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Raising a Teacher's Awareness about LD and AD/HD — Parents as Educators

Every August parents and kids alike eagerly await the start of a new school year. But, for parents who have a child with a learning disability (LD), Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD), or any other disability, the anticipation usually creates feelings of anxiety, worry, and even dread.

One of the biggest worries for parents is whether this year's teacher will have any awareness or knowledge about their child's disability — how the child learns best, what she struggles with, and what she needs to be successful in the classroom. Why does it sometimes seem like parents know more than the teacher about how LD and/or AD/HD impact their children? If a child with a disability is to have a successful school year, parents are often put in the situation of having to educate their child's teacher about these issues.

Why General Education Teachers Often Don't Understand LD and AD/HD

There are some common reasons why general education teachers have very little knowledge about disabilities in general. First, teacher training programs devote little to no class hours to understanding challenges students with particular disabilities face and how to help them learn. Second, general education teachers typically don't sign up for continuing education classes that focus on effective ways to teach kids with learning disabilities or AD/HD. Last, most school districts do not provide ongoing in-service training for teachers about teaching kids with special needs.

In my experience as a consultant and psychologist in the schools, many general education teachers do their best to provide the appropriate support to the kids in their classrooms with disabilities. But to be effective in teaching these students, general education teachers need much more interaction with, and guidance and support from, their special education colleagues than most schools typically provide. This is a huge frustration for teachers as well as parents.

Parents also encounter a couple of prevailing teacher attitudes. Many teachers do not view parents as "experts" about their child's disability, how they learn, how they need to be instructed, their strengths and weaknesses, and what they need to make progress in the academic and social arenas. Another common teacher attitude is that kids with LD or AD/HD are "lazy," "not motivated," and "need to work harder." My all-time favorite is: "Your child can do the work when she wants to or chooses to."

Classroom Behaviors that Require Teacher Understanding

What many teachers don't realize is that kids with LD and AD/HD have to work much harder than their peers to acquire, retain, and perform academic and social skills on a daily basis. This can cause overwhelming stress for kids who have limited coping resources. Very often this stress is translated into behaviors that are likely to be misinterpreted or not noticed by teachers who don't have a good understanding of LD or AD/HD. Kids may engage in work-avoidant behaviors, such as repeatedly getting out of their seat for various reasons, constantly asking to go to the bathroom, disturbing classmates during independent work time, or frequently getting up to sharpen pencils.

Kids can also develop anxiety-related symptoms including: not wanting to go to school, complaints of headaches or stomachaches, routinely asking to see the school nurse, or crying in school. Acting-out behaviors can result, as well, and may include: arguing with the teacher, being verbally or physically aggressive with peers, or noncompliance with teacher requests or directions.

In my experience, the solutions teachers offer to assist with these behavioral difficulties usually focus on the child, rather than themselves. Oftentimes, a teacher can successfully reduce or eliminate a child's difficult behavior with a simple change in the way she presents information, provides assistance, or alters the way the child can demonstrate performance of academic tasks.

As a personal example, after submitting my written request for a 504 Plan for my daughter, who is diagnosed with AD/HD, I had a conversation with the social worker at her school. Our conversation centered on my daughter not wanting to go to school because of feeling overwhelmed by all the work she had to do, the reasons for her tardiness, and the accommodations I thought would be appropriate. We spent 20 minutes chatting about behavioral plans for my daughter (this was before the social worker knew I was a learning consultant and school psychologist) and the social worker ended the conversation with this advice: "Well, Mrs. Robuck, we can put any behavior plan in place for your daughter here at school (to address her tardiness), but it is ultimately your responsibility to get her to school on time."

It was painfully clear that this social worker had limited knowledge and expertise about kids with AD/HD, since her solution was to address the symptom my daughter was manifesting — tardiness — rather than the underlying, school-based cause of anxiety resulting from too much written work. Fortunately, after my daughter's 504 Plan was in place and her teacher decreased her workload, her anxiety significantly decreased and she was tardy much less often.

Educating Teachers in a Way That Invites Collaboration

Educating teachers about various disabilities and their impact on a child's learning can be a challenging task for most parents, requiring much time, energy, persistence, and patience. So, how can parents educate teachers in a way that will promote a collaborative working relationship?

