

Family Connection Circle - Collaborative Advocacy - Session 1

Transcript 8/18/26

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Transcript:

Karen Harrison: All right. Well, good afternoon and good evening, everyone. Welcome to TNSTEP's Family Connection Circle. We are so excited that you are here for our launch of this new, exciting initiative that we are doing.

And this is... the Family Connection Circles are a direct result of feedback from families that they want to spend more time connecting and learning from each other. So, it is a learning and community-building group for Tennessee families of children and youth from birth to age 26 who have disabilities. And we are so excited to launch this with some partners that we have gotten to know over the last several months. And these wonderful professionals have done this Collaborative Advocacy Series, reaching families across the nation with this information, and it's very, very exciting for us today. Just a couple of housekeeping things. We will hold questions until the end, but if you have a burning thought, go ahead and put it in the chat box, as it will be monitored and responded to.

We are recording this today, but during the Q&A section, for confidentiality reasons, we will stop the recording to respect everyone's confidential information.

This is a **two-part session**, so we're hoping that you'll join us for this one and next week. And next week, we're going to do some great hands-on activities to apply the information that is going to be shared today.

This series is presented by Crystal Sanford, founder of Sanford Autism Advocacy Group, and Dr. Angie Balsley, founder of Unified Leadership and Senior Consultant with CADRE, the Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education.

We're so grateful to them for letting us have access to the expertise of these wonderful presenters today. So, I am going to turn it over without further ado to our presenters. They have some amazing information to share, and they'll tell a bit more about the topic as we delve into it and talk about Part 2 as well.

Angie Balsley: Fantastic, Karen. I will get my screen shared here, and we will get started right away. Let me just get everything rolling here. There. You can see my screen, Crystal.

Crystal Sanford: Yes, looks great.

Angie Balsley: Okay. Well, welcome, everyone. We're so glad you're here. We're going to do introductions and find out who's here with us. I'm Angie Balsley, and I was a special education director in Indiana for 18 years and a special education teacher for 9 years before that. I am also, as Karen mentioned, a senior consultant with CADRE. Crystal is as well. We're both senior consultants with the Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution. My

research is in dispute resolution and collaboration. You've got my contact information there.

Most importantly, I am the goddaughter of Tim Rodino, who was born in the '50s to my grandparents with Down syndrome. And Tim had Down syndrome, and they were told, put him away; he won't amount to anything. And they said that no way, he's coming home. We're going to raise him like our other nine children. So, inclusivity has been at the heart of what I've done since I was born. So great to be with you here today.

Crystal Sanford: Wonderful. Also very honored to be here as well. I'm Crystal Sanford. I am, like you all, the parent of a child with a disability. I have two teens who are neurodivergent. One is on the autism spectrum, and similar to Angie, my oldest sister is an individual with developmental disabilities. My mom has, you know, received support, and I've been able to provide care and support to her over the years. Just as federal law, IDEA, was even beginning, my child, my daughter, and my sister were receiving their education. So, we've definitely seen, even as a family, how far we have come over the years. I've been a speech pathologist for over 20 years, and I've spent the last 10 years as an educational consultant.

I'm a parent advocate providing support to families through my own company, and I also provide training and support nationally. I have recently also become a senior consultant with CADRE. So, this is my contact info as well, and I'm very happy to support you and be here.

Angie Balsley: So, we'd like to know who's with us here today. If you want to share your name and your child's age in the chat, you're welcome to do so. We won't read it out loud since it's being recorded. So yeah, feel free to go ahead and share who you are; we'll give you a second to do that here.

I also recognize that it's evening time for you all. So, if you are balancing child responsibilities and evening chores, cooking dinner, and you can't interact in the chat, that's okay too. You're totally welcome just to listen.

Alright, I see one there. Welcome. As you're entering your name and your child's age, maybe also tell us something about your child that you're really proud of.

What a great friend. Someone is here to learn. They have an older child, but they're here to learn information to support a friend. That's wonderful.

This is great. I'm reading them all, and normally I'd be kind of calling them out and responding, but for confidentiality's sake, I'm not going to do that. Ooh, a child learning new skills and tactics. That's awesome. Fantastic. Someone shares that their child has some awesome skills. Love that. A Social butterfly. Isn't it fun when our kiddos are just out there making friends with others?

Crystal Sanford: Love that. Never give up, right? So persistent. That's beautiful.

Angie Balsley: Yes.

Crystal Sanford: Where learning and the magic happen.

Angie Balsley: Fantastic. Well, we invite you to continue using the chat this way throughout the presentation, and as Karen said, we'll take questions at the end.

So, we want to thank TNSTEP for hosting us today and for being so thoughtful about providing this service to you all. Thank you to TNSTEP.

Angie Balsley: Crystal, would you like to share this resource that you've provided for our families today?

