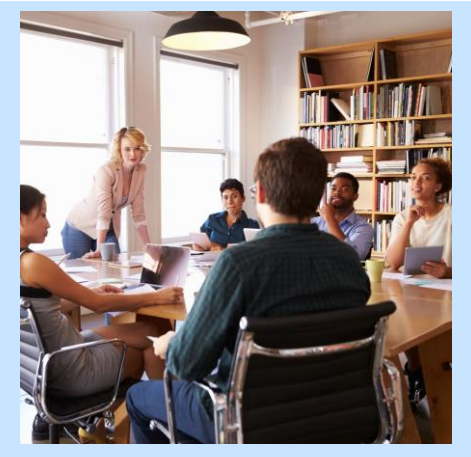

Communication Secrets to Manage Difficult Parent Situations

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Most of us would agree that we are living in challenging times, which can result in frustrations, which can erupt in contentiousness. What does that mean? Some of us humans get quarrelsome, argumentative, or downright combative. We speech-language pathologists (SLPs) are in a helping profession, and we rarely experience this type of behavior, but if we ever do, we need to be ready to respond appropriately and professionally.

Following are five hopefully helpful objectives I'd like to accomplish within this article. They're listed in no particular order.

1) How to avoid a confrontation, i.e., a power struggle. It's never good for the SLP, the parent/caregiver, and especially the child we are working with. Parent perceptions influence the child's perceptions.

2) How to prepare your mindset (your internal state; your place to come from) before and during a contentious situation.

3) How to observe and determine what the parent is really saying or what he/she really wants via verbal and non-verbal indicators.

4) How to respond professionally, remain cognitively aware and rational during the confrontation, and flexible in your response. We'll cover critical communication components: The words we use, our vocal characteristics, facial-expressions and body language. Like many children in our therapy, our intonation and facial body expressions can be easily misunderstood.

5) And, more positively, how to build an effective working relationship with parents where differences of opinion are okay when there's mutual admiration and support.

By way of disclosure, here's a little background about me. I am a speech-language pathologist and was in the schools for many years, had a private practice, and taught at a university for a while. Over the decades, I experienced a few negative parent comments (that were actually made to my face!), or parent confrontations. The few I was involved in, I didn't like. Personally, I'm more introverted; professionally, I've learned to be more extroverted. I like to have a sense of accomplishment, and I like to contribute to improving someone else's life. Like most SLPs I don't do what I do to receive huge accolades and

appreciation, although, probably like most, it's nice to hear when it comes my way. I want to work with kids; meetings and paperwork are not high on my list of desirable things to do. But, I know, they are necessary. And I have tried to systematize them as much as possible.

So, when someone in my immediate professional world says something disparaging, the words cut straight through me and set me back on my heels. In the past, I'm sure that I reacted emotionally, and thought, don't they know that I work hard for them? That I'm constantly trying to learn new ways to help them? That I care? Don't they know that I get up at 5:00 a.m., do all the family stuff I need to do, leave the house at 7:00 and drive like a maniac through heavy traffic for a half-hour to make it to school so I can do a little prep, talk to teachers, and knock out some paperwork?

I have many decades of experience so here is the core issue as I see it: The reality is, negative comments not just concerned or helpful comments said by parents, or teachers, or administrators, usually come from people we don't have a ***mutually working relationship with***. An effective working relationship is when *we accomplish things together.* Those individuals you do not have a working relationship with aren't aware of at least three important things about you (and this works both ways): They don't know your **heart** (how you truly desire to contribute to other's welfare), your **competency level**, or your **work ethic**. We'll deep dive into all of this; as to what it means, and what we can do about it.

The article is organized into Five Topic Sections:

1. Reputation, and Specific Communications to Others
2. Our Mindset
3. Non-Verbal Communications by the Parent and Yourself
4. Verbal Communications, and
5. The Process of Building Positive Professional Relationships

Section #1
Reputation, and Specific Communications to Others

I want to clarify and emphasize an important point right up front: *Your reputation precedes you.* Always keep this in mind. Shape your professional life around it.

It is important for teachers and administrators to know what we do. Why does this matter? Because you and I are part of the school team and we want to be viewed as such. I want the teachers and administrators to be aware of my heart, my competency, and my work ethic. This *translates into reputation.* It can also influence the type of and level of support you receive *during Eligibility and IEP meetings.* The onus, however, is on us to share that information, at appropriate times, with parents, teachers, and administrators, tactfully.

