

Chapter Three



The Dance Manual

Essential Steps to Keep on Dancing

In this chapter we present the essential steps necessary to create and maintain strong partnerships.

These steps, identified separately for professionals and parents, are the basics, the building blocks, the fundamentals, for working together.

Visit this list of suggestions often and share it with parents and professionals during any phase of the partnership: at the beginning, during transitions, if challenges arise... any time we collide or begin to slide. We won't use every step at every dance with every partner, but a working knowledge of these basics can keep us gliding along.

FOR PARENTS: ESSENTIAL STEPS

In addition to these essential dance steps for parents to consider, we also share our thoughts about the absolute importance for parents to hold onto great expectations and hope.

Share your dreams, high expectations, and hopes for your child and engage others to share.

Essential Dance Steps

- Go slow. It takes time to absorb new information, especially during the initial phases or at transitions or changes with partners. Don't expect to understand every detail, every report, or every choice immediately. Give yourself time to feel, think, question, and take in the new information. Don't do it alone. Seek out other parents, resources, organizations, family members and friends. (See page 138 for a list of resources.) Let a trusted person know what you are going through and how they might support you (i.e., by listening, going out to a baseball game, coming to a meeting with you, babysitting, bringing over a meal, or helping research a topic). Asking for support is a healthy thing to do, and a way to become a stronger partner.
- Ask for input from professionals. If you aren't sure what you need to know, try asking, "What are typical questions parents have asked about this assessment, these results, or these strategies?"
- Trust yourself. Don't dismiss or underestimate what you know about your child.
- Trust that your partners want to share valuable information with you and do their best to support your child.
- Communicate. Share what you know—you don't have to use the same words as professionals. Find *your* own words to tell stories about your child, about his or her abilities, and what's important to your family. You can use photos or other ways to share information. Words are only one way.
- Be prepared. To be ready for meetings, formal or informal, ask ahead of time what to expect, what to bring, and what

you should be prepared to talk about. Ask for a brief overview of the meeting, including the length and who will be present. Bring a list of thoughts, questions, and expectations you wish to address.

- Read carefully. Take your time reviewing the written reports. Remember that these reports can be useful as well as intimidating or overwhelming. Some parents find that reading them with a family member, a seasoned parent or peer mentor, a friend, or trusted professional is helpful.
- Ask. Your questions are important. If you're not sure how to phrase a question, try this: "I'm not sure I understand what you said. Could you repeat it, or give me another example?"
- Speak out. Express your opinions, thoughts, agreements, and disagreements with respect. If you are hesitant, for whatever reason, to share your thoughts at a meeting, follow up after the meeting with a one-on-one conversation or phone call with one of the professionals. You bring the much-needed family perspective.
- Take five. If you feel anxious or frustrated during conversations, it's OK to ask for a short break.
- Aim high. Keep your expectations high for your children. Resist the pull to limit their dreams. Our children are so much more capable than we might think. Share your dreams, high expectations, and hopes for your child and engage others to share.¹
- Learn. With the help of professionals, families, and peers, discover how your child learns best. Familiarize yourself with the concept of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2006) so that you can understand your child's learning style. Gardner, a pioneer in understanding the different types of intelligences teaches us that we are all smart in different ways.

¹ An effective planning tool is MAPS (Making Action Plans) developed by Jack Pearpoint, Marsha Forest, and others affiliated with The Marsha Forest Centre (www.inclusion.com). This tool asks eight key questions that assist in planning for the child's future. Questions include: *What are your dreams? What are your nightmares? What are the gifts and talents of this child? What steps are needed to build the dream and avoid the nightmare?*

- Share your family’s cultural values, traditions, and routines. You have a lot to teach and share with professionals, not only about your child but also about your family and community.
- Give feedback. Let professionals know specifically what they did that was helpful, valuable, and appreciated.
- Involve your child. As your child grows, learn more about ways to include him or her in the meetings, planning, and discussions. A primary role of parents is to support their children to understand their disability, to know what supports and interventions they need, and how to advocate for themselves.
- Remember that your child is the same unique, wonderful child she or he was before the assessments.
- Be kind to yourself. Parenting is joyful and challenging. To sustain your energy for the long run, it’s important to find ways to relax and step away from your parent role for a while.

My Reflection: As I review this list, the three that caught my attention are

An additional suggestion I want to add to this list is