

Arc Guide to Communicating with Professionals

When you have a family member who receives educational, county or other services, you may run into issues communicating with professionals. No special educator, case manager, etc. went into the profession for the money or fame; they went in with a desire to help people with disabilities. Parents/guardians/individuals should go to meetings assuming good intent on the part of professionals. When issues arise, or before they arise, consider these tips to make the process go more smoothly.

General Tips

- Be realistic with your requests. Allow the person you're trying to contact at least 24 hours to respond.
- Ask yourself if what you are requesting is reasonable and/or possible.
- Use your family member's evaluation to support your request. What are his/her identified strengths and needs?
- Think about who needs to be at the meeting-the individual, a few people, the whole team, supervisors? Too many people can be overwhelming, however you want to be sure the decision makers are present.
- Choose your method of communication wisely. A phone call can be quicker and allows you to gauge tone. Written communication provides documentation. Ask the professional which method s/he prefers.
- When using email: be business-like and to the point; don't expect an immediate response; watch "Reply All" and only use if you really want to reply to everyone; read emails before sending to check for tone and to be certain you're conveying the correct message; and don't YELL IN EMAILS.
- As a team, agree on how to communicate, with whom, when and how often.

Use Active Listening

- Ask questions; listen to the answers without forming a rebuttal in your head.
- Try to understand what is said and ask clarifying questions. Restate or paraphrase to make sure you have the correct meaning. For example, "I think I heard you say...Is that correct?"
- Use "I" statements. This gives direction or explanation of what you want and think. Using "you" puts the other person on the defensive and can cause a closed mind.
- Avoid using "but" and try to use "and." "But" is another word that can be interpreted as holding up a "stop" sign and putting the listener on the defensive.

For further information or advocacy services, contact The Arc Greater Twin Cities at 952-920-0855 or visit www.arcgreatertwincities.org. Thank you!

This document is not legal advice, and should not be construed as such. Thus, no information herein should replace the sound advice of an attorney.

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- Repeat if you're not being heard or answered.
- Never be afraid to ask for specific examples or to have things broken down for clarification.
- Be sure you're in agreement before you move on to the next point.
- If you do not understand the jargon or abbreviations being used, ask the team not to use acronyms and to explain what they are talking about. This is especially true when discussing your family member's assessment/evaluation. Again, make certain you understand what is being said. Review an acronym list ahead of time.
- Ask for a summary of decisions and/or initiatives so everyone walks away with the same understanding and ideas. Documentation is always good to keep for your records and for looking back to for clarification.
- You may want to bring a tape recorder so you are able to listen to the discussion later, without distractions. Get permission first.

Dealing with Feelings

- Identify how you are feeling. Every feeling is valid, and how you deal with the situation can make or break the process.
- Think before you react or speak. Watch what you say and how you say it.
- When feeling overwhelmed, anxious or upset, take deep breaths and never hold your breath.
- If you need to take a break, don't be afraid to ask. Take a brief walk or go for a drink of water. Give yourself time to collect your thoughts before returning. Don't say something you may later regret.
- Be assertive and hold the team accountable for what is said or promised without violating the rights of another.
- There is always more than one point of view. Try not to judge another's report or experience.
- Look at what team members want for your child and try not to get stuck in your position. There is often a compromise solution that can meet the needs of the individual and the resources of the school or other service provider.
- Trust your instincts. You know your family member best and it's a learning process for all involved.

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Determine Your Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement (BATNA)

The BATNA is the action that will be taken if you and the service providers cannot agree. You generally want your BATNA to be the bottom line of what you are willing to accept. Here are three suggestions how you can accomplish this:

1. Create a list of actions you might take if no agreement is reached
2. Convert some of the more promising ideas and transform them into tangible and partial alternatives
3. Select the alternative that sounds best

Determining your BATNA before a meeting will help you know your bottom line when negotiating creative alternatives.

Good communication requires patience and training. Keep focus on the person with the disability instead of individual positions and feelings, it will go far in making that communication effective. You and your family member are in the service system for many years and good communication can help those years be productive and successful.

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