

# *Seeing the Child's Education from Two Perspectives- Mother and Educator*

*How to Develop a Strong Team & Work  
Collaboratively for a Student with Autism*

## *Session Objectives*

- The learner will gain insight into what a parent may experience as they navigate raising a child with Autism*
- The learner will understand how they can improve their relationships to strengthen collaboration with parents for the child's benefit.*

*My Name is Mara Wenzel.*

*I am a School Psychologist, and a mother to a child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder.*



## *Experience*

- *A little over 16 years in the field of education*
  - *Self-Contained Unit Substitute*
  - *General Education Teacher*
  - *Interventionist*
  - *Assistant Principal*
  - *School Psychologist*
  - *Lead School Psychologist*
  - *Pursuing a PhD in Clinical Psychology*
  - *Mom*

## *Discovery - Over the course of 3 years*

### *Age 3-6*

- *At home .. We saw tantrums, limited eye contact, lack of social engagement, anxiety, rituals*
- *Physical Abuse at Daycare*
- *Expelled from 2<sup>nd</sup> Daycare*
- *Quit job at the height of my career to try and navigate what was happening*
- *Gained employment in a district so my son could attend school there*
- *Sought out evaluations and enrolled in ABA therapy*
- *Decided to put our son on medication for ADHD*

## *What I have learned along the way*

*Even with all my education & experience , I  
still felt lost many times ...*

## *Be Proactive*

- *Early Intervention is Key*
- *When you believe a child may have a disability take the steps to assist a parent in early identification*
  - *Connect with your campus School Psychologist or Educational Diagnostician to determine the appropriate next steps for the child*
  - *Don't wait to connect with a parent on what you see, doing so can delay their ability to access early intervention resources*
  - *Daycares and private institutions should equip themselves to be able to direct parents to their local service centers for guidance for children that are not of school age*

## *Be Empathetic*

- *Parents may come to you with many questions and needing guidance. Be patient and available to listen. Make the time and space for them, they need you.*
- *We may be triggered easily and appear defensive*
- *Some of us may even be in denial or wanting to wait to see if the child will "grow out of it"*
- *If you hear other professionals making assumptions about parents encourage them to try and see the situation from the parent's point of view.*

## *Be Present*

*Annual Meetings are important to us and only happen once a year*

- Be on time and make sure all required members have been invited to participate*
- Encourage parents to be meaningful participants by pausing to ask questions and for their input*
- Observe body language and adjust accordingly to how the parent may be feeling.*
- Close your laptop, silence your phone, and don't multi-task !*

*“ As far as the annual meetings, they are a HUGE deal for me, and I do find it offensive when a staff member does not show up. I know they are busy, but I feel I have shown more than enough support throughout the years, and I am always available when it comes to my children. I have shown I am an involved parent so when they (school staff) don't show up for us or appear uninterested it is discouraging. How can we share input and ideas if they are not present?” – Parent*

## Reminders...



- Ensure the IEP paperwork is prepared and review as a committee before the IEP meeting. All members should contribute to the plan. You don't have to be an expert to see a need. Share the need and let others on the team help.
- Have a staffing prior to the IEP meeting if you feel some members are not aligned or if it may be a challenging meeting. It is imperative that the campus presents themselves as a team.
- Discuss concerns parent has had throughout the year, if the campus also sees the concern as impacting the student, how you are addressing them in the plan?

\* If the campus does not agree you must still review the concern and offer an alternative solution or response.

## Be a guide

- For many parents, the future is unclear, or very different than we imagined
- At times, the school team will find that goals parents may have for their child are not in line with the current capabilities of the student. It is our role to guide the parent to resources so that they have a better idea of how to help their child and that the future may look a little different than they imagined.
- Remember that the committee is charged in creating attainable goals for the student that will lead up to transition out of the school system. Become aware of what community resources are available for this and who else can be invited to the meeting to assist the school team.
- Transition planning is an important step that the school assists the parents with. Make sure to begin discussing these services at least by age 14, so that the school team is aware of what the parent is expecting and to create alignment.

## Be Solution Oriented

- Remember that when you call your words have so much power over us since we are not with our children. If we could fix it by "talking to them" we would.
- Our child's behavior is a manifestation of their disability and a form of communication. It's not a result of bad parenting, and not a personal attack on you.
- Have some ideas for solutions to discuss otherwise we aren't sure what to do with the information you share.
- When you are not sure what to do seek out assistance or training from your school district personnel AND then include the parent on the strategies, so everyone is aligned and on the same page.

Hello! Austin did not have enough points this week for fun centers. He did not do his math work this week, he wasn't keeping his hands to himself, and he was squirting people with his water bottle. He is now throwing stuff in the classroom, picking up his desk, banging on his desk. He is very upset.

"This year Lexi has a teacher who seems to be problem behavior oriented. She doesn't mention solutions and is not open to discussing solutions. It is nerve wrecking! I later learned she was trying some strategies in the classroom but wasn't keeping me in the loop as to what she was doing or if anything was working. I couldn't offer any input because she just wasn't communicating with me." – Parent

*“Last year, Noah had a teacher who seemed so experienced with Autism. She would tell me the challenges that were happening in the classroom, she would find a solution, share it with me and then we would work on it at home too. When we found something that worked, we would share with each other. Our goal was consistency in our strategies so that they would carry over and he would be successful. – Parent*

## *Be Informed*

- Prioritize professional development and continuing education for your general education teachers.*
- Partner with your campus assessment personnel and related service providers to learn more about what they do and how they can help.*
- Get to know your families that have children with special needs, each family will be different and want/need a different approach from you. Spend the time to figure that out.*



## Other ways to improve and collaborate

- Be open minded to different ways to offering services and creative scheduling
- Seek experts in your district, partner with them and leverage them for their expertise
- Be aware of your own bias – seek ways to close knowledge gaps you may have
- Remember to send positive notes and updates, especially around areas of concern, it goes a long way!



Good morning, Mara! Just wanted to let you know that Austin is making excellent progress in his phonemic awareness! And this morning, he really surprised me. Towards the end of our social skills lesson, he grabbed a book from our book basket, and started independently reading. He was able to successfully decode every word without any assistance. I honestly felt my eyes water up, because he read so beautifully!

“ Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.” – Maya Angelou



# *A salute to mothers of children with autism*

## *By David Petrovic*

Through my relationship with my own mother (turned "friendship" in my adult years), there have been many seasons of ups and downs and many words of celebration and comfort. But the one common bond throughout it all is the seed that a mother plants from the moment her child is born: the seed of love.

From that seed blooms a sixth sense of knowing when your children are "not themselves". There also comes the drive and determination that the mother did not know she possessed to make sure that her child is able to shatter the glass ceiling of assumptions that was placed over his or her head by others at a young age. Finally, no matter what her child does, or doesn't do, in his or her life, the mother will always be the guiding force and the peaceful whisper that assures the child of their worth and value; in other words, the children have the potential to achieve their own levels of unexpected greatness!

Motherhood is not "a job"; it is a calling... a truly special vocation that resembles an iron man triathlon: you get tired, feel like you're drowning in life's deepest ocean, and you may feel like giving up and settling. But then you get a glimpse of the ultimate prize worth fighting for (your child); you regain your drive, and you come out on top, a medalist!! You don't merely finish, you dominate the obstacles and recognize your own endurance.

So, to all mothers out there, from a young man on the autism spectrum who is who he is because of his own mother, we thank you and we honor you today.