Crystal Sanford: Yes, so on our company's website, https://www.sdautismhelp.com/store/p36/New_School_Year-Parent_IEP_Tips.html, guide for the new school year. So, it's the new school year, parent IEP tips, and this lists out some considerations to empower you as you're getting started in your new school year. Some things to do, some ways to prepare yourself. There's also a thinking guide that you can reflect on so that you can look at the content and then see how specifically to apply it to your child and your child's education this school year. So, there's a free resource there you can find on the website, and I think, uh, maybe we'll be sending that link out again afterward as well; we could do that.

Angie Balsley: Fantastic. That's so nice of you to share that, Crystal. I love that. And we're going to talk about what we're going to do next week. Normally, Crystal and I are very interactive and engaging when we are present. And today, we have a lot of content to get through. But we really hope that you'll come back next Tuesday.

Because we're going to practice using the skills that we're talking about today. So next week, bring your questions, your experiences, your ideas. We've got a couple of fictitious scenarios to walk us through as well, which will allow for some great discussions. We're as excited as we are about tonight, we are about next week as well.

CADRE, again, the www.cadeworks.org, and I wonder if Karen or if you could put that in the chat for everybody. Cadeworks.org is the website, and there's a section specifically for parents that you can go to. Thanks Karen.

I wanted to just share that the information presented here is intended to serve as, or it is not intended to serve as, nor should it replace any legal advice that you receive. Opinions expressed are not to be represented as official or unofficial interpretation of any guidance from the U.S. Department of Education or CADRE. An application of information presented may affect your state statutes, regulations, local policies, and practices. CADRE is funded by the U.S. Department of Education, so that is why they are mentioned in there. As Crystal said, she lives in California; my practice was in Indiana, and I now live in New Mexico. So, there are some variances in the law, so if there are any, we can point them out, or I'm sure Karen will be happy to correct us quickly.

Today, we're going to discuss the principles of Collaborative Advocacy and discover strategies to support productive IEP meetings.

So let's jump right in. Go ahead, Crystal.

Crystal Sanford: Yes, so many times parents are looking- parents and myself included- who have one child with an IEP as well, one with a 504. Many times we are looking to avoid

conflicts, and so we wanna set the stage today with the understanding that conflict is normal in teams.

Anytime that you gather together multiple human beings, they're coming with their own insight and experiences and perceptions and perspectives. It is to be expected that there may be conflict in teams. How we advocate in those times, in these interactions, really makes a difference. How we engage when we are advocating, when we are coming together as an IEP team.

It shapes trust, participation, relationships, and ultimately student outcomes. Parents may seek an advocate. Maybe you have sought an advocate to help you at... in these kinds of, matters. Maybe it is a parent educator from a group like TNSTEP; the support that you receive there provides guidance and clarity, and that support can really help to secure appropriate outcomes. But again, it is how we navigate these difficult conversations that makes a difference.

This is true for everyone at the IEP table. How we navigate these conversations and the conflict can positively move us forward. It can strengthen parents' confidence, but it can also inadvertently continue to fuel the conflict.

So today, we're going to be talking about collaborative advocacy strategies that are going to help protect and preserve your rights, your child's rights, and ultimately support your child thriving in their educational environment.

What is Collaborative Advocacy? It is a relationship-building approach. There are many approaches to advocating through the special education process, but we do promote a Collaborative Advocacy approach that fundamentally changes how we support families and special education. I think that is where there is room for growth. The how we do things.

We know that there is law, both Federal and State, but the implementation thereof, and how that comes out in real time, I think, is where there's room for improvement. So Collaborative advocacy.

This approach really fosters empowerment for families, confidence and skills, and meaningful participation, which is a part of the law; meaningful parent participation is a requirement. It protects rights and ensures the legal safeguards remain at the forefront of the discussions. When we focus on a collaborative approach, it will naturally reduce conflict because we're no longer avoiding the elephant in the room. We are now coming to the table with an open ear and eye, ready to discuss the situation so that we can come to a resolution. It prevents conflicts from escalating even further through this proactive communication style.

And then it keeps the focus on the students, right? It can feel personal, and I understand, as a parent, I have written IEPs; as a professional, I have received them from my child personally, and I understand that sometimes the focus becomes on people, adults, where the focus truly should be on students and student-centered decisions and what is best for the child. It's about engaging and learning how to engage so that the team stays child-focused while parental rights are being protected. And it's a... it's rights-affirming, not

conflict-avoiding, but a conflict-negotiating strategy and approach that we have seen in real time be successful.

Angie Balsley: I'm going to walk through the principles of Collaborative Advocacy here. Individuals who practice Collaborative Advocacy voluntarily adhere to these principles. They outline how we engage with families, educators, and service providers in ways that strengthen collaboration and keep the focus on the children.

First, Collaborative Advocates recognize that everyone deserves respect and to be treated with respect. They value others' perspectives, so even when they don't agree with them, they still value others' perspectives.

Collaborative Advocates remain child-centered, remembering that the child is at the heart of every decision a team makes.

