

The relationship that parents have with school personnel in the special education process is a long-term one. Parents have to view their interactions with school staff as part of a process of working together to provide an appropriate education for their children. Parents need to be thoughtful about how they nurture the relationship with school personnel. Here are some suggestions from experienced parents who have been successful in forging positive relationships with educators:

1. **Start early getting to know all the people who will eventually be in a position to serve your child.** Network. Start sharing your dreams and let them get to know your child. Then when you are in a position to work together, there is a good basis for open communication and teamwork. Getting to know staff allows them to have advance time for planning programs and prevents unnecessary “surprises” from happening.
2. **Recognize that school personnel are people too.** Good educational outcomes for your child are not just dependent on knowing your child’s educational rights but also on practicing good people skills. Try to avoid making demands. Instead, make suggestions and provide good rationales for what you would like to achieve.
3. **Be willing to negotiate and make compromises or trade-offs.** Realize that the trade-offs you make today can be made up for by different program options in the future.
4. **Be open and listen.** Don’t carry a chip on your shoulder. Try to remember that each new situation brings opportunities to start fresh. Don’t assume that you are always going to have a fight.
5. **Offer to help.** Be a creative problem-solver. Your enthusiasm and willingness can motivate and assist school staff to develop programs that might not be possible or might not have been envisioned without your support.
6. **Take the role of the educator and help them understand why you want what you do.** When school staff have reservations or are resistant to your desires for your child, use that opportunity to provide information. You may have thought of an approach to your child’s needs that has not occurred to them.
7. **Give positive feedback and support to the people involved with your child.** Everyone needs a pat on the back for things he or she is doing right. When a problem or complaint arises, seek a solution at the source. Going through the appropriate procedures and steps in the chain of command in solving problems builds trust.
8. **Understand that building good relationships takes time.** Things may not fall into place immediately. Patience can pay off as long as there is consistent progress. Mutually supportive relationships with school personnel will lead to superior outcomes for your child.
9. **If relationships break down, don’t involve your child in your battles.** He or she has to spend all day, every day in the problem situation. Support your child by offering strategies for dealing with the situation, and let them know you are working to correct it. Make an agreement with school personnel to be positive in front of the student and problem-solve behind closed doors.

Teachers and administrators generally enter these professions because of their interest in children and their well-being. Most professionals are well-intentioned and eager to do the “right” thing in serving a child with special needs. It is in the best interests of school personnel to have positive relationships with parents. The evidence is that, when there is cooperation between home and school, children flourish and professionals feel greater job satisfaction. Professionals who enjoy positive relationships with families make the following suggestions for successful interactions:

1. **Be an advocate!** Inform parents of their child’s educational rights and explain the practical implications of those rights. Let parents know about all of the special services that their child may access. Nothing destroys trust more than professionals withholding information that parents find out later would have been important for their child’s well-being and educational success.
2. **Listen to parents’ dreams for their child.** Remember, parents, are in it for the long haul.
3. **Communicate your aspirations for the child.** This can help parents understand why you may want to work on a particular goal that they might not think is so important.
4. **Accept parents as important members of the decision-making and implementation team.** Recognize their expertise. Treat them as equals.
5. **Soften the edge at formal meetings.** Use good people skills to help parents feel comfortable. Make introductions of all attending. Ask parents for their input about programming and placement and how those will affect their child.
6. **When transitions are happening between schools, classes, or new team members, be understanding.** Realize that transitions can be rough for parents and sometimes trigger a recycling of grief. Try to put yourself in the parent’s shoes and think about how you would want to be treated.
7. **Build on the child’s strengths while addressing weaknesses and give positive feedback on how a child is progressing.** Never allow a meeting to become a “bash the child” event.
8. **Focus strictly on education and what you would recommend for the student’s educational program.** Comments about the family or what goes on outside of school are not productive and will probably be resented.
9. **Communicate regularly.** Agree upon how you will communicate--by phone/text, email, writing in a notebook, or parent/teacher conference. Discuss terms you will use with each other and be sure that you have the same definitions for those terms. Being precise in communication will help parents to follow through at home and professionals to carry out the plan.
10. **Welcome parents into the classroom.** Encourage them to drop in to see what is going on. Take a few minutes during parent visits to explain what you are doing and how it fits into the IEP.
11. **Be creative, flexible, and ready to try new things.** Be open to parent suggestions and willing to give them a try. Data collection for a “trial” period is a great way to show effectiveness.