

7 Tips for meeting with your child's school

Written by Sarah Mitchell, Dyslexia and Literacy Consultant

1. Prepare

- Keep a folder of all your child's professional reports, school reports, emails, meeting notes etc. Keeping everything in one place will mean you can draw out important notes easily under pressure.
- Highlight reports or scores you have for your child, especially those you haven't read for a while. Print out important emails and write down any questions you have. The more you prepare for the meeting, the better you will be able to interact.
- Spend some time making notes on the best ways to teach children with dyslexia so that you know what to ask for.
- Along with the paperwork, you may need to prepare mentally. If you have had difficulty communicating with the teacher or school, set your intentions and arrive in a solutions-based frame of mind. While your frustrations may be justified, using meeting time to vent them may not necessarily result in the best outcomes for your child.
- Visualising potential topics and what you might say in each scenario may help you remain calm yet still say everything you wanted to say.
- You do not need to be likeable and you may disagree by all means, just try to do so in a constructive way. Some parents find it hard to be assertive, others find it hard to remain calm. Try to identify your weak spots and practice your reactions and responses. If either of these things is a challenge for you, try to remember your 'why' – to get your child the very best support program possible!

2. What to Ask?

- Is my child currently on an Individual Education Plan (IEP)? Why/why not?
- Has my child had any in-school assessments? May I have a copy, please?
- How is my child's progress being measured?
- Has my child had any extra support? Can you please tell me the details; how many hours, when this occurs, who runs the support, what takes place in those sessions?

- What is the name of the intervention program(s) you use to support my child? Is it evidence-based? *This means the program has solid backing in well-conducted research as being most useful for dyslexic type learners.* Ask the school to justify their choice of program according to research. Stating that it has worked with other students is not sufficient. Be sure your child's IEP details intervention, not just accommodations.
- Which intervention programs does the school own? Ask for the names of all the programs the school has. *Often, there is an evidence-based program tucked away in a cupboard somewhere and the school might be willing to get someone trained to use it.*
- What accommodations do you currently use to support my child? *Accommodations are different to intervention.* **Intervention** aims to address the gaps in knowledge through explicit teaching. **Accommodations** are allowances and tools given to the student to level the playing field. They may include use of laptop, extra time, shorter instructions, using a C-pen etc

3. Put everything in writing

I recommend you take your laptop and make notes directly into an email. Ask for the addresses of all present and type those into the email.

Send your notes at the conclusion of the meeting to all present, asking for confirmation you understood what was agreed. Print the email and include it in your child's folder.

Write down all the points discussed and the action plan outlined. Write down who will be responsible for each action point and by when each will happen. Also ask for a review date and note down any tests that will be used to measure the success of the intervention. You must also ask what the name of the program is. Ask the school whether this program is evidence-based. This means it is backed by well-founded research. Almost any program can be supported using personal experience or weak research but it's important there is a strong body of scientific evidence.

4. Use time wisely

Meeting time is usually limited, so you want to be sure to make best use of it. Prioritise your concerns when planning for the meeting so that you cover the most essential issues for you.

Most meetings begin with the parent's views and this is a good time to dot point the issues you'd like to cover. Again, stick to solutions-based comments and stay on topic. It's tempting to explain or relay difficulties of your journey so far, but this is unlikely to result in actionable steps being agreed upon that will ultimately determine your child's success.

You have a right to ask as many questions as needed until you understand where your child's current progress falls in relation to their peers. You also have a right to know exactly what is being done to help them.

I am often surprised how many of the parents say they were afraid to ask questions. *You must ask!* Try, as much as possible, to be future-focused. Your prior preparation is key to staying on topic during the meeting. If everything is not satisfactorily covered, it may be possible to arrange to follow up via phone or email if necessary. Ask if there is anything you feel you needed to discuss.

5. Follow up

This is critical. In busy school life, it's easy for even the best intentions to fall by the wayside. Many parents tell me they're afraid to 'waste the teachers' time', but if you have a child with special needs, you're entitled to a little more time. Make sure you touch base about two weeks after the meeting to check what has been put in place.

It's best not ask your child what is or is not being done. Kids with memory and organisation difficulties etc. are not always the best reporters! Plus, it's important for teachers and parents to have a united front for the child. This will help the child value and respect the efforts of both the teacher and parent. It's reasonable to email about once per month, but don't expect (or request) lengthy written reports!

6. Leave silent space

This technique is used in many professions. Ask a question or make a statement, then stay silent until the other person feels impelled to fill the silence. Let them talk until it's clear they have nothing left to say. When they stop talking, try to remain silent a little longer.

For example, you might say, "It says in my child's report they should receive an intensive evidence-based program. Can you please explain how that's being addressed?". It's an excellent way to gauge what the person knows and is thinking. It can also help the person to continue talking until they have found a solution themselves. Resist the urge to talk. It will be hard, but so worthwhile!

7. Educate respectfully

Feel free to take in a few carefully selected pages of information about your child's needs and useful resources such as websites (no, not whole books/folders filled with stuff!). Say, "I came across these and thought you might find them helpful."

You can ask whether the staff has had training in specific learning difficulties. If they have not, you might ask if they plan to do some training soon. You could take a list of some training opportunities to them. Point out that about 10% of children are dyslexic, so training would benefit a lot of their students.

Avoid adversarial approaches that put them on the spot or make them feel attacked. Teachers are extremely busy and they are doing the best they can with the knowledge, resources and systems they have. Help them to learn more in a way that lightens the load. *sequentially, directly and systematically in the context of a comprehensive reading program"* Birsh and Ghassemi 2010

For more detailed information please see the following links:

<https://codereadnetwork.org/help-is-here/resources/>

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