Collaborative Advocates also encourage meaningful parent participation and help parents engage confidently. Rather than speaking for parents, Collaborative Advocates help parents to clarify their priorities, understand their options, and find their voice. They provide accurate information so that parents can make informed decisions. Additionally, Collaborative Advocates recognize the importance of strong team relationships, and they work together to strengthen them.

Collaborative Advocates use collaborative problem-solving to work through disagreements. They listen for understanding, identify shared goals, and work through differences.

Collaborative Advocates also act as community liaisons. They help connect families with resources to build a strong support network.

Collaborative Advocates are also professionals. They stay responsive, reliable, and self-aware; they're prepared, follow through on commitments, and remain calm even when emotions are high.

Collaborative Advocates remain honest and trustworthy, protect sensitive information, and ensure its shared appropriately and respectfully.

And lastly, Collaborative Advocates stay informed about special education and early intervention procedures, regulations, and best practices to help guide parents.

I wanted to make one distinction before we move on to our next slide here. I talk about collaborative advocates, and sometimes we think about that as a particular person, right? A support person who comes with a family to an IEP. These principles, though, apply to all of us at the IEP table.

Myself as a former teacher, Crystal is a former speech pathologist, myself as a former administrator. All of these principles apply to us as well, to families, to therapists, to outside support people that come to the meeting. These are ways we can all interact with each other to help the team process and be even more productive. I love that. I appreciate you sharing that because it is right: not just a role, it is an approach that we all can take as we operate in our position at the IEP table. Something we want to encourage all families to consider is showing up and leaning in.

As you engage in your discussions and your interactions and your IEP meetings, consider that there will be challenges, which we've said is to be expected, but to lean into the challenges.

Crystal Sanford: I know sometimes that can be difficult. I know I've heard parents say, I don't want to be that parent. You know, I don't want to ruffle any feathers. However, the fact that you have a child with disabilities- there are hundreds- means there are so many rights and protections for you and your child. And you are doing nothing more than advocating for what is best for your child, so there's nothing to fear with that. We just encourage you to show up, show up to the challenge with an open mind, with solutions, and considering an open mind, considering the solutions that are potentially appropriate for your child, and work to understand the perspectives of others.

Leaning in and listening to see what is offered, considering those with an open mind, and let's see how much progress and forward movement we can make when we take on this approach.

Angie Balsley: Absolutely. The way we show up matters. In every interaction, we're influencing each other, whether we mean to or not. Our tone, our body language, our choice of words, even our pace, they all send signals. Those signals, they shape how the other person responds.

So, imagine a parent is coming to an IEP meeting, and the parent is worried, maybe even a little frustrated, and the parent says, I don't think my child is getting what they need. The teacher, feeling a little defensive, responds, "We're doing everything we can; your child is making progress." The parents lean forward with their voice tight; that's not what I'm seeing at home, and just like that, the conversation shifts into tension. Both people care deeply; the parent cares, the teacher cares, but now they're on opposite sides trying to kind of prove their point.

Now, the same parent, same concern, but watch what happens when the teacher shifts just one thing. The parents say, "I think my child is not getting what they need." The teacher responds, "I'm really glad you told me that. Can you share what you're seeing at home?"

The parent exhales a little and says that homework is taking hours and they're getting really discouraged. The teacher nods and says "that sounds really hard for both of you. Let's look at this together." Now the conversation opens. Same concern, but instead of tension you have a partnership.

Our interactions influence others in our confidence, how we communicate, and our willingness to collaborate. So just wanted to point out that we really play off each other in how we interact.

I want to kind of bring this into the IEP meeting table. I'm a girl from the 80s. I was raised on Sesame Street, where every episode was brought to us by a particular letter. So, the IEP meeting in this example is being brought to us by the letter A.

Let's think about A, which is the A in FAPE. We know that FAPE means, you know, F-A-P-E means a free and appropriate public education. That's what schools deliver to children with disabilities and their families.

In FAPE, the A stands for appropriate. It's what the law says. It was discussed in two U.S. Supreme Court cases about whether it's a school's duty to maximize a child's benefits.

They kind of wrestled with that in the two Supreme Court cases, and they came to an appropriate conclusion. In the most recent case, *Andrew F.*, it's about ensuring that we've calculated an IEP. We've developed one together that's reasonably planned in order to ensure the child makes progress on their goals. So that's kind of the basic legal definition that's appropriate.

And then think about funding: as a former administrator, I would argue there's definitely not enough. I bet parents would agree with me, for special education.

Now, A for awesome. Awesome is what all parents want for their children, right? My child doesn't have a disability; however, I wanted, you know, the best for him. Every parent wants the best for their children. And then this all kinds of rides on a currency of advocacy, in which we all bring our different perspectives to the table.

So this is all happening, and we're working together, and this is where conflict can come in, because, as a parent, if I want the best and a school has limited funding, we just have to work through all of those issues together. That's just one example.

I wanted to share just a little bit about; from a book I read called *Staying With Conflict* by Bernard Mayer. In this book, he talks about different types of conflict. There's latent conflict. Conflict like, ugh, what am I going to make for dinner? I don't think I thought of anything, right? It comes, and it goes.