Following are a few suggestions I've done through the years. And, I have to say, I didn't just start off doing these things. They didn't come natural for me, but I saw the need and learned to do them over time. Also, this is primarily when we are all doing our jobs in-person, although it could be done online.

Here's the first suggestion: At the beginning of every school year, visit each teacher in his/her room for a few minutes, alone.

- If the person is a new teacher, or you are new, smile and introduce yourself, and find a commonality. For example, comment on specifics about the appearance of his/her room. "Oh, you have a word wall, very helpful for the kids. In speech and language we work on words, too," and share some things you do. Say something like, "I hope I have a student from your room…" Let them see you as part of the team, an approachable person, and someone who goes out of your way to meet them and get to know them. That gives you and the teacher a great start.

- If you already know the teacher, go into his/her classroom as well, and talk about something professional or even a personal situation you know about (their son or daughter is in the military, they have a new baby, or their grandchild, etc.). And say, "I hope we get to work together this year. Remember last year? Oh my gosh, we made such great progress with Jose…."

I know—all of this takes time. Typically, I didn't make my "rounds" all in one day; if I happened to pass Mrs. Browns room and she was alone, I went in. I tried to do my visits within the first week or two and had a check sheet to make sure I spoke with everyone. It opened doors of communication, referrals, discussions about our mutual kids, as well as familiarity, connections, and support and at meetings.

And the second suggestion. Okay, we zeroed-in individually, now let's zoom out to the group as a whole. Ask your principal for 10 to 15 minutes of time to speak at an early-in-the-year staff meeting *to ensure you all are on the same page*. You may want to have a handout for them to follow along as you talk. Human nature being what it is, if you just give them the printed handout, they may not read it.

After you introduce yourself, and express how happy you are to be there, etc., I recommend sharing at least three things.

1. The *types of children* you work with, with a couple example characteristics.

2. *The referral process:* Does it go through your school psychologist, or you, what form is used, etc. If you have an RTI process, or student team, or whatever the process you use, explain it.

3. *The qualification standards:* Just because a child is referred doesn't mean they qualify. Emphasize: There are federal, state, and district legal qualification standards and you must adhere to them. Assure them that you would see every child if you could, but that's not possible. Let them know you are fair and flexible within the criteria you have to adhere to.

Build your reputation. Let them see you care, you are competent, and you have a strong work ethic.

Thirdly, in addition to our reputation there's another topic that's not talked about very much. I've never really liked talking about it either. It involves the perception of an individual's *level of education*.

Many teachers have a bachelor's degree not a master's degree. There are parents that have a bachelors or less and some lack a high school diploma. Now, maybe it's because I do have an advanced degree, or maybe it's because my mother raised me right, or maybe I'm just naïve, but I've always seen people as people i.e., looked at their personality, their character, and their values. It is a fact, however, that some people judge others based on their education degree.

This human frailty came to light for me early on as a SLP. It was after an eligibility meeting and most had left, including the principal and the school psychologist, who had an arrogant side to him but he knew his stuff. So there was just the parent, the teacher, and me. The parent said in reference to the school psychologist, "He has his master's degree so he thinks he's hot stuff." I sheepishly thought, well, I've got my master's degree too…. Hmm. Thanks to the quick-thinking teacher, she saved the day and responded with a semi-joke. She said as she stood up (and I followed suit), "Well that's not all he's got!" We knew what she meant; we laughed and went our separate ways. A potentially uncomfortable situation was avoided.

In the same vein, later in my professional years, I started a seminar and products company, Speech Dynamics and read a helpful book called *BusinessThink*. In it, Marcum, Smith and Khalsa stated: "Arrogance consumes everything and everyone in its path. Ego has no pleasure other than superiority over others—their ideas, worth, position, and value. And that usurps anything meaningful."

Ego, above all, is most dangerous. *Your reputation is golden.* Again, your reputation precedes you. People talk. The janitors talk. Teachers talk. Parents, kids, they all talk. Maybe it's your first time meeting a parent. Maybe they know nothing about you, but usually, they know what they've *heard* about

you. Therefore, at all times, be professionally friendly and kind to all. Smile, acknowledge, and treat everyone with the same respect. Yes, be competent in what you do and project confidence but temper it with humility and appreciation for other's views as well.