- **Keep an organized notebook** with copies of your child's special education records, evaluation reports, and other important related information so you can quickly find needed information when communicating with teachers and other school staff.
- **Put together a collection of articles** that best describes your child's disability. You can then give teachers articles that pertain to a certain issue when the need arises. Provide teachers with articles that are only 1-2 pages in length. If articles are more than 2 pages in length, develop and attach a summary of the important points that you want your child's teacher to know. Most teachers appreciate the information, as well as your time and effort.
- **Create a short "bio" about your child** (1-2 pages) which can include: strengths and weaknesses, strategies that help your child learn best, and what to avoid. Schedule a conference prior to school starting or soon after school starts with your child's teacher(s) to discuss this information.
- It's no secret that teachers have difficulty reading through IEPs. Most often the IEP document is confusing and cumbersome and teachers have a hard time finding the information they need. **Create a 1-page "IEP Summary"** that includes: your child's eligibility for special education (for example, "LD in the areas of reading and written expression," or "Otherwise Health Impaired" [OHI] for AD/HD); how your child's disability impacts her learning and her educational needs; the type, frequency, and duration of services your child receives; and detailed information about the accommodations your child needs. Don't forget the art, music, physical education, and computer teachers—they need this information, too, and many will be very grateful to have it!
- **Inquire about consultation time between your child's special education teacher and regular education teacher**(s). Some IEP documents specifically identify how much time a special education teacher will consult with your child's teacher on a weekly basis. Ask your child's special education teacher to keep you informed regarding the issues that are discussed.
- It may be appropriate, depending on your child's needs, to **schedule regular collaboration meetings** with your child's special education teacher, regular education teacher, and related services personnel. These meetings should have a specific agenda and last no longer than 30 minutes.
- If at all possible, **observe your child at school** — in the general education classroom, and in the special education classroom if your child receives services with a special education teacher. Consider questions such as:
    - Is the classroom environment conducive to learning for your student? How is the classroom set up—too stimulating, not stimulating enough, or just right?
    - How does your child respond to instruction in each classroom? Is your child engaged in the lesson?
    - Is your child able to complete work independently or is assistance needed? If so, how much?
    - Does your child participate in class discussions? If not, why not?

Your child may be exhibiting important behaviors that the teacher misses. **Take notes on behaviors that help you understand how your child functions** in the school environment. You can then use this information for future conferences or collaboration meetings with the teacher to help address your child's difficulties.

If it is not possible for you to observe your child at school, request that a school staff person, who you trust to give you reliable information, observe your child. You may also wish to hire an educational consultant to observe your child and provide you specific feedback on her classroom behaviors.

- **Find an "ally."** Many times there is someone at school who does have knowledge and expertise about your child's LD or AD/HD and can help you educate your child's teacher(s). It could be your child's special education teacher or your child's teacher from last year who knew exactly how to meet your child's needs. Whoever it is, talk to them about the difficulties your child is experiencing and find out how they can help. Sometimes information is better received when it comes from a colleague.
- **Avoid blame and keep your emotions in check**. Try problem-solving approaches instead. For example, you might say: "David tells me that he is really struggling to complete his writing assignments. How can we help him be more successful? What information do we need in order to address this issue?" This approach helps foster a truly collaborative relationship and may motivate your child's teacher to learn more about your child's disability and how to better meet your child's needs in her classroom. When your child's teacher tells you about the latest research article she read about your child's disability and how she has some new strategies to try in the classroom, you'll know that your hard work has reaped huge rewards for your child—and other children.
- **Allow the teacher to "be her best self."** Many teachers I've worked with over the years have said they feel unequipped to meet the needs of students with LD or AD/HD in their classrooms because of their lack of knowledge and experience. When you support your child's teacher by giving her needed information in a respectful manner and communicating with her regularly, you may help boost her self-confidence and, in this way, help your child be more successful. Identify what methods or approaches are not effective, and brainstorm together how to make changes to better meet the needs of your child. And don't forget to identify what your child's teacher is doing that is effective.

Support Your Child's Rights with Ongoing Communication

Ongoing and effective communication with your child's teacher is imperative for a successful school year. It is very important that you document in writing important points of conversations you have with your child's teacher or other school staff, and keep the notes for your records. Many teachers regularly communicate with parents via email, but sometimes it may be necessary to schedule a face-to-face conference to address certain more complex issues. Taking the initiative and staying on top of things is the name of the game. It is much easier and less time-consuming for you and your child's teacher(s) to solve problems together when they are little, rather than after they become a crisis. Plus, it is very easy for miscommunication to occur. Discussing expectations — when, where, and how you will communicate — with your child's teacher early in the school year can help avoid problems down the road.

Don't forget that your child's IEP, according to provisions in the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), must contain:

- A statement of the special education and related services, and supplementary aids and services, based on peer-reviewed research to the extent practicable, to be provided to the child, or on behalf of the child; and
- A statement of the program modifications or supports for school personnel that will be provided for the child — to advance appropriately toward attaining the annual goals, to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum, to participate in extracurricular and other nonacademic activities, and to be educated and participate with other children with disabilities and non-disabled children in the activities.

Supports could include specific training or a conference or workshop to help your child's general or special education teacher to better understand your child's disability, or to provide your child appropriate services or support.

Ideally, you'll be able to use some of these ideas to develop a collaborative relationship with your child's teacher, and to educate her about your child's disability. Clearly, some of your child's teachers will appreciate and value the time and effort you spend to help them understand your child, and will gladly collaborate with you to provide your child effective support. But there may also be many teachers who just "don't get it," no matter how many workshops they attend or how many articles they read. Regardless of a teacher's attitude, I think it's important to keep trying to build those bridges of understanding about LD or AD/HD between you and the teacher, because eventually it could help your child, or another child down the line, to be more successful in learning.

About the Contributors

Gina Robuck, M.Ed., has 10 years' experience as a

school psychologist, and has worked with children from preschool through high school. Currently, she provides consulting, advocacy, and evaluation services to families of children with special needs, and assists school-based teams to identify and address students' educational needs.