There are 6 different types of conflict, and he gets to the 6th type, which is enduring conflict, and he describes enduring conflict as deeply rooted, based in our identities and our values and the structures of our day when school starts, all of those things, right. The enduring conflict is really complex.

It can be rooted in distrust, and it involves fundamental issues of power. When I was thinking about that, I'm like, oh my goodness and the example he gave was actually an IEP meeting, even though the book is not even about special education.

I thought, okay, as a professional who helps families with the conflict in special education, this just really made a lot of sense to me because, you know, these meetings can feel like enduring conflict. We're coming back to some of the same issues over and over. Not every disagreement that we have will be permanently resolved, right?

We need to revisit issues that we may have already discussed in previous meetings. Through all this, we know that conflicts are still possible, or that progress is still possible, even when we're having conflict, and we also know that the way we engage affects our trust and future problem-solving.

So, this just really was an aha moment for me, especially as an administrator and a person who works with administrators. We need to set up ways that we can just engage in this enduring conflict. Right? How can we keep showing up? How can we keep doing the work, even when there are disagreements? Right? So, think of it, and just know that we're just trying to set the stage, for this is tough.

It's tough for families, it's tough for the systems, everybody, and that's why it's really important that we know how to show up in the space, and to speak well, and to treat each other fairly, all of those kinds of things here.

So, you know, the family believes the child needs more intensive reading instruction. Here's an example. And the school believes its current intervention needs more time.

Collaborative Advocacy does not make the disagreement disappear. It really helps the team to clarify the concern, examine the data, identify shared goals, and determine what could happen next.

Collaborative Advocacy, Crystal, maybe you can kind of talk about what it doesn't mean.

Crystal Sanford: Yes, so Collaborative Advocacy does not mean that we're agreeing with every recommendation. And I know we want to make that be clear that as we're saying, this is an approach that is, you know, you're leaning in, you are coming with an open mind giving away your rights, or you're going to settle, uh, you may or may not agree with recommendations, and that's fine. That is fair, and that is your right.

It also does not mean that we're avoiding the difficult questions. Again, I know that for some of us, we're just conflict avoidant personalities, and so it is not a comfortable space, but we're going to learn how to present ourselves and present our information and bring this open mind even in the midst of these difficult questions and maybe learning how to ask those questions in a way that is not as combative or as confrontational as well.

Collaborative Advocacy does not mean prioritizing harmony over your child's needs. And I'll never forget a parent I worked with many years ago who, after a consultation with me, said, "You know what, Crystal, I should have said something a long time ago."

Now we're at a point where, you know, I'm looking for an advocate; I'm trying to get help, but I just didn't want to say anything because I didn't want to hurt anybody's feelings. I know the teachers, so for the sake of harmony, she was not advocating for her child, and she regretted that, and we were able to move forward from that point on. But again, harmony, if it is not going to be supportive for your child and their needs, should not necessarily be the priority.

Collaborative Advocacy does not mean giving up procedural safeguards or dispute resolution options. You always have those as your options: your procedural safeguards. You can agree to disagree; you can agree to partially sign your IEP. There is no pressure or requirement for you to sign in totality, and that's what we're going to say next.

Collaborative Advocacy does not mean accepting a decision before you understand it. I know that... I was just talking to a parent today who's going to have a triennial assessment coming up, and I said, you know, ask for copies of your assessment documents to be sent to you ahead of time, so that you have time to read and process. And it's not the 1st time you're seeing this information in the middle of the IEP meeting. But if you find yourself in that space, you don't have to accept the decisions. You can say Thank you, I received the information, and I will get back to you after having proper time to review. And that's fine, that's fair. That is collaborative: to be able to say that you want time, and that is an opportunity for you to meaningfully participate in your child's education.

I hope you understand what Collaborative Advocacy does not mean, because we want to support you and help you to be well-rounded in this approach.

What Collaborative Advocacy does mean is...Being clear, prepared, curious, and persistent. And I love this. Preparing your questions ahead of time, especially if you have information given to you ahead of time. Being curious, come in with your questions, and we're going to give examples later.

You know, I read this in the IEP report or the psychological assessment. I'm curious about what brought you to that decision, versus you lying about my kid. I mean, there are many ways, just like Angie said, that you can say things and get a point across. There are ways to get it across in a collaborative way.

Collaborative Advocacy also means protecting rights while protecting participation. We really want to give everyone adequate space to be able to engage and to participate at the IEP table, and your rights should be protected throughout that process.

Collaborative Advocacy also means seeking to understand before assuming intent.

I know there are situations where it appears that, you know, people may not have your best interests or your child's best interests at heart, but we encourage you, through this lens of Collaborative Advocacy, to come in assuming that everyone is doing the best they can with what they have.

Can you take the perspective of, you know, the teacher who may have their own child with an IEP who is stressed about their own child as well as trying to teach a classroom full of children, or the administrator who would do more if the district would give him or her more funding? So, assuming the intent is positive until you have evidence of otherwise, really coming in to seek to understand.