And by the way, when I was in the schools, I ALWAYS made it a point to never talk about anyone—another teacher, a specialist, or a parent—unless it was positive. If another teacher started to talk about another teacher, I'd look at my watch, "Oh, I'm late for my ten o'clock," and quickly vacate.

Section #2
Mindset: Develop Your Pre-Confrontation Mindset

From here on, semantically I'm narrowing the field to parents, grandparents, guardians, and caregivers, not necessarily teachers and administrators, although much of the following applies to them, too. Also, for the parents, grandparents, etc., the words *parent* and *she/her* will be used, and when appropriate, I'll refer to the parent as *Marie*.

This section and the following two are directly related to dealing with comments from parents that *you do not have a working relationship with.* So, in response to my earlier question, don't they know I work hard for their child, I get up early so I can plan and do paperwork and do therapy to help their child? The answer is, no. NO. Parents that do not have a working relationship with you (unless much your stellar reputation preceded you) do not automatically care about those things about you; *they've* got their own list. From *their* perspective, they care about other things and hopefully one of those things is the child's welfare. This is where we can all meet in the middle; more on this later.

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Mindset, in this case, means *think about what you will do and say before a difficult situation occurs so it doesn't catch you blind-sided.* If you're like me my first reaction is to take it personally and either shut down or lash out. Neither of these options is constructive or leads to a good solution. Let's unpack this and add a few recommendations.

Know your vulnerabilities. Although some people seem to have pretty thick skin, for most of us, affronts and criticisms are hurtful and painful to hear or read. We can try to disconnect from our emotions, at the time and beyond, but it's difficult. On the other hand, I'm not sure that totally disconnecting emotionally is healthy. So, here's my here's my admonition: *Develop emotional awareness. Learn to temper your emotions with the cognitive needs of the situation.*

In other words, do not, as best as you can, take it personally. Don't internalize their comments but stay as cognitive as possible—remember, they don't know you, right? You don't have a working relationship with these individuals. They don't know your heart, your capabilities, and how hard you work to help them.

Therefore, right now, plan ahead to limit your emotions, and bring your cognitive self to the forefront. Stay cognitively focused. On what? We'll be discussing that in Sections 3 and 4. But for now, what does this mean in real-life application? It means, keep the parent's words in perspective, and observe and interpret the parent's verbal as well as non-verbal communications, and be aware and in control of your own non-verbal and verbal communications. That's a lot; it should keep your brain busy.

Emotional stress compromises our ability to communicate effectively. When we're emotionally stressed, we're more likely to misread others or send confusing or off-putting nonverbal signals. Keep in mind emotions are contagious. If you are visibly upset—as reflected in your facial expressions as well as arm and hand positions—it is likely to make others upset, making a bad situation worse. Take a moment to calm yourself; talk to yourself and do what you need to do: Observe and analyze the parent, listen to the parent, and note your own non-verbal signals and verbal communications.

Section #3
The Non-Verbal Communications of: A. The Parent, and B. Yourself

A. Non-Verbal Communications of the Parent

To veer away from the lure of emotions, think and use your powers of observation of verbal and non-verbal details that we SLPs are known for. We are excellent communication observers and analyzers. This section focuses on NON-verbal indicators.

The objective of this section is to enhance your abilities to recognize the emotions of others, the true feelings behind their words, and the non-verbal cues they are unintentionally sending.

Much of the following nonverbal information comes from four sources:

- An article by Riggio and Riggio (2012),
- A 2012 article by Wiseman, The Eyes Don't Have It,
- An online article by the University of Michigan News, 2015, on lie-detecting, and
- A 2008 book that I have, called, *What Every Body is Saying; An Ex-FBI Agent's Guide to Speed-Reading People,* by Joe Navarro.

Nonverbal communication involves a vast array of behaviors and that differs from verbal communication in several ways.

- Verbal communication is direct and involves the use of a single channel (spoken or written words), nonverbal communication is continuous and ongoing and involves many channels of communication, simultaneously.
- Verbal communication is intentional while nonverbal communication is spontaneous and much of it is not intentional, i.e., we're not consciously aware of our nonverbal behaviors, and
- One could argue that it is impossible to accurately convey emotions without using nonverbal cues (Riggio and Riggio, 2012).

