

Telling the teacher: *What I want my child's classroom teacher to know*

Most children with disabilities are included in the “regular” classroom for part of their day. Yet many general classroom teachers say that sometimes they feel unprepared and uncertain about how to work with students who have special needs. Many add that they’d welcome ideas.

“We parents do understand that teachers are incredibly busy with large numbers of students, lack of resources, and other challenges,” said Beth Davis, the New Brighton, Minn., mother of two teenagers with disabilities.

“I’ve always encouraged both of my children’s teachers—yes, even all the ones in high school—to contact me if I can help them understand anything at all about either one of my children,” she continued.

Like Davis, many parents of children with disabilities are willing to help teachers and others at school to work with their child. Some families, however, don’t offer help or suggestions because 1) they believe that the teacher must know best, or 2) they don’t want to appear critical of the teacher.

In the spirit of parent-school partnerships, you may wish to share the following ideas at your child’s school.

My child is a person

- Greeting my child by name when he comes to class can make a huge difference in his day. Developing a relationship with him establishes his existence. You set the stage for how others at school treat him.
- Like any child, mine is unique. She has passions, dislikes, things she is good at, things she is not. Your efforts to learn about her interests and strengths validate her.
- My son’s identity is more than a diagnosis or a label on an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The disability is only part of who he is. Please look beyond it to see more of him.

- Understanding the disability may affect how you perceive my daughter. I’m happy to give or help you find information.
- Please be discreet. What you say about my son—good or bad, in the teachers’ lounge or elsewhere—affects his reputation, as well as your own.

We can talk

- I gladly will share ideas and thoughts, as well as concerns, about my child. If you contact me, I can probably offer insight to her behavior and share strategies that work at home.
- My son may look like a typical 12-year-old, but his disability is real. Our family worked with professionals through a long and sometimes painful process to reach a diagnosis for him. If you acknowledge that my son has a disability, we can communicate openly about how to address it.
- The only way my daughter can succeed at school is through our partnership. I know that you are a professional, but I am an expert when it comes to my child, and I will be part of her life forever.

My child can learn

- You can relax. I don’t expect miracles, but I hope you will have high expectations for my son. I assume he can do a certain task until he proves otherwise. If we work together, our expectations for him likely will be realistic.
- Arranging groups and teams to include everyone will help my daughter feel that she belongs to the class and the school community. She learns from peers.
- My child’s experiences in your classroom are the foundation of his future success at school or in employment. Encouragement is crucial for him to keep trying.
- My son may not be able to express himself in customary ways, but he benefits from being in your class. He

gains knowledge, even if he is slow at a task, scores low on tests, or does not respond at all. His IEP, which you have received, tells what accommodations he needs to progress.

- My child probably can develop her abilities—if we encourage her. It may be easy to coddle her, but together we need to help her “fly” on her own.
- Try using code words or discreet signals to guide my daughter. Calling out her name in class for what her disability will not allow her to do (“Mary, sit down,” “Mary, be quiet,” or “Mary, hurry up”) brings negative attention and affects her self esteem.

My child has gifts

- Children with all types of disabilities can offer much to others. If you look for it, my son can contribute something valuable to the classroom that no one else can.
- Above all, I hope you can find something to genuinely like about my child. I know you will.