

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER SERIES

The Good, Bad and Ugly: Advocating for Children with Autism in School

By Marquis Carter Grant

Introduction

This issue of NASET's **Autism Spectrum Disorder** series was written by Marquis Grant and is titled, ***The Good, Bad and Ugly: Advocating for Children with Autism in School***. A report delivered by the U.S. Department of Education estimated that in 2009 there were 5.8 million children between the ages of 6 and 21 were being served in special education (Edweek, 2011). This was a drastic increase from the 1,666,000 children in 1963 and the 2,100,000 children in 1966 that were reported by Mackie (1969). The numbers for autism have shown an even greater increase, with 1 in 88 children receiving a diagnosis under the autism spectrum. These numbers are extremely important because, if this trend continues, more parents will face a likelihood of a diagnosis for their children. How we face these diagnoses could make the difference between having children who are successful in the classroom and having children who suffer needlessly.

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Educators often talk about “high maintenance” parents who are “crazy” or “overzealous” with their demands when a parent aggressively advocates for their child. Educators should be encouraged to put themselves in the shoes of these parents, who often spend a great deal of time trying to convince people to give their child a chance. What if this was your child? What would you want for them? How would you react if you felt that your child was being treated unfairly? Of course, most educators mean well. They do the best they can with what they have and really don’t mean anything negative in their approach of these delicate situations. However, autism can present difficult challenges that even a veteran teacher may find overwhelming (Rodriguez, Saldana & Moreno, 2012). To further complicate matters, teachers may feel that they are not adequately trained to manage those disabled children in their classes (James & Oldfield, 2009).

The reality is that no one can advocate for a child better than the child's parent or guardian. Even when encountering better educated, more knowledgeable professionals, parents have more power than they think. The *Handbook on Parents' Rights* outlines much of the procedures and processes afforded parents on behalf of their disabled child. Knowing what is in the handbook is only half the battle. Parent should not be afraid to stand up for what they believe even if their position does not represent the majority. However, with this power comes great responsibility. Schools have a lot of protection as well. As a child's advocate, it is extremely important to stay abreast of any changes or situations that are occurring throughout the year. Teachers may come to the table with various complaints concerning a child but if those complaints have not been articulated over the course of the school year, parents should question this behavior. On the same note, teachers' complaints that go unaddressed by parents are never good. Showing support and a willingness to work with a child's teacher and administrators goes a long way. It will also give the impression that you are a no-nonsense parent who wants the best for your child and you are willing to do whatever it takes to get your child where she needs to be.

Always Be Prepared

Any exceptional children educator will (well, should) tell you that the *Handbook on Parents' Rights* is the absolute road map for parents, guardians, advocates of children with disabilities. Policy and procedure are extremely important in regards to exceptional children and being knowledgeable is only half the battle. Communication from the beginning must be precise and outline clear expectations for student achievement. Parents cannot be intimidated by what they perceive as "me against them" environments. True, the teacher is the expert in the classroom but you are the expert when it comes to your child. If you feel that you cannot convey your thoughts and expectations in a manner that is clear, then seek out a family member or an advocate that can assist with this task. You don't have to write a novel or eloquent prose in order to get your ideas across. Even a simple email can serve as an opening for bilateral communication between parent and teacher. Even if a parent cannot go to the school on a regular basis for face-to-face discussions, an email or note to the school will let the teacher know that you can certainly concerned about your child's progress and that you expect to be informed of all things related to your child's academics. Parents are viable members of the exceptional children team directly responsible for the implementation of their child's individualized education plan (IEP); therefore, it would behoove them to overwhelm rather than underwhelm.

So-called high maintenance parents are usually those who have a story to tell. They have experienced first-hand the frustration of having a child's IEP not being properly implemented or having a frustrated teacher become the enemy. Imagine having your child in an environment with someone you feel has no interest in their success. As a parent you learn very quickly in this game what needs to be done. In these instances, reaching out to the special education teacher will be important in determining whether your child is receiving what he or she needs in his environment and how services are being monitored. Don't be afraid to ask for copies of work assignments, assessment results...whatever might be necessary in order for you to get a comprehensive picture of your child's present level of performance and find out that your child needs in order to accomplish the goals set forward in your child's IEP. While schools often get it right, according to parents and school experts, there are times when they don't and parents need to know their rights (DesRoches, 2013).

Another rule of thumb is to keep a notebook that is compiled with all of your child's important paperwork (i.e. IEP, evaluations, work samples), teacher communications, school records, pertinent articles, and personal notes that may be of benefit at a future IEP meeting or parent conference. Once teachers know that you are organized, they will step up their game as well. Not only will you be a valuable resource for your child's teachers, but you will also have a means of reference to recall past conversations or decisions that were made in regards to any issues. I would emphasize never attending a meeting without your notebook in hand and highly visible. The more detailed the contents, the better, using tab dividers, table of contents, color codes, and anything else that will add to the value of your resource. The IEP notebook should be to you like the *Physician Desk Reference* to the medical professional.

Parents know their children better than anybody else and are vital members of the team when it comes to assessing a given situation and making sound judgments.. As a parent, you are your child's first advocate.

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Therefore you are better equipped to analyze and evaluate what is in the best interest of your son or daughter. Don't be afraid to be proactive. The more involved you are in your child's education, the fewer regrets you will have in the long run.

About the Author

Marquis Carter Grant is a special education teacher and parent of a child with autism. She has been an educator for the past eight years, beginning her career in Jacksonville Florida as a high school English and reading teacher. She earned a master's degree in curriculum & instruction from the University of West Florida and a doctorate in educational leadership from Argosy University. She has published two articles, *Charter Schools: Are They Really the Answer* (ED 511137). *Inclusion Doesn't Always Mean Included* (511442) and her dissertation, *The Effectiveness of Using Dibels for African American Males At Risk for Reading Failure in Kindergarten*. Her contact information is 336-575-6546 and email: mrsgranto1@yahoo.com.

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