The following information helps us read the parent's non-verbal indicators and signals before, during, and after a meeting.

Analyze nonverbal communication signals broadly. Don't read too much into a single gesture or nonverbal cue. Consider as many of the nonverbal signals as you can, from facial expressions and body language, as well as vocal characteristics and their words which we'll look at closely in Section 4.

In general, notice when either you, or the parent, walk into the meeting, does she appear confident, relaxed, and open? Or, shy and hesitant, uncomfortable but friendly, or downright upset, angry, defensive? Does she look at team members and smile, or look down? If in-person, does she seat herself up to the table or back from the table, and does she rest her hands on top the table, or no? Does she keep her purse on her lap? Does she cross her arms, basically hugging herself (which is considered to indicate self-southing)? These last three are definite indicators that she does not feel part of the group and is stressed for whatever reason.

Navarro mentions additional types of pacifying behaviors, such as repetitive rubbing the throat area, touching/stroking the face, the nose, and the cheeks, lip licking, and puffing out the cheeks and exhaling slowly. These types of behaviors are done in an effort to release calming endorphins into the brain to make ourselves feel better.

Continuing our exploration, prior to the meeting if the parent appears to be stressed, following are a few possible reasons:

- It's a new experience. She is uncomfortable with the situation and the great unknown as to what will happen, or
- She has a sense of not being a part of the group. She *feels* that lines and sides have been drawn and she's by herself, or
- She's fearful as to what will be said about her child, or
- Perhaps she anticipates the recommendations for her child and has a strong conviction one way or another.

If you see these indicators prior to the meeting, rather than just sitting and waiting, you might want to smile and offer her some water, talk about what a great child she has, talk about the weather or her colorful top she has on, and try and put her at ease. Your kindness briefly demonstrates who you are and is an indication of your heart. Also, you may avoid a problematic meeting.

Following are some especially telling Nonverbal Signals that usually involve emotional expressions. They are divided into four groups: 1. Facial Expressions, 2. Eye Gaze and Eye Movements, 3. Head Movements, and 4. Gestures.

1. Facial Expressions

Most notably, facial tension indicates stress: Scowling or frowning, a furrowed brow, pursed lips, and/or clenched teeth (note contracted masseter muscles).

2. Eye Gaze and Eye Movements

- Squinting: This is not a reference to light that's too high or too low. People squint when they do not like or agree with you.
- Darting eyes: Darting eyes means the person feels insecure.
- Direction of eye movements/glancing: Unlike what has been thought previously in the literature, Wiseman, et. al did a study and found that there is no research to indicate that the direction (left or right, up or down) a person looks reveals their honesty or not. Also, there is no research to indicate that because a person looks you in the eye as they speak means they are telling the truth, or not.
- On a positive note, raising eyebrows: Raising eyebrows is a quick way to draw attention to the face. It is a gesture of congeniality and an indication the person wants to agree and get along with you.

3. Head Movements

- Sideways glance: A sideways glance denotes uncertainty or the need for more information.
- Looking down their nose: If she lifts her head and looks down her nose at you, it usually means she feels superior.

4. Gestures

Tightly laced fingers, gripping, or hand wringing possibly indicating sweaty palms, can be interpreted to mean low confidence, high-stress, and concern.

In the 2015 Michigan study, they found that 40% of those who were lying gestured with both hands, as compared to 25% of those telling the truth. Also, scowling or grimacing of the whole face was present 30% of the time in those being deceptive and 10% of the time in those telling the truth.

You may wonder why I am mentioning this about a parent and their truthfulness. One of the most tumultuous meetings I was in (along with several other team members), was one where a parent was absolutely adamant about her child being in special services. She stood up, waved her arms, scowled, and yelled. The child was very bright, had great speech and language skills, and was doing well in class. I suspect he was just born into the wrong family. Turns out, the parent's motivation was that if her child was in special education, she received more government money. Fortunately, this type of despicable behavior is not pervasive, but it does happen.

Trust your instincts; don't dismiss your gut feelings. If you have a sense that something isn't adding up, you may be picking up on a mismatch between her verbal and non-verbal cues. Note inconsistencies; nonverbal communication reinforces what is being said.