Then Collaborative Advocacy also means looking for progress without pretending disagreement does not exist. Not being afraid to discuss what your expectations are, looking for those, you know, places of agreement; maybe there's 10 things you don't agree on, but maybe there's three that you do, and that's a point of agreement that you can discuss and use as a launching pad, hopefully to be able to see agreement in other spaces. Not again, not pretending that the other disagreements don't exist, but at least we have been able to, you know, find common ground on these points that give me confidence and hope that we'll be able to find agreement eventually moving forward on these other areas. Hopefully, that is what you can keep in mind throughout Collaborative Advocacy.

Angie Balsley: Fantastic. So, just some examples here of Collaborative Advocacy actions. Before your child's IEP meeting, you can identify their strengths and your top couple of concerns and something that you hope to achieve in the meeting, and utilize that worksheet that Crystal mentioned that she's offering you for free from her website. That's a great way to prepare before the meeting.

Then during the meeting, ask your questions, connect your thoughts with your child's needs or the proposals. If you're hearing a therapist say, I'm considering doing this way of therapy, and then connect with them, maybe tie that back to your child's needs. Confirm that, you know, people are understanding what's being said during the meeting. And if

you're given an answer and you still don't understand it, ask again, right? When there's disagreement in a meeting, it's a good time to slow down to identify the concern by naming it. You can ask for reasoning. Tell me more about that. Explain the data behind the decision that you're proposing here. And as Crystal mentioned, identifying those areas of agreement is a great way to keep a team moving forward.

Then after the IEP meeting, as a Collaborative Advocate, you can review the written documentation that you get. You can summarize any unresolved questions and confirm the next steps, such as, okay, I realize we didn't get through the whole IEP meeting today. I understand that we're going to reconvene or meet again at a later time. When is that? Can we go ahead and get that on the calendar today, right? Those are things that you can do after a meeting as well.

So, digging a little deeper into Collaborative Advocacy, we're going to look at centering on the child, working together, and protecting the process. It's kind of where we're headed next. So, first, thinking about centering on the child, we want to make sure that we're being child-centered. That we're having dignity and we're empowering our families. So, Crystal, could you kind of dive into child-centered processes, focusing conversations on the child?

Crystal Sanford: Yes, I love this. The idea of being a student of your child is a great first step. And I will say, as a first-time parent, my husband taught me a lot about this as I was, you know, scrambling around the house trying to do all the things and create all these teachable moments for my little, you know, toddler; he would just spend so much time sitting on the floor with her and just playing and observing. And it was irritating, but fascinating. And I learned from him the idea of studying her and understanding what motivates her. What frustrates her? What are strengths? What matters? And... and that was really powerful for us to learn early on, and I still do that as much as I can today. And so we encourage you to be a student of your child and, uh, share the information that you know and have with your IEP team.

For example, if your child is having some issues at school around, you know, behavior, you might share that a tool at home that works is giving my child a one-minute timer before we remove an activity.

Because that really works for them. Or giving them two choices. Or, you know, my child understands directions better when he can see an example and not just hear auditorily. And so as you've studied your child and know those things about them, definitely share that information to the team helping the IEP to become more and more child-centered and specific for your child. Help the team hear your child's voice.

It is all about your child, and that becomes even more apparent as your child moves into the transition space, where there has to be an individualized transition plan where the team has to interview your child and bring in that input and all the things and make goals that are transition-focused. But that's something that should happen throughout, I believe, a child's educational career with their IEP. It could be that the child, you know, puts together a portfolio. It could be that as they're older, they could attend the meeting or they could show up to a meeting and just share their personal information and their strengths as they get

older. For a child who is not verbally communicative, maybe there are picture icons or something that they put together, or a video.

Anyway, the team can hear the child's voice and humanize the IEP; that's super powerful. Also, ask how the proposals reflect your child's unique strengths and needs. You have an IEP goal that's recommended, and so you can ask the OT, for example, how does this, uh, you know, typing goal aligns with my child's unique needs and strengths?

It's a fair question to ask. Again, we're honing it not just on the kind of goal we always write for kids at this age, but on personalizing it to, well, how is this going to work in real time for my child, knowing what you know about their strengths and needs? And that is a part of the IEP process, and if it's helpful, sharing a brief video.

For some students, that works for them. Maybe it's a video of you reading with the child at home. Maybe it's a child who isn't really communicative at school but really opens up and talks more with their family. Maybe a short video of that and what that looks like or a short video of you using strategies with your kid and seeing that work or a therapist who comes to the home. Those little windows of insight into what the child can do in a variety of contexts can be super, super powerful for teens.

It also gives them an example of what is possible, especially if you're seeing a team that is maybe limiting or not seeing what you're seeing in the home or maybe limiting their expectation. Being able to see that in real time can just really open their eyes. So these are some examples that we encourage.

First, keeping the IEP child-centered.

