

4. During Meetings: The Essential Steps

5. Ending Meetings: The Essential Steps

We conclude with a poem written by Janice, who shares the importance of listening, the most basic and fundamental of all steps.

**For All Partnerships at All Times: The Essential Steps**

- Prepare yourself before talking or meeting with parents. You have a demanding schedule, and shifting from one activity to another requires concentration and intention. Do something simple before the interaction to remind yourself to *pause*, even if just for a moment. Take a deep breath, counting slowly back from 10 to zero, feel your feet on the ground... do whatever it takes to shift, to be present. Make this a simple ritual before every conversation or meeting.
- Remind yourself that it took you many years of study and practice to feel familiar with the laws, forms, procedures, policies, mandates, acronyms, services, and timelines. Reassure parents that it takes time to feel confident and comfortable with the information and process. Remind them that you are there to assist them.
- Be prepared for a range of feelings from parents, yourself, and others. Raising and teaching children is complicated and easily elicits a variety of emotions, often unexpected. The feelings can range from worry, fear of failure, uncertainty, joy, confusion, pride, and many more—sometimes all at the same time. Practice dealing with feelings and resist taking it personally when negative feelings emerge. Learning to handle strong emotions in yourself and others is as necessary a skill as knowing how to teach a child. Seek colleagues who listen to you with compassion, and who can provide support for handling strong emotions.
- Be aware of your body language and that of the parents. Ask yourself throughout the meeting, “Am I communicating openness in the way I am sitting, holding my hands, my shoulders, through my eye contact?” Remind yourself that 82% of communication is nonverbal (Stoddard & Valcante, 2000). Encourage parents to ask questions and to request

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that answers be given clearly and with concrete examples. Assist parents in articulating their needs with such prompts as, “Sometimes parents want to know more about \_\_\_\_\_, while others want more information about \_\_\_\_\_. Do you have a preference?”

- Don’t reassure parents too quickly. Well-intended statements such as “Everything’s going to be fine” often feel dismissive and are experienced as a lack of understanding.
- Be mindful that when people appear agitated or “louder” that it is often a sign that they do not feel understood or heard. Step back. Speak less. Ask more open-ended questions. Write down the parents’ issues, concerns and/or recommendations and ask if you have correctly captured their thoughts. Resist rushing to defend your position. Concentrate on obtaining more information from the parents.
- Ask parents what they have previously heard about the particular labels, diagnoses, services, plans, and experiences with early intervention or special education when there is tension or discomfort. Knowing the back story or the family’s previous experiences or impressions might provide valuable insights and give you a new way to be helpful.
- Refrain from using jargon. If acronyms or technical terms are used, always provide an explanation and an example. Professionals new to the field might consider practicing the technique of sharing information with a friend or family member who does not work in the field of early intervention or education. He or she may then give you practical feedback about words to use or ways to explain. Provide a written list of commonly used words and their definitions. Parents and eventually children benefit when they are familiar with the terms frequently used, but they do not need to converse using the terms, especially during the initial phases and transitions.
- Strive to learn about the parent as a *person*. Inquire, with sincerity, about current happenings in the family such as an upcoming sports event, a family vacation or illness, or just about the daily routines. Ask parents how they are doing. Purposefully use “small talk” or simple chatting to ease into conversations and set a comfortable beginning.

My Reflection: Name two other strategies you can use to promote partnerships.

### **Preparing Parents for Meetings: The Essential Steps**

- Prepare parents about what to expect by contacting them at least a week or more prior to the meeting or conversation. Explain the purpose, length, and give an overview of the meeting; explain who will be there and what the parents should bring and what to be prepared to discuss. Encourage them to bring a list of their questions and priorities. Let families know they can bring someone to the meeting to take notes, be another listening ear, or to offer ideas and support.
- Offer parents options about ways to participate in the meeting if they can't be physically present, such as using telephones with speaker phones, video conferencing, Skype, written letters, and so on. (One father, stationed overseas, participated in his daughter's Individualized Family Services Plan meeting through Skype and web camera. It was a memorable experience for the family and providers as they gathered around the kitchen table.)
- Inform parents how to request a change in the date or time of the planned meeting and who to contact. Let parents