Is the parent verbally conveying one thing and her body language indicating something else? For example: The parent says, "Yes, I agree to what you say," but she's slightly hunched over, both elbows are on the table, her hands are laced tightly and covering part of her face. Her words do not match the non-verbal signals she's giving. This is where heart-to-heart questions come into play. We don't want the parent to leave feeling like she was railroaded, or not listened to, or genuinely not in agreement with the plan. It is likely that either, she'll request another meeting because she went home and thought about it, or contacted her best friend and discussed it, or went on Facebook and bad-mouthed the school. Read her body language and deal with her concerns now.

Note the above types of behaviors before and during the meeting. As the parent becomes more at ease with the team, the process, and the decisions being made, you will not only hear a difference in what she says and how she says it, you will see a huge difference in her non-verbal indicators, e.g., relaxed hands on the table, open body posture, natural and positive head nodding, and smiles. Non-verbal indicators are reliable indicators of how a person really feels.

B. Your Non-Verbal Communications

What is communicated through your body language and nonverbal signals affects how others see you, how well they like and respect you, and whether they trust you or not.

We're all familiar with the phrase, "actions speak louder than words." Sometimes they do. Even the most well-chosen words can be undermined and usurped by incongruent non-verbal communications. Let's investigate what this means in real-world situations.

If verbal and nonverbal barbs are coming your way, keep your external observations bubbling to the surface of your brain, rather than focusing on your internal emotions. Your emotions will no doubt be reflected nonverbally. And you don't want to give that away.

Chances are your words indicate "I'm here for you and your child; I want the best for your child." Do your nonverbal signals match your words and listening level?

Monitor yourself. Project:

- Your head up in normal position,
- A relaxed, almost non-expressive sincere facial expression,
- Non-intensive parent eye contact,
- Either an open hands or hands steepling position (explained below),

- Torso leaned slightly forward toward parent, and

- If visible, angle your legs and feet toward parent.

Navarro devotes an entire section in his book on how Effective Hand Movements Enhance Our Credibility and Persuasiveness. He says, keep your hands visible and on the table. As you listen, either lightly fold your hands, or part/open them on the table (maybe 6 or 7 inches apart), indicating your openness. He also talks about steepling. Although I had seen the gesture before, I never knew that hand steepling had a label. Basically, steeping is when you spread your fingers on both hands and lightly touch the left and right corresponding thumbs and finger-tips. When you do this, it looks like a steeple. He says, "It is one of the most powerful displays of confidence we can possess." It projects I am confident in what I am saying. I'm not being arrogant, overbearing, stubborn, or angry, I'm patient and firmly confident in my competence. It doesn't mean I'm opposed to being flexible, but that I am confident based on what I know.

As the parent talks, look at her; and keep your mouth and facial muscles relaxed. Navarro states that "when it comes to emotions, our faces are the mind's canvas." As you listen a gentle nod may be appropriate, indicating you are listening and thinking about what she is saying, no matter what she's saying.

Section #4
Verbal Communications

Possible Reasons Behind Negative Comments

Does the parent *really* mean what she is saying or asking? Do you perceive any underlying issues? Following are a few possible reasons for negative parent verbalizations. As much as possible put yourself in her place.

- Maybe she's having a bad day or a bad week. We never know what preceded our contact time with the parent.

- By in large, she wants the best for her child. Admittedly, some parents take that to an extreme, and it's all a matter of perception. Meaning, she wants her child to be super happy, to be taught by the best teachers (at school and on the soccer field), to have the best friends, and to have the best speech-language pathologist, etc. So, be the best.

- Is she reacting to something you have written and misinterpreted, or something you said or didn't say or how you said it, or something they heard from another person maybe her child, a teacher, or another parent. We've circled back to that pesky reputation thing. I've had a couple kids that didn't like to work with me, and they told their mom they didn't want to be in speech anymore. Investigate. See if you can drill down to the cause of the negativity. Typically, mine is being a stickler for speech homework; sometimes, however, it's been personality. You never know.

- Here's another thought: Maybe she is testing you. She is doing her own investigation: Is that SLP going to stand up for what she believes? Does she know her stuff? Is she going to motivate my child and actually help him?

- And maybe they absolutely LOVED last year's therapist and they miss him/her. It's happened before—to all of us. That makes our working relationship a little steeper hill to climb.

