



TIPS FOR A  
**Positive School  
Experience**

Information & ideas for your child's success in school



**Ensemble**

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# Tips for a Positive School Experience

Information and Ideas for Your Child's Success in School

by Lisa Raffoul

## Introduction/Purpose

Education for their children and a positive school experience is a priority for most parents. Along with the school staff, parents have a very important role as part of the education team. This book provides information and ideas for good communication with your child's teacher. Good communication will help others to get to know your child and for you to understand what is happening at school. This book encourages positive relationships and will help you become a confident member of the school team.

This book is based on the comments from families, principals, educational assistants and teachers so that all members of the school team are represented. A lot of the information in this book has been taken from the "Special Kids, Special Parents" book that we wrote with a team of families in 2006. The feedback that we have received from this book is that it is very practical and helpful to families. Good communication will help others to get to know your child and help you understand what is happening at school.

In this book, the word "parent" includes parents, guardians, other family members and caregivers.



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## Telling your child's story

As a parent you will quickly understand your child; you will learn about the manner in which they communicate to you and to others; you will notice what they like to do and what they do not like to do; you will appreciate who they are as a person and you will not define your child by what he or she can and cannot do.

Knowing what you want for your child and what your child wants in his or her life is important, especially when you are talking to your child's teacher, educational assistant or another professional. You are the person who has shared the day to day successes and challenges with your child. You and your child are the experts about his or her abilities, dreams and goals for the future.

It is important to remember that your child is a child first. Be careful not to speak about him/her in terms of diagnosis or labels. While a diagnosis is important information to have, it should not define who he/she is and most certainly should not place restrictions on their abilities. When you talk about your child, try to describe him/her in terms of who he/she is as a person rather than in terms of his/her disability or special need. Use an explanation that best describes your child. The message that you want to communicate is that your child is a typical child with certain qualities that make him/her unique.

## When are labels important?

It is important however to have a starting point for your child's education. Medical tests and psychological assessments are often required so that your son/daughter gets the appropriate support they need and they can provide the foundation for successful learning. The goal is for the school team to understand this starting point for each child and to use it effectively toward their education and learning.



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# Worksheet

The following is a checklist that will help you get to know some important traits about your child. Fill in the blanks with words or phrases that describe your child.

My child can ...

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My child enjoys ...

---

My child doesn't like to ..

---

My child communicates by

---

My child tells me how he/she feels by ...

---

My child needs ...

---

My child is working on ...

---

I know my child is happy when he/she ...

---

I know my child is upset when he/she ...

---

I am concerned about ...

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## Determining your child's learning style

Just as children have unique personalities, they also have individual learning styles. Children begin to show us the best way that they learn very early in life. There are three primary learning styles that children may use. Some children like to see what they are learning about, others prefer to hear what is being presented to them and there are some children who learn best by actions and learning activities.

### The Child who learns by watching. Does your child .... ?

- Like to use pictures
- Enjoy art and drawing
- Like puzzles
- Prefer books with pictures
- Daydream
- Get distracted by untidiness or movement
- Forget names, but remember faces
- Learn best when they are shown how to do something
- Prefer teachers who use the board to write things down
- Draw pictures to problem solve
- Notice details
- Have good hand/eye coordination
- Have a vivid imagination
- Have trouble remembering verbal instructions



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## The Child who learns by listening. Does your child ... ?

- Remember things easily when they are in a song
- Have difficulty reading
- Enjoy listening to others
- Remember names but forget faces
- Like talking on the phone
- Enjoy music
- Enjoy reading out loud
- Give directions verbally
- Prefer people who speak with expression
- Have a difficult time concentrating when they are in a noisy room
- Talk themselves through problems
- Like to tell stories and jokes



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## The Child who learns from their surroundings. Does your child ... ?

