

Planning for a Meeting about Your Child's Behavior Needs

Raising a child with a disability is challenging. Raising a child with a disability who also has behavioral needs is even more challenging. As a parent, you may find yourself among competing approaches to handling behavior concerns. Planning ahead for an individualized meeting about your child's behavior needs will help you explain your own ideas about the best way to help your child in addition to listening to the ideas of others.

View behavior as an opportunity to teach – As you prepare for the meeting, consider why a child may have problem behaviors. Behavior is communication, and all people develop a style of communication that works for them. Problem behavior is negative communication that someone uses to meet a need, even if the behavior results in punishment.

Adults usually react to children's behavior out of their own personal experiences, training and beliefs. Be sure you are clear about why you think your child has problem behaviors. Take into consideration your child's specific needs, medical diagnoses, and any information that would help explain why your child is behaving a certain way.

Viewing negative behavior as communication takes practice. It is often easier to respond with a quick fix, such as punishment. Try to remember that what a child does is not necessarily related to why he or she does it. For example, a boy who struggles in reading may be worried that he will be asked to read out loud. To avoid embarrassment, he may use inappropriate language, knowing that the result will be removal from class. It is essential that parents and professionals search for the meaning behind the behavior, rather than responding to the behavior only.

Punishment doesn't teach new skills – Historically, schools have viewed problem behavior as disobedience, and punishment has often been the response. Punishment, however, is only a temporary way to stop the behavior. It does not teach new skills. If the child is not taught new skills, the problem behavior will more than likely continue, because it works for the child. For example, a child with developmental delays may hit others in order to be noticed. If the child is simply punished and not taught another way to ask for attention, he or she will likely continue to hit.

Teaching positive behavior skills is a process – One of the best ways to help your child learn new behavior skills is to adopt a team approach with the school professionals. Together, consider your child's needs and develop a program based on them. After you agree to a program, your responsibility is to support the teacher and the program and to monitor the effectiveness of services in meeting your child's needs. If you do not agree with the decisions that are being made, it is your responsibility to speak up.

Questions to consider in a team meeting – You may want to consider the following questions as you look for ways to help your child learn good behavior.

1. What are my child's strengths?
2. What are my child's needs?
3. What is the problem behavior?
4. Is there a relationship between my child's disability and his or her behavior?
5. What has worked in the past to stop the problem behavior? At home? In the community? In previous classes?
6. What has not worked to stop the problem behavior?
7. How does the environment affect my child's behavior?
8. What school-based supports might my child need to learn new behaviors?

9. Does the Individualized Education Program (IEP) Team need any more information to address my child's behaviors appropriately?
10. Does my child need a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA)* to help us determine why the behaviors are occurring?

** FBA helps determine the reason for the behavior through a review of existing data and observations.*

Come Prepared – Attend the meeting with a list of items that includes what is working well and areas of concern you want to discuss. Behavior and discipline are often emotionally charged topics, so it is helpful to have written notes. At the end of the meeting, ask for a review of what has been decided or confirmation of what you believe was agreed upon. Sometimes who will do what needs to be specified as well.

Update the IEP if necessary – If there are any changes to the IEP, ask for them to be sent to you in writing.

Work together – As the parent of a child with a disability and a behavior concern, you know how difficult it can be to change a child's behavior. By being intentional about teaching new skills and working with your child's school, you will increase your child's chance for behavioral success.

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