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## Coming into My Own as an ADHD Advocate

I've finally become a seasoned advocate for my ADHD son. It just took a dozen IEP meetings to get here.

by Amanda Driscoll

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Last week I had the pleasure of attending the 12th annual Individualized Education Plan (IEP) committee meeting for my son. Reflecting over the last twelve years of meetings like these has been an enlightening experience. The mother that sat at the first IEP meeting is a completely different person than the one that just attended her 12th. While navigating the system for my son, I've become a stronger advocate for him.

Even though I had years of Special Education Teacher coursework behind me at that first meeting, I was petrified of the future. All I knew was that my child wasn't developing like his peers. My son had less than a ten word vocabulary, yet could scale any piece of playground equipment and complete a simple math equation, yet never sat still. I was exhausted and quite certain that his delays were a result of something that I had done wrong. The experts had data on his development as compared to others. They had piles of plans and mounds of suggestions for therapy. As a young mother, I remember sitting at that meeting feeling overwhelmed, underprepared, and sad: *They think I'm a bad mother.* Ultimately, I felt incompetent, as if I weren't nearly as qualified as those experts on the subject of my child.

Those feelings lingered for many years' worth of IEP meetings. Each year, I walked into a meeting filled with educational professionals, feeling weighed down by nerves. The meetings always began with the professionals' comments on progress that Holden had made through the year and discussion of continuing challenges. By the time we got to elementary school, I started feeling a bit more confident and able to communicate my own requests for educational accommodations. Sadly, though, those were most often met with outright opposition from the school administration. For example, when I suggested that my ADHD child, who also struggles with dysgraphia, be given the accommodation of being allowed to type his work, not only was the request denied, but I was made to feel that I was an unsupportive mother for not believing that my son could overcome his "bad handwriting." The disappointment was overwhelming -- just as I felt confident enough to advocate for my child, I was shot down.

Things have recently changed though. Years of showdowns have thickened my skin; the disappointment has given way to ambition. What has helped the most, though, is that we are in a new school with administrators who truly believe that I am the expert on my child. Their ability to listen to my concerns and really believe in my suggestions have helped me feel stronger as a parent and more confident as an advocate. They listen to my son's thoughts and ideas as well. The administrators' attitude has trickled down into their staff members, who have approached us with suggestions for new accommodations. When we ask for help, I'm thanked for my suggestions, listened to, and given help without argument. Because of this support, I have learned that not only is it okay to be a strong advocate for your child, but it's necessary. This 12th and most recent IEP meeting was an absolutely beautiful experience that I wish more parents could have.

While it's true that some of teachers and administrators may have been the experts when it came to know more about educational policies and strategies, they never knew more about my child. It's taken 12 years of IEP meetings, being kicked in the shins by administrators, and laughed at for my ideas to help me realize that when it comes to my kid, I am the expert. I only wish I had the same strong feeling about myself many years ago.

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