- Like to find out how things work
- Learn through skits or role plays
- Have difficulty sitting for long periods of time
- Like action books and movies
- Try things impulsively
- Have a short attention span
- Fidget a lot
- Point or move while giving directions
- Prefer teachers who use hands on activities
- Try to put things together without using instructions
- Use a lot of gestures
- Become bored easily
- Show you things rather than tell you about them
- Have a difficult time learning in a traditional school setting
- Learn best when they try to do an activity by themselves



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## Tips to Help your Child Learn

### If your child learns by watching...

- Draw pictures or symbols, use flash cards, write things in colour, highlight important words, create charts or diagrams

### If your child learns by listening...

- Turn instructions or information into songs, read out loud together, encourage them to repeat instructions out loud, talk out problems and solutions with them, write out sequences and then read them out loud

### If your child learns from their surroundings...

- Let your child fidget while listening, give short instructions, take frequent breaks, combine learning with physical activities such as clapping or jumping when counting, teach them by taking them on field trips, create skits or plays

### What to consider regardless of your child's learning personality

- Keep expectations realistic.
- Help your child at home
- Approach your child's teacher with ideas of how to support your child's learning style
- Teach your child coping skills for activities that are not geared toward their learning style

For all of us there is a natural desire to keep on learning. Realize that no matter how complex your child's disability, they also have a very keen passion for learning. You may receive strong opinions from others and may even be told that your child will never be able to learn. If this is a situation that you encounter try to help others to understand your child's individuality and encourage them to find ways to help your child learn.



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## Using Effective Communication and Strengthening Relationships

The way we communicate with people will determine the nature of a relationship. If you speak to people in a friendly and approachable manner the more likely you will be to develop a positive relationship or partnership. There will be many professionals and support people involved in your child's life and having a good relationship with them will have a positive impact on your child's health and well being. The professionals have a great deal of education, experience and consideration for your child. It is important to respect their point of view; work as a team; share expertise and develop a plan that will offer the best possible outcomes for your child. Each perspective should have equal value and finding a balance will be important. Collaboration is the key to a successful relationship.

If you have any questions about the policies and procedures of the school, don't be afraid to ask the principal. It is important to value their time and if you do have questions for your child's teacher or other professionals, it is a good idea to make an appointment so that they can offer you their undivided attention.

## What is advocacy?

Advocacy is a term that is used to describe the action of supporting, pleading or arguing for a cause. Parents who have children with disabilities or special needs will do a lot of "advocating" on behalf of their son or daughter.

Your success in getting someone to understand your point of view will depend upon the approach that you use. A positive approach will get you positive results. Others are more likely to listen to what you have to say if you talk to them in a respectful and courteous manner. This is called effective advocacy. Using effective advocacy is an approach that will help you and your child get what you want.

## Ways to Increase Your Advocacy Skills

- Develop effective communication skills so that you are able to clearly state your needs in a positive and constructive manner
- Find out who can assist you should barriers arise
- Talk to other parents and share strategies
- Attend conferences or workshops that will enhance your skills and knowledge
- Keep a record of phone calls, home visits, and other communications with parents, agencies, school boards and government
- Look for opportunities to share the parent perspective throughout your community



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## Tips for Communication

Your success as a skilled advocate for your child will largely depend upon the manner in which you communicate with others. Here are some practical tips for communication to obtain the results you want.

### BE POSITIVE

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Believe that you can make a difference and you will. Believe in your team.

### BE A PARTNER

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Supporting your child is a team effort and you have a major role in this partnership. Have reasonable expectations. Enter every meeting with ideas for solutions but also come prepared with back up plans. Be open to consider other suggestions put forward by other members of the team.

### RESPECT ROLES & OBSERVE PROTOCOL

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Be sure to follow the proper steps for communicating with certain professionals. For example, if there is a concern at school speak to the teacher first. Be Prepared and Have a Plan. Have all of your records up to date, gather as much information as possible concerning the topic of discussion, if possible get your child's input, research anything that is unfamiliar to you, prepare a list of topics to be discussed as well as questions you wish to ask, have copies of documents you wish to distribute and come prepared with note taking supplies.

### TALK TO YOUR CHILD

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Review your child's concerns with them. What are their issues? Work with your child to prepare a report card of their experiences.



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## LISTEN AND BE COURTEOUS

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People are more willing to listen to you if they receive the same courtesy. Listening will provide you with a number of different and useful perspectives. Interrupt only when there is something that you do not understand. Do not interrupt to offer your own opinions. Write down your concerns so that when given the opportunity you can present them.