Angie Balsley: Oh, Crystal, I love these examples that you shared. I always felt it was very, very important to have the child's perspective when we discuss accommodations as well. Because as adults, we could all sit around the table and imagine what we think that the child needs, making sure that we incorporate the child's interests and preference and strengths into our accommodations discussion. It's super important.

Crystal Sanford: Definitely.

Angie Balsley: The next area of Collaborative Advocacy that we're going to talk about is dignity, treating everyone around the IEP table with respect.

Protecting your child's dignity is very important. And for that, it means helping team members remember they're discussing a whole person, not just the needs, behaviors, or deficits observed at school.

Bringing your child's preferences forward, their feelings, their strengths, their hopes into the conversation, that helps to protect their dignity. You might say, "My daughter is so proud of how independent she's become, or "My son wants to make friends, but he's not sure how to join a group. Those are ways that we can bring our child into the conversation.

Also, with sensitive topics, those should be discussed carefully, especially when your child is present. It is appropriate to say, can we talk about this in a way that protects his dignity, or request that an adult conversation happen privately. Once, I met with a parent, and we were having a conversation when her daughter came home and was in the background.

Honestly, I just felt a little uncomfortable with the way the parent was describing all of the kinds of conflict that was happening at school, and she was talking about it in front of her daughter. So, we really want to try to keep our children out of adult conflict and just have those sensitive conversations in a different way. It also... sensitive conversations about maybe our child's medical needs. Those are really important that we are careful with those conversations as well.

We can protect dignity by sharing your family's culture, values, and experiences that matter to you and your family. You might explain that, in our family, independence looks like this, or that the communication style that's important in your culture. When I worked in Northern Indiana, I worked with a lot of Amish families, and so what I was trained on as outcomes, post-secondary outcomes for individuals with disabilities was different than what they wanted, in their family, so I needed to understand what their family cultures and values looked like.

Also, having a meaningful voice in the decisions is a way that we can protect dignity. Pay attention to who's speaking, who's being heard, and how people respond. If the tone or the language feels disrespectful, you can pause and say, I'd like us to reframe that in a more strength-based way. Hopefully you're feeling empowered by some of these suggestions we're giving you. And speak up if something feels disrespectful, right? You want to say, you know, to make sure the conversation feels good to you. And if it's not, then to point that out. And then finally, you can return to what everyone values about the child by saying, you know, she's creative, determined, deeply caring, and just affirm the commitments that we have to that child, and that we're all here to help her succeed.

Then, next, looking at empowerment. Crystal, would you like to take this principle of Collaborative Advocacy and talk more about empowerment?

Crystal Sanford: Yes, I'd love to. So, Empowerment in this process can start with understanding your rights and your options. Empowerment means having the information and tools you need to participate confidently, without feeling as though you have to know everything, because nobody does. But if you're unsure of your rights, ask the team to briefly review those procedural safeguards. It is their requirement, at least here in California, that they share those rights with you at least once every IEP year. And you can pause the IEP meeting and ask when they say, oh, did you get your parent rights? You can say, yes, can you explain those to me? That's not going to derail your IEP meeting, and you're doing nothing wrong by asking that, but I think it is great, and I encourage parents to hear their interpretation. It could take 7 to 10 minutes, tops, out of your meeting, but it's also good for everybody else on the IEP team to hear what your rights are as a parent of a child with an IEP and what your options are. And so, that empowerment starts by understanding yourself, what your rights and your options are.

Preparing a short parent input statement really is empowering. This is something you could do even in the summer, so you have it ready for the beginning of the school year, or even right now, when you're just getting started. That input statement can go right in that space in the IEP where they say parent concerns or parent questions. Sometimes we skip over that sometimes because it's just in the middle of meeting. We don't even know what to say there. So that's why we encourage you to think about it ahead of time before that IEP

meeting. What are your child's strengths? You know, clearly sharing maybe one or 2 priorities you have for the year.

Maybe a couple of strategies that work well for your child and how you would like to communicate with them, by email or phone. For example, Jordan, you love science. Jordan wants to become a DJ when they get older.

Jordan really struggles with environments that are too auditory and benefits greatly from visual models and resources. And when you are interacting with me during the school year, please do so by email at this email address.

That's a simple parent input statement, but very empowering for you to be able to get your voice, your vision statement for your child for the year, into that document, and then making all of the other decisions revolve around it.

Empowerment, bringing more than one possible solution to your concerns while remaining open to other ideas. This can be hard sometimes, especially if you have a private therapist or someone who's saying your child needs this and that.

This is what's going to help them make the most progress. And then you come into the school and say, you know, I want this therapy, and I'm not taking no for an answer; that is going to slow down the process of navigating and advocating if we're only stuck on one option. But it's a requirement. When you have to file a complaint, if you ever do, you have to come prepared with multiple options you're comfortable with to resolve the disagreement. So, we encourage you to think with that in mind. Yes, this is the point of concern.

Here are two or three ways that we would be comfortable settling this disagreement. And then having a discussion, an active discussion around those with the IEP team; maybe you're several on one, maybe someone comes up with one that's very close, and then you're open to moving forward that way.

