

Communicating With Families: Strategies for Children With Special Needs

Parents of students with special needs have been actively involved with teachers and administrators in their children's education for more than 30 years, as the diversity of needs has been recognized and Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) have been developed to meet them. In fact, many of the following suggestions have already been successful in meeting the requirements of families who have children with special needs.

Parents of children with special needs often feel isolated and uncertain about their children's future. Schools can help parents find the facts and support they need to understand that they are not alone and that help is available within the community as well as the school. Teachers can help parents feel comfortable discussing their children's future by listening to the parents—who know their children better than anyone else—and by explaining school programs and answering questions in words that parents can easily understand.

What Administrators Can Do

Teachers and parents need support from schools and the community to help children with special needs reach their full potential. Schools can be both a clearinghouse for information and a place where parents can gather to support one another.

Administrators can help teachers and parents by:

- **Establishing parent resource centers to help parents and teachers develop good working relationships.**
- **Providing basic training to help parents understand special education and the role of the family in cooperative planning, as well as offering workshops on topics requested by parents.**
- **Making up-to-date information and resources available for parents and teachers.**
- **Encouraging early childhood and preschool screening programs and other community services that can be centered in the schools.**

What Teachers Can Do

The relationship between teachers and parents with special needs is defined by specific programs with specific guidelines that are too detailed to summarize in this article. In addition to these guidelines, some general advice is available for teachers, including the following points:

- **Make it clear to parents that you accept them as advocates who have an intense desire to make life better for their children.**
- **Provide parents with information about support groups, special services in the school and the community, and family-to-family groups.**
- **Offer to give parents referrals to helpful groups.**
- **Encourage parents to organize support systems, pairing families who will complement each other for school activities.**

- **Involve parents in specific projects centered around hobbies or special skills that parents can share with students in one or several classes.**
- **Discuss a child's special talents with parents and use that positive approach as a bridge to discuss other issues.**

Adapted from ***Reaching All Families Creating Family-Friendly Schools*** – August, 1996.
Available at <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/ReachFam/index.html>.