

# SPECIAL Parenting Matters of Westchester

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NEWSLETTER

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A Resource For Parents Of Children With Special Needs  
And The Professionals Who Work With Them

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## Building Parent-Professional Partnerships

Roberta Rachel Omin, CSW-R and Jenny A. Frank, CSW

**P**arents and professionals working collaboratively fosters a child's success. Given the important and complex nature of this relationship, *Special Parenting Matters of Westchester* (SPM) interviewed parents and professionals to shed light on the elements that make up and support a mutually effective partnership.

SPM thanks the parents and professionals who have graciously contributed to this interview. The professionals are Alison Abrams, special educator at Eagle Hill School; Dr. Stephen Cowan, developmental pediatrician; Dr. Peter Deri, psychologist; Jacqueline Stern-Einzig, clinical social worker and educational consultant; Patricia Levy, special educator in Greenburgh and Susan Varsames-Young, special education consultant. The parents are Joan Fox-Bow and Daniel Bow, Pat and Ron Colombo, Sal Comen, Ashley Craig, Victor Krupinski and Evelyn Scott.

### SPM: As parents, what do you want from professionals?

Mrs. Scott: For professionals to be sensitive to both my child and me. Sensitivity runs the gamut. When starting out, a neurologist looked at my child and in less than four minutes said he had autism. Of course, I began crying immediately. He responded with "I see I touched a nerve." Literally I could not hear one more word. Needing a second opinion, I met with another neurologist who confirmed the diagnosis, was sensitive and held my hand as I cried.

Mrs. Fox-Bow: To have our concerns heard and listened to.

Mr. Comen: Professionals, whether teachers, social workers or occupational therapists, need to be really prepared. Most importantly, start with the positives before getting into what has to be done. Strengths are the foundation.

The Colombo's: Clarity around how they are helping my son progress in each area. I'd like a way to communicate with them easily after the meeting for questions I did not think of at the time. I'd like to record the meeting so we can go over it, not to get anyone in trouble. Lastly, speak slower, in laymen's terms and explain professional language.

Mr. Bow: At the CSE meeting the talk can be factual and explicit and hence hard to bear. I was pretty upset coming out of the meetings, although it was a dose of reality. Things need to be said and can't be glossed over. Yet, it is emotionally charged when it is about my child. I need professionals to understand they are talking about my child.

### SPM: As professionals, what do you want from parents?

Ms. Levy: I like to get a meaningful understanding of what goes on at home. I

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want fathers to be involved so I invite them to the classroom and involve them in activities.

Ms. Varsames-Young: I want to know if the parent observes my findings because my meeting with the child may have been a honeymoon or the child was overwhelmed or was at his worst. I want feedback reflective of the child's performance and what came up in the evaluation. I always give parents positives about the child's learning style and personality. Then we go over the interfering behaviors and how we can bridge them with the strengths.

Ms. Abrams: I like it when parents come with questions. I always ask, "Is there anything special you want to discuss and if it takes the whole conference that is okay.

Ms. Stern-Einzig: We professionals cannot do our job without the effort and direction of parents. Parents need to become educated consumers as they are the backbone of the structure.

### **SPM: As parents, what do professionals need from you?**

Mrs. Craig: Support is the main thing. Professionals have limited hours with my son so if I am not willing to help how can it work?

Mr. Comen: Professionals need to know we are committed and that we can stick it out.

### **SPM: As professionals, what do parents need from you?**

Dr. Deri: Parents need to feel "I get their kid" so when I get to the point of discussing their difficulties, I do it with empathy and they know I can understand what is trying about their child. They feel an alliance. I realize that talking about their child is the most intense thing they can do so I ask them, "What is it like to be discussing your child?"

Dr. Cowan: Giving parents the encouragement to become advocates.

### **SPM: How do you establish rapport?**

#### **Parents' Responses:**

Mrs. Scott: Whether school personnel or private professional, I use my people skills. First, I keep my emotions such as anger and sadness out of it. I try to foster good working relationships

with a teacher my child will only have for one year, the chairperson of special education who I will know for twelve years or a private clinician. I also make sure I don't have an attitude of entitlement. I listen well, let the professionals know I am a collaborator and always thank them for their time, effort, commitment and hard work. On occasion I follow up a meeting with a thank you note or brief phone call thanking them again.

Mr. Comen: For a first meeting, my wife and I bring a photo of our child and her siblings. We express our concerns and commitment to our child's well being. In turn, we listen and then trust our instincts. We are not easily fooled. If rapport is not established we move on.

Mrs. Craig: Through empathy for teachers. I understand where they are coming from.

#### **Professionals' Responses:**

Ms. Varsames-Young: Parents being as specific as possible about their concerns and what they want for their child. In turn, I let parents know what I have to offer - my expertise. I ask "Is there something on my menu that you have not thought of?" Professionals need to share what they offer so parents can decide what is needed.