Lastly, if your state allows audio recording of your IEP meeting, ask in advance to audio-record. That is empowering so that you're not having to absorb all the information in real time. You can sit and listen to it afterward, especially if you're a more auditory learner like me. And then, you can share it with a significant other or spouse, whoever couldn't attend, or an advocate, or whoever later, so that you can get into the information and get it a little more clearly and then take your notes and get your questions prepared. So, just a few practical ways to empower yourself in this Collaborative Advocacy process.

Angie Balsley: Thanks for sharing all those, Crystal. This, when I was a special ed director, was super important to me to empower parents to participate in the meeting. And you had mentioned about understanding rights and options, and definitely that could be explained in an IEP meeting.

I will also say that I would love it if a parent, you know, emailed me or called me and just said, hey, Angie, can I come and meet with you outside of the IEP meeting? I just really want to understand, you know, my rights, how this works. I always love those conversations and would make time for parents.

So, if you don't want to take time out of your IEP meeting, you can also meet outside of that meeting just to understand your rights. As a director, I wouldn't want to make any decisions about your child specifically outside of a meeting. I want to do that in a meeting. But helping parents understand their rights was really important to me as a director. So make sure that you know that and you take advantage of those opportunities.

Now we're going to talk about working together as principles of Collaborative Advocacy. We're going to speak about collaboration, relationship building, and professionalism as well. So, let's start with collaboration.

We want to make sure that we... You share your questions and your priorities, and you can do this even before the meeting. You might say, you know, here are some questions I'm going to ask, some things I'd like to address. That's really helpful from the school side for us to know those things. We know that my daughter needs more help during transitions. Could we think through ways to provide her with that? Right? Those are great ways for you to help invite some of that problem solving together. Right? Maybe there's a concern that arises and you might say, instead of saying, you know, she must have a one-on-one aid, you could say she needs, you know, more support in math class. What could we do to look at that? That's a way to be collaborative.

Also, building on ideas by saying things like, I like that suggestion. Could we also add a check-in at the beginning of the day? And then remember that silence in a meeting can be productive. It's okay to say, I need a moment to think about that. Or could you explain that in another way? Use your voice; speak up during those times. And those are collaborative things. Using those pauses when needed. Maybe you need a break to think about something, or you need some time to process. As Crystal said, she likes to think about things that are suggested.

Also, if you disagree, name it respectfully. You could say, I think we understand the data differently. Could we look at it together, right? Just, you know, without being confrontational or contentious. That's kind of what we're getting at. The collaboration will run much more smoothly. Then, finally, you know, clarifying the areas of agreement and identifying the next steps before the meeting ends.

I've had the opportunity to engage with families in the mediation process, and it's a really valuable process. If you ever get to the point where your IEP meeting isn't as productive as you need it to be, I remember that at the end of the meeting we had a whole list of things we agreed on, and we were ready to implement the next day for the child.

There were two areas that we didn't agree to, and we named them and we just agreed that we needed more time to think about some collaborative solutions for those two areas. Helping to name those agreements can really aid in the collaboration. That's relationship building.

Crystal Sanford: And for the sake of time, Angie, I want to just do a time check, understanding we have about 7 minutes left.

Angie Balsley: Yep.

Crystal Sanford: Before we move on to our Q&A time. So, I just wanted to put that out there.

Angie Balsley: Love that. Thanks, Crystal.

Crystal Sanford: Relationship building- this is a relationship, an ongoing one that you will likely have with your team, your school, for many years, depending on your child. So let's think about connecting with your child's team before there are concerns.

Before there is this long list or pattern of situations, maybe it is a quick check in, you know, with your teacher, the child's teacher, you know, Liana is excited about your class. Please let me know.

What's working well, and is there any way I can support her at home? I'm just putting that out there ahead of time, but those feelers out there can be very helpful. It can help a teacher who may already be, you know, on edge, worried, or concerned feel a little more comfortable and understand that, with you, they're going to have a more collaborative interaction. Include a trusted person when helpful. If you are maybe unsure, or if your knowledge or your voice, uh, you want to make sure that stays central while you are engaging with an advocate, a friend, or a trusted support person.

Always make sure that person is there to amplify your voice, not to take it. Communicating what supports helps you participate fully.

Maybe it is that, you know, taking notes, asking questions, letting your support person know that, you know, I want to participate, but I'm going to look to you to maybe enhance the things that if I feel stuck during that moment and during that meeting and that's great so that you guys have that set up ahead of time and they understand what it's going to take to help you participate, you know, fully.

Asking questions to understand others' perspectives, even when you disagree. Instead of just taking it at face value, it could be a question of, you know, helping me understand where you're seeing this at school, you know, because at home it looks different. And again, if you've done, like you said, maybe sharing a video of what it looks like at home.

