



Planning for a School Meeting About Your Child's Behavior Needs

Supporting your child's behavior needs at school can be challenging. For a child with a disability or mental health diagnosis with behavioral needs it can be even more challenging. As a parent, you may find yourself among competing approaches to handling behavior concerns. Planning ahead for an individualized meeting about your child's behavior needs will help you explain your own ideas about the best way to help your child in addition to listening to the ideas of others.

View behavior as an opportunity to learn about your child

As you prepare for the meeting, consider why your child may have challenging behaviors. Is your child responding to something in their environment that isn't working for them? Is your child behaving this way because of an unmet need? Is this an automatic or involuntary response related to their disability? When negative behaviors persist, it's important to ask these questions to learn more about your child.

Adults usually react to children's behavior out of their own personal experiences, training, and beliefs. Be sure to give careful thought to what might be impacting your child's actions. Take time to think about your child's strengths, specific needs, medical or mental health diagnoses, and any additional information that might be helpful to share and consider when meeting with school professionals about your child's behavior needs. Recognize that your own self care needs or current and ongoing stress can also influence how you view your child's behavior challenges and needs.

It takes practice to view a child's negative behaviors as an opportunity. If we are used to viewing our child's actions as misbehavior, then we likely limit our response to a quick fix, such as punishment. For example, one child's inappropriate language during reading class is problematic, and as a consequence the child is repeatedly removed from class. Since the troubling behavior continues, the parent decides to use this an opportunity to learn more. The parent asks questions of the teacher and learns that the inappropriate language happens when the class is taking turns reading out loud. The parent knows that the child struggles with reading and discovers that each student in class is called on to read out loud. From speaking with the child, the parent knows she would rather be removed from the class than be embarrassed by other students who might laugh at her if she struggles to read out loud. It is essential that parents and professionals search for the meaning behind the behavior rather than only responding to the behavior.

Punishment limits learning

Historically, we have viewed challenging behavior as disobedience, and punishment has often been the response. Behaviors are a way to get needs met. By proactively learning more about a child's needs, we may be able to move beyond trying to "consequence" the child into behaving. For example, a child with developmental delay may hit others in order to be noticed. If the adults do not identify an alternative plan for helping the child learn how to get attention appropriately, his or her hitting will likely continue.

Teaching positive behavior skills is a process

One of the best ways to help your child learn new behavior skills is to adopt a team approach with the school professionals. Together, consider your child's needs and develop a program based on them. After you agree to a

program, your responsibility is to support the teacher and the program and to monitor the effectiveness of services in meeting your child's needs. If you do not see progress in your child's behavior challenges, inform your child's educational team of your concerns.

Questions to consider in a team meeting

You may want to consider the following questions as you look for ways to understand your child's behavior needs.

1. What is the challenging behavior?
2. When and where does it occur? How often? Who is around when it happens?
3. Is there a relationship between my child's disability and his or her behavior?
4. What has been tried so far? What has worked? What has not worked?
5. What do I think the behavior might mean? What need does it meet?
6. What are my child's strengths, and can we use them to build a plan?
7. What plan would I like to suggest trying next?
8. When will we meet again to talk about the progress and needs of my child?

Come prepared

Find out who will be attending the meeting and what roles they fill. Ask for an agenda and that it includes time for you to discuss your concerns. Bring your concerns and ideas to the meeting in writing. Behavior and discipline are often emotionally charged topics and it is easy to get off track. Ask for an action plan in writing at the end of the meeting.

Consider additional supports

In a school meeting you could ask if your child would benefit from a 504 Plan or evaluation for special education. If your child already has a 504 Plan or an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), ask how the information from this meeting could be included in that plan. You could also ask for information about additional resources that may be available in your community.

Work together

As the parent of a child with a disability or mental health diagnosis and a behavior concern, your role is important. By working together with your child and the school, you can increase your child's chance for behavioral success.

Additional PACER Publications

To learn about the 504 plan or the special education process, read the following PACER handouts at:

PACER.org/publications

- 504 Flow Chart
- Understanding the Special Education Process

Call PACER Center at 952-838-9000 or 800-537-2237 (toll free in Greater Minnesota) or go online to PACER.org for more information.