Ms. Stern-Einzig: Rapport needs to be mutual and nurtured. I extend myself by being sincere, and showing interest, in the child and the parents as well. I validate what the parents are feeling and experiencing.

### **SPM: What do you do to make the conference work?**

#### **Parents' Responses:**

Mr. Krupinski: It is an interactive process. I regularly speak to all teachers and therapists before the CSE so we are on the same page. We talk about real and concrete goals, not only the ones listed on the IEP. I have the written goals from the last meeting which we update. Then we look at my child's needs, regardless of the label, and the ways the professionals think they can be accomplished. We do this before the meeting so we are all on the same page for the meeting.

Mr. Comen: I come with my questions and comments written down. I may bring schoolwork completed since our last



meeting I listen carefully and ask additional questions. I don't assume the "professional" necessarily has all the answers. I am always sure to thank the professional for time and effort.

Mrs. Fox-Bow: I bring an advocate for moral support to feel there is someone completely on our side. It helps to have another set of ears.

#### **Professionals' Responses:**

Dr. Cowan: The most important thing - listen to each parent's concerns and what they are experiencing. Two other things come to mind. First, too much time is spent on the negatives of a child, so by the time a child gets to my office parents have usually been told their child is not performing so it's negative immediately. Second, I try to empower parents by finding positives to work from and teach parents how to become an observer. Empowering parents gives them encouragement to do the work, become advocates and the "expert" on their child.

Ms. Varsames-Young: I eliminate all professional jargon and ask clear questions covering each area of development.

Dr. Deri: I try to explain that in my understanding of children I look for red flags in areas of development other than where the child has difficulty. How much is it about aspects of temperament (e.g. sensory); neuro-development (e.g. speech and language) or environment and experience - in other words which columns do the areas of difficulty fall into.

#### **SPM: In your opinion, what makes a good conference?**

##### **Parents' Responses:**

Mr. Comen: A good conference is one in which I walk away filled with positive momentum, having strategies that will effect change and there has been sensitivity. We want to experience true give and take. Conversely, a bad conference is when we feel the professional has dismissed what we see or say or has failed to use a more sensitive approach when speaking. If we feel on the defensive or angry the whole purpose of the conference is lost.

Mrs. Scott: One that gives me information, both on current status and with next steps to build on. There is nothing worse than feeling there is no where to go.

##### **Professionals' Responses:**

Dr. Deri: A conference is successful is when parents can connect the dots.

Ms. Levy: When we have collaboration and parents feel they have choices. If parents have their priorities in order and we

have manageable and concrete steps to deal with problems along with hope.

Dr. Cowan: I always feel good after I have seen a family and I have a feeling of some magic having occurred. We start with concerns and end with a plan. It doesn't necessarily mean we have solved the problem or problems but we have a concrete plan with clear goals and clear challenges. A successful conference lends itself to my asking, "Are the parents more at ease? Do they know they are not alone? Are they not as fearful as when they first came in?"

## Thoughts to Ponder...

### **Professionals**

1. How are you bringing to the fore the value you place on trust and ethics?
2. What could you learn from the parents that can be helpful in moving toward desired goals?
3. How are you discussing the child's strengths and areas of need?
4. How are you communicating your appreciation for this child's uniqueness?
5. How is the child's disabilities impacting the family?
6. What role if any can you play in helping the parents?
7. Are there other resources you can share with the family?
8. In what other ways can you empower the parents?



### **Parents**

1. Do you make a list of questions, concerns and goals prior to your meeting?
2. Are you informing professionals of what is going on at home that could be impacting your child and family?
3. What do you need to learn to better understand your child's needs?
4. Are you communicating regularly with the professionals?
5. What are you doing at home to carry over what the professionals are doing?
6. In what ways can professionals be of assistance?
7. Are you reaching out to other parents to hear what has worked for them?

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**Ms. Stern-Einzig:** A good conference is when equal footage is established where every member of the conference feels validated for their part, feels comfortable in sharing concerns, hopes, fears and all thoughts. All parties have a sense of partnership.



The parents and professionals interviewed offered rich and thoughtful responses. It is our hope that you, our readers, translate their voices into your own, helping to make your parent – professional relationships, as well as conferences as fruitful as possible.

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## Considerations For Your Child Attending Meetings

- How does the professional view your child attending the meeting?
- What is your child’s understanding of his/her special needs?
- Does your child have the maturity to attend the meeting?
- What is your intention? What do you hope will be accomplished?
- What are the possible pitfalls to manage?
- What would make it a positive experience for your child?

# Parent Coaching

*Child-friendly behavioral strategies to suit your family's needs*

- Discover the influence of your parenting style on your children's behavior
- Expand your repertoire for positively impacting their emotional growth
- Support spouses to work together for the benefit of your marriage and family
- Restore fair parenting with all your children

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