **TAKE NOTES**

Jot down important comments and decisions made and tasks assigned. This gives you a record to reflect upon after the meeting.

AFTER A TEAM MEETING

- **WRITE THANK YOU NOTES**

If a member of the team really supported you at the meeting, show them that you really appreciate it by writing a quick thank you note. If you are upset with a team member, call and ask if they would like to meet for lunch so you can spend some time discussing their comments, their feelings and their opinions.

- **COMPLETE ASSIGNED TASKS**

If you agreed to do something before the next meeting, be a responsible member of the team and complete the task. If you are having difficulty with the task, call a member of the team for help.

- **EVALUATE WHAT WORKED WELL & WHAT DID NOT WORK WELL**

To improve the outcome of future meetings, always revisit your list of goals and accomplishments you anticipated from this meeting. If you were successful, why? If you weren't, why not? Discuss the successes at the next meeting.

Maintain Relationships

Like any relationship, your relationships with medical and education professionals must be maintained. Many of these professionals will be interacting with your child on a regular basis throughout his or her life. Maintaining relationships is an on-going process. Written statements about your concerns and what you would like to see changed are critical. Likewise, sending letters when you are happy with the way things are progressing is important.

Remember, you are an equal partner in developing your child's medical and education plans. Be prepared to give input and listen respectfully to other ideas. To be an effective member of the team, remember the following tips:

- **OPEN TO PERSUASION**
Be open to suggestions, not that things should be "my way or no way." Other team members might have information or access to information that you don't have.
- **COOPERATE**
If everyone agrees to vote in a way that you don't agree with, let it go and move on if possible. If you cannot let it go, be careful with your words and actions, especially when you are upset. Remember that this medical or education team may be together for a long time.
- **RESPECT**
Be considerate of other team members, even if their views conflict with yours.
- **GOOD LISTENER**
Let other members know that you are listening and that you understand by looking at the person speaking, nodding occasionally, and not carrying on separate conversations with the people at the table next to you.
- **ASK QUESTIONS**
If you do not understand something being discussed, ask for clarification.

Repairing Damage

Many parents experience intimidation and frustration in trying to work with medical and education specialists. If there has been a bad experience with team members in the past, it is crucial that you attempt to move forward in a positive way.

The best way to repair any damage is to openly acknowledge the problem. Be forthcoming about the tension that has occurred in the past and your desire for a more positive and productive working relationship. Be candid about what you believe would help to facilitate a better experience in the future. Keep a record of these attempts, especially if you are unable to resolve the issue and need to pursue other avenues in your advocacy efforts.

The Art of Negotiation

Conflict is inevitable — a wife and husband at odds over how to share housework; a father and daughter arguing over the use of the family car; a parent's job is at stake because he or she regularly misses work due to their child's illnesses; an employee is resentful of their bosses for a heavy work load; and, the conflict we sometimes find when we sit down at the medical or education team meeting. Disagreements happen because everyone has different values, opinions, and goals.

Compromise is reached when everyone gives something up to gain a common solution — no one wields more power or control than another. Your relationships in life are shaped by how well you are able to manage and negotiate conflicts.

People resolve disagreements in many ways. The bargaining style is a win-lose approach. One party wins at the expense of another. The lose-lose approach is about "if I don't win, neither should you." Everyone comes out a loser. Compromise is when "you give some, I give some;" which makes the win-win approach the ideal negotiation solution. The needs of all parties are satisfied by having all creative options on the table, thoroughly explored.