Initial Responses

As we all know, quick, defensive-type reactions can escalate the situation, so we know we need to avoid that. Following are some alternative options and suggestions, plus three situation Scenarios.

- First, after the parent makes her disparaging comments, pause for a second or two (longer than that gets uncomfortable), inhale and take inventory of *your* non-verbal characteristics.

- As was mentioned, face and body are relaxed as much as possible, do steepling with your hands, angle your body toward the parent and *calmly* state your case.

- Calmly? Note your vocal characteristics not just your words: Volume, rate, and inflections. Project self-assurance and balanced confidence. Too much "confidence" comes across as egotistical; too little, comes across as weak and vulnerable. It is a balancing act.

- Keep your language focused on the child; not on the parent, not on yourself. If you want to emphasize your experience, then say, "I have worked very successfully with many children similar to your son, and they did very well with this approach." Or something similar.

Diffusing the Situation

- "If I were in your position, I would feel the same way. Also, here are some other things to think about…."

- "You are not wrong. I'd like to add another perspective."

- Say her name, get eye-contact, and smile with your eyes.

- Ask questions; find things you agree on.

- Focus and really listen to her. Sometimes when we do that, others are more apt to listen to us.

Scenario #1: In an Eligibility Meeting; The child does not qualify, the teacher sides with the parent who want her child in speech and language.

Let's say, you and others have evaluated the child, and although he has some speech errors, and/or, his language scores are within low normal limits, Johnny doesn't quality. But the parent wants the child to receive services and the teacher sides with the parent. (To add a little insight, a teacher told me this one time: A teacher has to frequently interact with the parent *all year long.* Possible solution: Talk with the teacher ahead of time.)

Here are a few verbal response options:

- Say, "I hear you and I understand, and if I could, I would love to work with Johnny. He's a great kid but because of his relatively high test scores he does not quality. It is unlawful for me, or for anyone, to place a child in speech when he does not quality based on lawful standards." Have a speech development age chart handy, and for language development, physically show her the child's graph on his protocol and where his abilities lie. Let her know that the children that qualify have a different looking chart; their scores are very low. "Your child's scores aren't low—which is a good thing."

- If need be, mention your experience. "I've tested hundreds of children, and honestly, Johnny is doing quite well. Here's why I say that _____."

- Say, "I hear you. Please share your reasons *because* I'd like to better understand where you're coming from." (*Because* is the operative word. The word *because* justifies what you're saying and makes it difficult to argue with). Then pick up your pen to write down her responses. If her reasons are valid, and maybe addresses another area that you didn't test (or your testing was minimal), and you're in agreement, swing her direction and do the extra testing. I know it's above and beyond, but it may be best for the child to remain flexible in this case.

Scenario #2: Is the parent's language in direct reference to the child?

In other words, is she advocating for her child? If so, her view of what is or has happened with the child is obviously different from your view. With this type of scenario just keep the focus of your responses **on the child** and ask questions if appropriate**.** Here's an example:

At the annual IEP, the parent says: "Alyssa is not making progress in therapy, so it's a waste of time and I want to pull her out."

First, don't take the "emotional" bait. Meaning, do not internalize the inference that you're not a good therapist. Instead, stay focused on the child, and respond calmly:

- Begin with language that validates what they *said* and how they *feel*: "Marie, I hear you, I understand, and if I were in your position, I might think [not feel] the same thing. I greatly appreciate you having her best interest at heart." During this time, gain eye contact and smile with your eyes, use her name, preferably first name; it's friendlier. Be authentic and straight forward.

  Say, "Marie, I too have Alyssa's best interest at heart. I'd like you to hang in there with me, *because* I have another perspective I'd like you to *think* about with me." (Remove the focus from feeling into thinking.) "I just recently started [or, I have decided to start] using another therapy approach with her. It's _____. I've had good success using this approach with other children. It is amazing how every child learns differently, and sometimes I have to try a couple different approaches to see which one works best. And *because* of that, I'd like to keep her in speech."

- Here's another option: "You know, Marie, I've been thinking about this, too. Some students just need more practice. I'm sure you don't want her leaving the classroom any more than what we're doing, that's not fair to her, but I do believe she would benefit from more practice outside of therapy. I've seen extra practice help many students." *Enlist the parent's help. Involve her in a meaningful way.* It's good for the child and good for the parent, i.e., she'll have a better sense of not only *what* the child is doing, but how well the child is doing. And it places some of the responsibility onto the parent.

