

Honey, Not Vinegar!

AAC Moms Share Their Advocacy Tips & Tricks!

By: Pam Harris, Kim Daswick, Sherri Patterson, & Anna Foster

With support from: Caroline Musselwhite

INTRODUCTION

What's the difference between a parent who's viewed as a pain and one who's viewed as an advocate? How can a parent yield real change for their student . . . without alienating the team? That's exactly what this group of amazing moms will share! This lecture / panel discussion will share successful strategies, and describe pitfalls to avoid. This session is for anyone who wants to be more effective in advocating for change for students with significant disabilities, including other parents, and teachers and therapists who want to support parents in advocating for 'the right stuff' for their children!

WHO'S SHARING?

This group of dynamic, dedicated moms represents a spectrum of the AAC community. The range includes:

- age (six to adult)
- mobility (ambulatory, manual wheelchairs, power chairs)
- communication devices (all students have high tech devices, from a number of different companies, set up in many different ways)
- classroom setup (from self-contained to resource to general education classroom to community)

1. ESTABLISH YOUR MINDSET

- Everyone wants to be appreciated for who they are and what they do
- Treat everyone with kindness
- Maximize people's strengths and minimize their weaknesses
- Be realistic with resources and prioritize needs
- Your child receives special education services, you and your family will lose privacy

2. BUILD A PERSONAL SUPPORT SYSTEM

- Don't isolate yourself - connect with others either online or face to face (ex: join a support group or an online listserv)
- Find a supportive AND skilled ally (ex: find another parent with an older child, who may have been through similar experiences or connect with Caroline, like we did!)
- Attend workshops, seminars and conferences . . . network!

3. BUILD YOUR PERSONAL SKILL SET

- Learn to actively listen (ex: reflect back what you are hearing)
- Learn to recognize a persuasive bias: stereotyping, bandwagon, scare tactics, testimonials (Students with autism use PECS not speech generating devices; All of the other parents agreed to opt out of the standardized testing; If you don't let Mrs. School Psychologist administer the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scales (SB5), Fifth Edition, we won't be able to provide little Billy with services; Dr. Feelrealgood recommends 15 minutes of speech therapy for students with Down Syndrome.)
- Learn how to be assertive (ex: take a class or spend time at the University of WWW learning how to present your position assertively)
- Learn to present your position without anger. (ex: practice in front of a mirror)
- Listen to your child's typically developing peers - they are true experts on age appropriate.

4. PREPARE FOR MEETINGS

- If possible, get to know the school staff on a personal level (ex: it's harder to get angry at someone when you know their mother has been ill or their dog just died)
- Never go into a meeting hungry or empty handed (ex: bring cookies, flowers, a bowl of potpourri - all add nice relaxing scents (aromatherapy!))
- Set goals - both short term and long term (ex: If you don't know where you are going - how are you going to get there?)
- Remember your objective is to influence thinking and motivate action. Increase your odds of success by proposing small changes and preparing for all potential arguments
- Have solutions ready - give team members ways to be successful in meeting your needs and goals

5. DURING THE MEETING

- Always start with something positive
- Sit strategically (ex: sit at the head of the table)
- Use specific examples to explain
- When you have something VERY important to say, lean in and speak in a quieter tone.
- Give choices, as people are always more receptive when it is their idea, not yours (ex: 'What do you think would be best for Rebecca . . . a larger desk, or perhaps a small table?')
- Carefully consider what the school is suggesting (ex: Is it in the best interest of the child or a solution to make it easier on staff?)

PITFALLS TO AVOID (VINEGAR)

Sometimes we make mistakes . . . here is a list of 'don'ts to consider such as . . .

- 1) Nothing was ever accomplished by hollering!
- 2) Never roll your eyes or 'make faces'
- 3) No name calling
- 4) After an issue has been brought to your attention jump on the phone and call everyone you know....WRONG...take a cool down period after "an issue is brought to your attention" before you talk to anyone about anything (learned this the hard way :)
- 5) Beware of thinking that everyone there has only your child's best interests at heart
- 6) Assume you are in for a fight and walk in swinging...WRONG...
"assumptions" has the word "ass" in it for a reason - making assumptions usually makes you into an "ass" Assume people are there to help - no one entered into the special education field to ruin childrens lives - assume that they are doing their best
- 7) It is not the pot stirring that is the problem - it is what you use to stir it that can become a problem ...