



## **Parents and Professionals Partnering for Children with Disabilities: A Dance that matters**

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### **From Chapter One: THE DANCE TOWARD PARTNERSHIP: Using the Dance Metaphor to Understand Parent-Professional Partnerships**

Forming partnerships between parents of children with disabilities and the professionals who work with them is like learning a new dance. At first the parent dancer and the professional dancer do not glide together gracefully across the floor. The moves are likely to feel stiff, uncertain, and awkward. The partners may have different expectations, needs, and constraints. Each seems to be listening to his or her own music with its own tune, words, and rhythm . . . No wonder some partnerships are not as graceful as others; the absence of shared music and familiar dance steps causes collisions. Toes---and feelings---get stepped on . . .

#### **Dance Steps to Practice: Stop, Look, Listen, Share, and Take Care**

**STOP:** It's easy to fall into the trap of labeling the partners in the dance as either "the parent" or "the professional." When we stop this categorical thinking, we discover that we share a common label. We are all people—each with our own stories, foibles, strengths, interests, and hopes. Casual conversation in the hallways, over the phone, or before and after meetings create opportunities to get to know each other a little bit better. We learn that one of us likes hockey, or enjoys gardening or works the midnight shift. We may not become best friends or perfect partners but moving beyond our labels into friendly interactions can enhance and strengthen partnerships.

**LOOK:** Look for opportunities to follow through on commitments you've made, big or small. Being dependable is a powerful way to build trust. Notify your partner when you anticipate a delay, a change in your agreement, an unexpected barrier, or when you have more ideas. If you begin to feel ambivalent about the agreed-upon plans, share your concerns or questions. Keeping silent will inevitably lead to misunderstandings . . . Look to others to talk through the challenges or to seek guidance . . . Stay away from people who encourage blaming or attacking others. That type of negative advice puts a screeching halt to building partnerships.

**LISTEN:** Listening is the most fundamental and probably the most challenging of all dance steps and must be constantly employed. Work on sharpening your listening skills throughout the dance. Listen for understanding and check in frequently to be certain that you're on the same page. During conversations, reflect back on what you heard the other person saying. Ask if you got it right. Listen to your own chatter inside your head. Sometimes that chatter interferes with your ability to be truly open to someone else's thoughts . . .

**SHARE:** Notice what is working well in the partnership. Let your partners know what has been productive, what you appreciated, and what was helpful. Feedback like this has a reinforcing impact. Partners are more likely to keep doing what worked when it is acknowledged. Most of us second-guess ourselves, at least occasionally. Receiving appreciation and specific feedback bolsters confidence and energizes partners and the relationship as a whole.

It's always important to share when unusual stresses or life changes, such as a family illness or an unexpected deadline, might impact interactions or the partnership. Details aren't necessary but a heads-up can help explain changes in the routines or even how communication is handled.

**TAKE CARE:** When we stumble on each other toes, apologies go a long way to repairing and strengthening the partnership. An honest, "I'm sorry." is a natural part of all healthy relationships. Take care and work toward a shared meaning of the visions for the child and for how "success" is defined.