  Your first inclination to the homework suggestion may be that what is the parent doesn't want to do it or doesn't do it. Obviously, that's her prerogative. However (and some of this will be covered in Section 5), when you share the minimal amount that the parent and child have to do (you don't ask them to do very much), and how very beneficial it can be, she might just change her mind. Give a try.

Scenario #3: Is the parent's language in direct reference to YOU, the therapist?

Is her language accusatory, combative, aggressive, and rude? Is she trying to pull you down to elevate herself? *"Johnny comes home and says that speech therapy is too hard, and he doesn't seem to be getting along with you, so I want him changed to a different therapist."*

- Let's face it, truly, not every child and parent will like us. That's called human nature. But I don't want to focus on that first. First: Is what Marie saying TRUE? Her statement requires some tactful investigation.

- "Oh, I would not have known that Johnny felt that way. Please tell me more!" Or, "Tell me what he says or does, *because* I would like to change that for him." Stay focused on the child, and show your heart.

- There may be an underlying issue. From the child's perspective *maybe* he's missing something when he's getting pulled out for therapy. Determine if that's happening, or not.

- Sometimes it's helpful to explain the following: "All children in speech-language therapy are there because they are having difficulty in one or more areas of communication. So yes, some tasks will be hard. We all want to do things we are good at. But that's not realistic. If we want to accomplish hard things we have to work." It may be that the child doesn't understand why he's in speech and that it does take some effort to improve. Awareness and motivation may be at the core of the matter.

- What *not* to say: "Oh my, in 10 years I've never had a child that didn't like me." That's more about you than about the child. The parent's interpretation of your statement may be different than yours, "Well, there's a first time for everything." Just stay focused on the child.

- Also, is the parent projecting? Did she have a difficult time in school and doesn't want her child to experience the same struggle? Probe this further only if you are comfortable in doing so. But pull it back to the child if you can. Offer positive personal characteristics and learning abilities of the child. Every person is unique.

Section #5
Constructive Ways to Build a Professional Working Relationship

It's a good policy to work toward building a **working relationship** with parents and others. In addition to limiting the number and type of disparaging comments, successful working relationships will make your professional life and your professional involvement much more enjoyable and successful.

This section focuses on practical ideas and suggestions that I have personally used to build working relationships in the schools. It's a deliberate process and one that takes place over time. As you add a few of these low-to-no time-consuming things to your day, they will eventually become automatic and a part of your normal routine.

Another term for "a working relationship" is TRUST. I would love for a parent to say, "Ah, Mrs. Boshart sent that home, it must be important; let's get it done." Or "This IEP meeting is not the most convenient time for me, but I know it's probably the only time Mrs. Boshart has to fit me in." Or "Hmm, looks like Mrs. Boshart changed her therapy method, I know she really cares about my son and she knows what she's doing, so I'm gonna trust her on that."

A working relationship like all relationships evolves and grows over time. As you both focus on the child, the parent gets to know you—your heart, your competency, and your work ethic, and you get to know her. The bottom line to all of this? You probably guessed it: COMMUNICATION.

This section is divided into two parts:

A. Planting Communication Seeds Prior to the Eligibility Meeting

B. Communication at the Eligibility Meeting and Other Meetings

A. Planting Communication Seeds Prior to the Eligibility Meeting

I alluded to this earlier but, in this internet and social media age, you never know who an in-coming parent has talked to, or even read or Googled. Even the most positive parent may come to the meeting with the purpose of determining your qualifications, your credibility, and if you are someone she wants her child to work with. There's even the possibly she may recommend an instruction method she wants you to use.

So, to get a jump on this and dispel any parental concerns, do some leg work, i.e., communication, prior to the initial meeting. Initiate a personal connection. It can take place in-person, via phone or Zoom, leave a phone message, or email or text her. The goal is to reach the parent, but if not, at least you

reached out. Even that goes a long way toward laying the foundation for your credibility. It is best, however, to directly communicate with her for a few minutes. Yes, this takes extra time, but pays dividends for you, the parent, and the child, if you incorporate an initial connection into your routine.

