

Learn How to Be a Proactive Advocate for Your Child

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Dr. Ann Glang: It is very, very difficult to be an effective advocate for your child, and yet we know that when parents are effective advocates their children benefit. We know that when parents and schools work together kids have better outcomes, lots of research on that. So it's important to be a good advocate and there's a couple of things that are pretty simple to do that can really go a long way towards making things go better. Again, I want to stress that these things have to be done proactively. That is don't do it when the emergency has happened, when the crisis has happened at that point I mean it's still going to help you but it's kind of too late. If however, you can up front do a couple of things your child's going to be a lot better.

So I think as a parent when you're advocating for your child it's important to do a couple of things. One is it's important to remember that you and your child's school team really have the same goals in mind that you're moving in the same direction and if you can do that together that in the end everybody wants the child to be successful to do well, to eventually graduate and go onto a productive adult life. If we can remember that and kind of start there, that's good. Second thing is to take the perspective of the school and remember that often times a teacher has many, many, many, many, demands on his or her time. Lots of kids, speaking different languages, with different disabilities in their classroom and so we just have to cut them a little slack because they can't be perfect.

Then I think very, very important to use effective communication skills and by that I mean simple things like listening and like using "I" statements and like making eye contact, like not walking into a meeting and saying, "My kid needs this and *you* are gonna provide it" and there are a lot of parents who take that approach and sometimes the bully approach works, so they get reinforced but in the end you know the staff in the school are you know backing up when the mom comes in with that bull dog approach and says they're saying, you know, "look out" we, you know, "here we go" and that doesn't benefit your child because that resentment carries forward to the child. I mean we're only human so if you can have instead an approach where you come and you say I understand the constraints of your job, you've got a lot of kids, there's a lot going on, I also know that my child has had a very significant brain injury and has some significant problems and I need to work with you so that we can make sure she gets what she needs.

If that's the approach that's met with much that's usually met with a much better response than the other -- and I have had families, because we've done some training around this -- and I have had families say, "Oh my gosh that mom who comes in like a bull dog that's me, that's what I do. I come in, I rant and rave, I walk in with this sack of you know what on my back and I dump it on the table and that's what I do to these people." You know no wonder they're running when they come in, and so when they learn you know gosh some simple things, like make eye contact and don't walk in like this with your arms crossed and being angry you know

just sitting back and you know being kind of open and willing to collaborate, that that goes a lot farther and in the end that's what gets -- when you have a nice relationship with your child's school -- that's what gets your child what you want for them. You have to kind of put some of that anger and some of that resentment and guilt whatever you're carrying in and you know we all have that and especially when our child has been injured and we've got a lot of feelings that we need to kind of put aside.