You could say, now, you know, Mr. and Mrs. So-and-so, this is what we see at home. Tell me what story time would look like at school, and what the differences would be there? And being able to understand that. Responding with empathy and inviting others to do the same. And I know, as a parent advocate, I have done this. Can we understand, IEP team, that the parent has had some difficult conversations and interactions with IEP teams before you? And so there is a bit of trust-building that needs to happen here so that we can all move forward. Engaging with that empathy is very powerful. Keeping the conversations focused on possible solutions. And again, looking at what is working as a springboard to, okay, maybe we can use some of these things to help us make progress in this other area.

Lastly, no, almost lastly, following up with a summary of the key points and next steps. That is very important after an IEP meeting. It is my understanding, dot, dot, dot. And then requesting clarification when needed and working to quickly repair misunderstandings, not avoiding them but working to understand.

Angie Balsley: Absolutely. And we could have spent a whole hour building relationships. This is just a super important part of the process. We're going to walk through professionalism more quickly, so we have time for questions here. So regarding professionalism, we've talked about coming prepared, having your information organized for the meeting, making sure that you're communicating honestly about your child's concerns, that you're not being conflict-avoidant, that you're being clear about the concerns that you have, and pausing when needed to maintain your composure during difficult moments. It's perfectly acceptable to ask for a break in the IEP meeting, and to maybe go to the restroom and kind of pull yourself together, or if you're a person who's a smoker, maybe you could go outside for a cigarette break. Like, it's perfectly okay to ask for that break during the meeting. Listening actively, making sure you're paying attention, not interrupting other people, right? All of those things.

Using respectful, neutral language, even when you disagree. Being mindful of your tone, your facial expression, your body language. These are all things that we can all do in the meeting. And address disagreements directly, respectfully, and with a focus on your student. So then, let's think about protecting the process here, and in doing that, we're going to look at things that include integrity, competence, and confidentiality. So, integrity, Crystal, could you speak briefly about integrity?

Crystal Sanford: Yes, integrity means being honest and transparent, focusing on what will help your child, and sharing information that will help the school understand and support your child, while considering what is appropriate for that educational setting. You don't have to share everything happening in your family life with the school, but definitely share things relevant to their educational environment that would help the team make appropriate decisions for your child; it is potentially good information to share.

Integrity also includes asking your support person to keep you informed when unforeseen circumstances arise. If you're working with a parent, a parent advocate, someone who is a support person, have clear communication with them, making sure that they are informing you if they may be late to a meeting, or if they're having some hardship where they can't respond to you in a timely manner. These are things to look for. And next week we're going to talk more about what to look for when you are looking to work with a parent support person. But one of these things is clear and open communication with them.

Working toward resolving concerns at the IEP table as promptly and effectively as possible. And I have talked with so many special education attorneys who have said the same thing, that litigation truly should be the last resort and working through these conversations.

Using Collaborative Advocacy processes can truly help us reach this goal at the IEP table instead.

Angie Balsley: Sorry about that, Crystal. There you go. Yeah.

Crystal Sanford: And just lastly, again, we'll talk more about this next week, but choosing a support person who can be transparent and objective, free from conflicts of interest involving the district. You may not want to choose someone who is a former person who worked in the same district as yours. You may or may not, because there could be some potential conflict there depending on who might be on the IEP team at any given time.

These are things you can ask for and ask about as you are choosing someone to support you in that IEP process.

Angie Balsley: Absolutely. So, we're going to move into competence here. And again, quickly, out of time's sake here, asking that the team explain in clear, understandable language, looking for that connection between the needs and goals and supports.

Asking why a particular recommendation is being made and requesting specific examples. These are all things that you can do in an IEP meeting. Ask questions until you understand the answers and their implications for your child.

Prepare your most important questions and concerns, then work collaboratively with each team member. These are things we've kind of talked about throughout the day. So then confidentiality here. Crystal, I'm going to just click through the slides, and you can cover the main points of confidentiality.

Crystal Sanford: Okay.

Yeah, I was going to say that exactly. So, confidentiality, we actually have talked about as well today, you know, again, asking for that sensitive information to be discussed privately when your child is present, or that the information be shared when the child is not present, instead of completing a release of information form. If you are working with a parent, advocate, or support person, they have the right to legally interact with your team on your child's behalf. Share your child's personality and identifying information only with the people who need it. Really encourage teams to avoid bringing up other children or conversations about them during your IEP meeting. Also, use CARE when you share personal information. Maybe there are ways a portal could be provided, or a Google Drive where you could upload information, instead of directly emailing it to teams, which can also support your confidentiality.

Angie Balsley: Then community connections, just making sure that you stay on top of all the things that can be supportive of your child's experience, especially when you get to transition planning and your child's post-secondary goals and identifying, you know, folks in the community that can help support your child and you as your child grows. So really, we kind of broke down here into, you know, collaborative advocacy. We know that it builds trust, strengthens relationships, protects parents' rights, keeps the focus on your child, and reduces conflict. We just have a couple of things to share while you've got this. The slides have been shared with you, and these are all outlined in CADRE's Collaborative Advocacy Principles here.

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