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Preparing for a meeting

A guide for parents of children with Special Educational Needs

As a parent of a child with special education needs you may be asked to attend a variety of meetings with professionals at your child's early years setting or school. These meetings give you the opportunity to put your thoughts and views forward.

Before the meeting

If the date or time is not convenient, ask for it to be changed. Ensure you are aware of where the meeting is being held. If you are not sure what the meeting is about, ask the person holding the meeting. Ask who will be attending the meeting. If there is someone you feel should be invited to the meeting who has not been, then request that this is done.

If you need help because of a sensory impairment or disability let the person arranging the meeting know before you go. If you require an interpreter because English is your second language you can ask for an interpreter to help you understand. It may take some time to organise this so there may be a delay in holding the meeting.

Preparing for the meeting

Read through any reports that are sent to you before the meeting. If this meeting is an Annual Review of your child's EHC Plan then reports should be given to you two weeks prior to the meeting. Make notes if there are parts you do not understand or would like to be clarified. It would be better to ask the early years setting or school prior to the meeting for clarification, but if they are unable to help, raise the points at the meeting.

Be clear about what you want to discuss at the meeting and the outcome you would like. It is best to have an idea of your limits, what is the most you want and what is the least you will accept. Make a short list or notes of what you want to say, as these will help you to remember. You may need to raise past issues but the focus should be on the future.

If possible, ask your child for their views. What do they like and dislike about school? Do they have any worries? Is there anything they would like you to say at the meeting? This gives your child an opportunity for their views to be taken into consideration.

You may wish to take your partner, family member or a friend with you for support. The person may be able to take some notes for you at the meeting that will help you to remember important information. If you feel the meeting may be difficult and would like support Buckinghamshire SENDIAS Service may have a volunteer or member of staff who could attend with you. We usually need at least 2 weeks' notice of any meetings.

Take your diary to the meeting just in case future meetings need to be organised.

At the meeting

It is important to ensure that you are on time and are prepared.

If there are people at the meeting you have not met before ask the Chair of the meeting to introduce them so you know who they are.

If you are asked to speak first it is quite acceptable to ask to speak after others so you can listen to their contributions and then make your comments.

If during the meeting people use complicated terms or jargon that you do not understand ask them to explain. They are probably used to using these phrases and abbreviations in their day-to-day work. Keep asking, until whatever is unclear has been explained in a way that makes sense to you.

If you are given any new reports to read at the meeting, ask for time to read them and if you have any queries then raise them. If you feel you need more time ask for the meeting to be put back to another day to give you time to consider the new information.

If you disagree with a professional at the meeting about their views then do not be afraid to speak up. You know your child in a way that they do not and if you think something they are suggesting will not work then tell them why and perhaps make another suggestion. If you do not understand how a professional has come to a conclusion about your child ask as many questions as you like to gain an understanding.

Try to keep calm and polite at the meeting rather than angry. Getting across a different point of view will be easier if you are calm. If at any time you feel that you need a break from the meeting because you are feeling overwhelmed or upset then you should say so. If necessary you may want to ask for another meeting at another time.

At the end of the meeting ask the Chair of the meeting to clarify what has been agreed and what should happen next and when. If a further meeting is to be arranged it is probably better for this to be done at the meeting when everyone is available.

After the meeting

You may feel that you would like to confirm what was agreed in writing to ensure that there has been no misunderstanding. It is important to keep all the important information about your child, including reports and correspondence. If you speak to someone on the phone keep a record of what was discussed with the date and actions to be taken by whom.

Non-Confrontational questioning

Asking questions in meetings about your child can be difficult, especially when nervous, angry or upset. Some meetings may be an emotional experience. Thinking about how to phrase questions ahead of time can make a difference, keep the meeting positive and set the stage for a positive relationship.

Positive opening questions are:

- Tell me how well my child is doing in your class...
- What is my child good at?
- What are my child's positive points...?
- What do you /others like about my child?

Questions that show a willingness to work together:

- How can we help my child with improving on _____ together?
- How can we _____?
- What are your thoughts on _____?
- It has been suggested that _____ can be helpful
- Can we try _____?
- How can I support you in supporting my child?
- I have found _____ particularly helpful and I wanted to share this in case it's helpful for you too.
- My child thinks _____ may help, would it be worth a try? (your child's view is very important, if they can vocalise what might help this is very useful)

Questions when you are seeking clarification or are unsure about what has been said:

- What do you mean when you say _____?
- How does _____ relate to my child?
- I am not sure what you mean, please could you put that another way for me?
- Let me see if I understand you; do you mean _____ or _____?
- I am not sure how _____ relates to our problem/discussion/issue please can you explain this to me?
- Could you give me an example of what you mean / how that would look/ how that will work?
- Would _____ be a good example of that?

If things aren't moving in the direction you wanted you could try:

- Have you considered _____ (you can give an idea)
- My understanding is _____ (especially helpful if you are certain of a fact and want to put this forward in a way that won't create ill feeling)
- I have heard that _____ can be helpful, could we try that?
- If you can't do _____, what could you do instead?