



By Angela Nelson, MS, BCBA  
Executive Director of Family and Clinical Services

## Parents of Special Needs Children Boosting Your Engagement In Your Child's Education

With countless demands already placed on parents of special needs children, what can be considered a realistic expectation for involvement in your child's education?

Being a regular volunteer in class...attending weekly meetings with the teacher...writing your own IEP goals? The CDC (2016) suggests that Parental Engagement, in part, is defined as parents being "committed to actively supporting their children's and adolescent's learning and development" and that is a shared responsibility with schools and other community organizations. What, then, does that mean for parents who want to actively participate in a meaningful way but that doesn't require yet another substantial layer of responsibility onto their very full plates?

The good news is that parental involvement often comes down to quality, not quantity. That's music to many parents' ears, especially working parents who cannot physically be at the school as much as they would like. In fact, we know physical location is not the only barrier to parental engagement. The Harvard Family Research Project (2012) found that there are several barriers to parental engagement: special education law is difficult to understand, the referral/assessment process is intimidating/discouraging, negative past IEP experiences, and cultural/language differences to name a few. Why then do so many parents overcome these barriers to engage in their child's education? Well, the Harvard Family Research Project also found that more parental engagement actually demystified the IEP experience, increased familial involvement in the IEP development, decreased

parental anxiety, increased confidence levels around working with educators and about their own abilities, increased student success, increased generalization of skills from school to home, and increased feelings of consistency as some benefits that topped the list.

Good stuff, right? Well let's get back to the quality over quantity part. Here are some ways that you can boost your engagement in your child's education in meaningful, yet manageable ways:

- Create a simple communication system which may include a binder with quick, objective sheets your child's teacher can fill out about the day/changes/behaviors/goals that YOU want updates on or a journal to quickly write down specific notes back and forth from home to school
- Use technology for efficient collaboration such as email, apps, or even text messaging (check with the teacher on the preferred method) if short, frequent meetings aren't an option
- Ask for resources such as parent-to-parent or community groups that specialize in topics such as new diagnosis and specific cultures that you can attend on your own time or in the evenings
- Ask to learn strategies being taught in the classroom so you can generalize them with your child to bridge the gap between school and home
- Join or even start a parent mentor partnership with the help of the school district (check out Georgia Department of Education for a great example)
- Ask the school for help on educating yourself on the IEP process parameters and special education law
- Ask to be involved in IEP goal writing early so you

Parental involvement often comes down to quality, not quantity.

can review/contribute and avoid surprises or disagreements later

- Provide helpful input and ask questions during IEP meetings
- Ask for translation and interpretation services if needed
- Approach your child's education from an open and collaborative stance while also being clear about your expectations and family goals

(Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education, 2010)

Overall, there are countless ways to engage in your child's education and commit to supporting their development, and something to fit everyone's time allotment and skill/language/comfort level.

You should not be afraid to ask how you can get involved. A question like that should brighten a teacher's day and put you on a positive path to supporting their child's success!

If you have any questions or need support, contact us at [support@rethinkbenefits.com](mailto:support@rethinkbenefits.com) or (877) 988-8871.

#### References:

*Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education. (2010). Parents' experiences with the IEP process. Considerations for improving practice. Eugene, OR: John Reiman, Laura Beck, Teresa Coppola, & Anita Engles.*

*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2016). Parent Engagement. Retrieved from [https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/parent\\_engagement.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/parent_engagement.htm)*

*Harvard Family Research Project. (2012). Family engagement and children with disabilities: A resource guide for parents and educators. Cambridge, MA: Jamie Ferrel.*