

FATHERS AS ADVOCATES

SPECIAL EDUCATION AND THE INVISIBLE FATHER

Why can't Dad make the IEP meeting?

What should I do when he does show up?

As a father of a child with a disability I have experienced first hand what I refer to as the "Invisible Father Syndrome". This is most commonly observed in the physician's office. The physician automatically directs questions to the mother despite the fact there is another parent less than six feet away. The father just became invisible.

Another prime example is dealing with school systems. IEP meetings are at times most fathers cannot attend so the role usually falls to mothers to deal with trying to procure an education for the child.

Fathers I have talked with are willing to be involved but have no information on how to or have been discouraged from participating in the first place. This is also known as "I can dress him up but I can't take him out-Syndrome." Despite myths circulating otherwise, fathers can learn to be effective advocates for their children with special needs.

Both parents have to participate as partners in the learning process to be the most effective advocates for the child. When given the opportunity and the resources most fathers eagerly participate. After all, it gives us another skill to add with lawn and car care.

The education field in general is female dominated with special education being doubly so. Add that fact to the extremely high divorce rate among couples with children with disabilities leading to single mothers raising families on their own and the opportunity for father involvement diminishes even more.

When a parent remarries or develops a new relationship, often the stepfather or significant other finds himself in an arena with absolutely no idea of disability and will experience the cycles of denial, acceptance and finally a readiness to learn. The entire process from the length of an agency day with no flexibility for working fathers to seeming unwillingness to be considered a necessary component in a child's education and development are barriers to father participation. Tradition has been the invisible father in special education.

If we look at training available to parents, it is obvious that it has been developed by mothers to target the audience attending school meeting, other mothers. In my early exposure to training it was impossible for me to rationalize how making hats and playing games correlated with understanding what my rights were. Still haven't figured that one out, but that is the fundamental difference between the sexes. We need to find more creative methods to encourage participation of fathers in the education of children with special needs.

SOME SIMPLE STEPS CAN ADDRESS FATHER INVOLVEMENT.

- Seek input from fathers from the beginning diagnosis. Stress the importance of father participation in the early development of the child.
- Acknowledge fathers need to participate in school meetings. This can be accomplished by encouraging mother to take IEP information home to discuss with Dad before making

the final decision and making an effort to schedule meetings so fathers have an opportunity to attend if by conference call. Specify the need for both parents to attend whenever feasible.

- Develop training materials that are more gender neutral. Most men are uncomfortable and sometimes intimidated by large numbers of women and the activities presently used in training parents. Recognize the diversity in gender learning styles as readily as personalities and culture. Less formal settings are more comfortable for fathers and conducive to participation.
- Whenever possible, encourage fathers to talk to other fathers. Positive male role models are as important at forty as they are at age six. I have met fathers who have accepted the role of advocate and became quite adept at it. My hat goes off to these guys who despite any barriers put their child first and found the time to become great men.

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