## BE RECEPTIVE

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Acknowledge what is being said, even by nodding your head. Do not rush the speaker. Use "We" Statements. Approach a situation by asking "what are we going to do about this situation"?

## DO NOT BLAME

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Do not put people on the defensive; they will only respond negatively and may become uncooperative.

## KEEP ON TOPIC

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Make a check list of the issues that you wish to discuss during the conversation. Feel free to add other issues that spark your concern and introduce them later if they are not addressed to your satisfaction during your discussion.

## TAKE NOTES

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This will help you to remember what was discussed and also reinforces your commitment to the topic.

## BRING SUPPORT

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If it will make you feel more confident, bring someone along for support. This could be a friend, family member or anyone else whom you trust. Ask them to take notes.



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## ASK QUESTIONS

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The only foolish question is one that is not asked. Do not be afraid to ask for clarification of something you may not understand. However, be careful that you do not present your questions as disagreements and make sure that others are aware that this is not your intent.

## RESPOND TO SUGGESTIONS POSITIVELY

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Even if you do not agree with the suggestion provided you should still appreciate the offer. All you need to say is "Thanks, I will certainly consider your idea."

## BE CONCRETE

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Draw on your vast experiences and tell your stories. This will help others to gain a better understanding of what you may be trying to explain. Sharing your insights will be appreciated.

## OFFER SUGGESTIONS RATHER THAN CRITICISM

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Do not point fingers or dwell on mistakes. The solutions that you offer should be related to the issues that have been identified. The most effective solutions are developed together.

## BE ASSERTIVE WITHOUT BEING AGGRESSIVE

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Address the discussion with confidence. Although being cooperative will ensure that you have a productive meeting, it doesn't mean that you cannot say what is on your mind.

## KEEP COOL

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Try to avoid outbursts, stay calm. If you feel that your emotions are getting out of control take a break.



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## PICK YOUR BATTLES \_\_\_\_\_

Save your energy for the most important issues.

## FOLLOW UP \_\_\_\_\_

Always schedule a date for the next meeting.

## REMEMBER TO SAY "THANK YOU" \_\_\_\_\_

Appreciation goes a long way. You may even want to send a letter or phone a supervisor to offer a compliment.

## SEND COPIES OF YOUR NOTES TO ALL WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE MEETING \_\_\_\_\_

Sending copies of your notes will remind everyone of their responsibilities and it will also provide the opportunity to clarify any misunderstandings.

### Team Meetings

As part of the school team, it's a good idea to start the school year with a team meeting. Make your request to your child's teacher or the special education consultant for your school board. Be sure to invite all members of your child's school team, including all school staff involved, community supports like physiotherapists, and someone who can take notes for you.

Before the meeting, be prepared with:

- Two or three important items that you want to discuss
- An agenda that lists the discussion items for everyone to follow
- A list of questions that you want to ask the school staff

Keep in mind that with a positive approach will get a positive response in turn. It is important to create an environment of respect for everyone. Emphasize to the school that you want to work with them as a partner.



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## Developing a Relationship with Your School Community

Parents and schools are part of a working partnership that results in the best possible education for your child. Parents may request meetings to have their questions answered and to advocate for their children. Members of the school staff are committed to working with parents in any way they can.

Schools also have expectations for parents to be involved and participate in the school community. By attending meetings, volunteering and participating in special events parents foster healthy relationships with their child's school.

Here are some strategies that parents have found to be useful to building positive relationships with their son's or daughter's school:

- Attend parent's nights
- Participate in social events organized by the school
- Help out with fundraising projects
- Volunteer on a field trip
- Join the parent advisory committee

### About Communication Books

- Be specific about what information you want from the school
- Ensure information is individualized and relevant
- Make sure your expectations are clear to avoid unnecessary assumptions
- Offer helpful information to the school
- Your positive communication will inspire a positive relationship

### Going to High School

As your child moves from elementary school to high school, the goal will be to help your child achieve his/her individual level of independence.

Some ideas to consider:

- Include your child in making decisions that are about his/her life
- Listen to your child's ideas
- How will your child be included in the typical high school experience?
- How will friendships be maintained?
- How can you encourage inclusion?

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