### **From Chapter Three: *THE DANCE MAUAL: Eessential Steps to Keep Dancing***

#### **ESSENTIAL DANCE STEPS for PARENTS** (partial listing from the book, beginning on page 95)

- **Go Slow.** It takes time to absorb new information, especially during the initial phases or transitions or changes with partners. Don't expect to understand every detail, every report, or every choice immediately. Give yourself time to feel, think, question and take in the new information. Don't do it alone. Seek out other parents, resources, organizations, family members, and friends. Let a trusted person know what you are going through and how they might support you . . . Asking for support is a healthy thing to do, and a way to become a stronger partner.
- **Trust yourself.** Don't dismiss or underestimate what you know about your child.
- **Communicate.** Share what you know—you don't have to use the same words as professionals. Find your own words to tell stories about your child . . . You can use photos . . . Words are only one way.
- **Be prepared.** To be ready for meetings, formal or informal, ask ahead of time what to expect, what to bring, and what you should be prepared to talk about. Ask for a brief overview of the meeting, including the length and who will be present. Bring a list of your thoughts, questions, and expectations you wish to address.
- **Ask.** Your questions are important. If you're not sure how to phrase a question, try this, "I'm not sure I understand what you said. Could you repeat it , or give me another example?"
- **Speak Out.** Express your opinions, thoughts, agreements and disagreements with respect. If you are hesitant, for whatever reason, to share your thoughts at a meeting, follow up after the meeting with a one-on-one conversation or phone call with one of the professionals. You bring the much-needed family perspective.
- **Take five.** If you feel anxious or frustrated during the conversation, it's OK to ask for a short break.
- **Aim high.** Keep your expectations high for your children. Resist the pull to limit their dreams.
- **Share your family's cultural values, traditions, and routines.** You have a lot to teach and share with professionals, not only about your child but also about your family and community.
- **Give feedback.** Let professionals know specifically what they did that was helpful, valuable, and appreciated.
- **Involve your child.** As your child grows, learn more about ways to include him or her in the meetings, plannings, and discussions. A primary role of the parents is to support their children to understand their disability, to know what supports and interventions they need, and how to advocate for themselves.

- **Remember that your child is the same unique, wonderful, child she or he was before the assessment.**
- **Be kind to yourself.** Parenting is joyful and challenging. To sustain your energy for the long run, it's important to find ways to relax and step away from the parent role for a while.

### **ESSENTIAL DANCE STEPS for PROFESSIONALS** (partial listing from the book, beginning on page 101)

- **Prepare yourself** before talking or meeting with parents. You have a demanding schedule, and shifting from one activity to another requires concentration and intention. Do something simple before the interaction to remind yourself to *pause*, even for a moment. Take a deep breath, counting slowly back from 10 to zero, feel your feet on the ground . . . do whatever it takes to shift, to be present. Make this a simple ritual before every conversation or meeting.
- **Remind yourself that it took you many years of study** and practice to feel familiar with the laws, forms, procedures, policies, mandates, acronyms, services and timelines. Reassure parents that it takes time to feel confident and comfortable with the information and process. Remind them that you are there to assist them.
- **Be prepared for a range of feelings** from parents, yourself, and others. Raising and teaching children is complicated and easily elicits a variety of emotions, often unexpected. The feelings can range from worry, fear of failure, uncertainty, joy, confusion, pride, and many more—sometimes all at the same time. Practice dealing with feelings and resist taking it personally when negative feelings emerge. Learning to handle strong emotions in yourself and in others is as necessary a skill as knowing how to teach a child. Seek colleagues who listen to you with compassion, and who can provide support for handling strong emotions.
- **Be aware of your body language and that of parents.** Ask yourself throughout the meeting, “Am I communicating openness in the way I am sitting, holding my hands, my shoulders, through my eye contact?” . . .
- **Encourage parents to ask questions** . Assist parents in articulating their needs with such prompts as, “Sometimes parents want to know more about \_\_\_\_\_, while others want more information about \_\_\_\_\_. Do you have a preference?”
- **Don’t reassure parents too quickly.** Well-intended statements such as, “Everything’s going to be fine” often feel dismissive and are experienced as a lack of understanding.
- **Be mindful that when people appear agitated or “louder” that it is often a sign that they do not feel understood or heard.** Step back. Speak less. Ask more open-ended questions. Write down the parents’ issues, concerns, and/or recommendations and ask if you have correctly captured their thoughts. Resist rushing to defend your position. Concentrate on obtaining more information from the parent.
- **Ask parents what they have previously heard about the particular label, diagnosis, services, plans, and experiences with early intervention or special education when there is tension or discomfort.** Knowing the back story or the family’s previous experiences or impressions might provide valuable insights and give you a new way to be helpful.
- **Refrain from using jargon.**
- **Strive to learn about the parent as a *person*.** Inquire with sincerity, about current happenings in the family such as upcoming sports events, a family vacation or illness, or just about daily routines. Ask parents how they are doing. Purposefully use “small talk” or simple chatting to ease into conversations and set a comfortable beginning.

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