Years ago, I taught full time at a university in southern CA, and among other things I was in charge of the clinic. We had a lot of children and adults come through, and prior to seeing them, we always sat down did a case history and discussed their child. That experience has stuck with me all these years. Among other things, here's what I learned: *Parents want to share what they know about their child with you.* They want to verbalize what the problem is as they see it, what they have done about it if anything, and what they want for their child. So, open the door for them to do that.

Say something to the effect, "Hello, Marie, my name is Char Boshart, the speech therapist here at school. I'm evaluating Julie and wanted to touch bases with you and get your perspective." And then say, "I know she's having trouble with her speech sounds. Is there anything I need to know about that?" Or "I know she's having trouble expressing her thoughts. Is this something you've seen through the years?" Etc.

You are consulting her. On the surface that seems obvious and logical. However, it goes far deeper than that. You are laying the foundation for your working relationship. Not only are you connecting (which demonstrates an important part of your work ethic) and learning about Julie, but hopefully the parent feels valued and part of the team.

As a follow-up at the initial meeting, early on after everyone has introduced themselves, etc. you may want to say, "Marie, I thought about what you said on the phone, would you mind sharing with the group what you said? I thought it was so insightful." She's walking on a cloud—her view is respected. The teacher may jump in and validate what the parent said, or, "Oh my gosh, she does that at home—here's what she does in my class…." Issues can arise because a parent does not feel valued. You know what happens? Consequently, she listens to us with greater trust.

B. Communication During the Eligibility Meeting and Other Meetings

Meetings are not just about sharing diagnostic and therapeutic information, making decisions, and signing forms. They're about relationships and connections. Meetings provide a golden opportunity to show your heart, showcase your professional capabilities, and demonstrate your work ethic.

Not much has been mentioned about the concept of "work ethic." Your work ethic is based on a set of values of discipline and hard work. No doubt, you've got this one aced—I don't know any SLPs that don't work hard! So, how do you "inform" others of your passionate work ethic? Essentially, it's more about your professional actions and what you do, and less about what you say to others. It's about forming good habits like connecting teachers and going into the classroom (when we are all able to do that, again), as well as connecting with the parent prior to the eligibility meeting and working with them to get homework compliance. It also crosses over into your competency. A child who consistently improves and is dismissed, is an indication of your quality of therapy, as well as your dedication to the child and to the process.

There's also the "work ethic" elephant in the room: Paperwork. It is a big part of our job and is an issue for many school SLPs. When I was in the schools, it was for me, too. Paperwork can permeate and consume our time. Without straying too much from our primary topic, I'd like to share four brief things that have helped me to address the paperwork conundrum:

1) Schedule it into your day. What I did was schedule a flex hour prior to lunch; so that gave me a length of time. I filled that time with either paperwork, student in-class visits, meeting with a teacher or another specialist, etc.

2) When writing an IEP or an evaluation report, for longer sections, have a separate copy-and-paste page open on your computer and use it. Then quickly personalize the information about the target student.

3) Challenge yourself to type quickly. Time yourself; give yourself, for example, 15 minutes. If need be, put a do-not-disturb sign on your door and go for it. Crank it out.

4) Think about who is going to be reading it if anyone? People in your school? Probably, to a degree. The parent, maybe, but she probably will not read it in its entirety. Another SLP? Yes, if the kid moves, or goes on to middle or high school. An attorney? Yes, if there's due process; we do have to use legally defensive language. Keep it in perspective, however. I know of no one who likes paperwork, but it is necessary for documentation. That's what paperwork is: DOCUMENTATION in the form of IEPs, evaluations, progress reports, Medi-Cal, etc.

Go for accuracy but avoid perfectionism. Keep in mind you're not writing a novel; look at paperwork as a series of intermittent sprints, not a marathon. Please, do not give the bulk of your time and power away to paperwork. Create a *system* that works for you, and do it.

Okay, back to Meeting Communications. Let's discuss how to develop positive perceptions during meetings.

It's a fact: Parents and teachers will not remember everything that was said at meetings. I won't either. Many of us, including the parent, will remember a few important points. Most, however, will remember *impressions*.

Impressions includes a parent's perception of you, i.e., your professionalism and how you connected (with her and the group) prior and during the meeting. A parent will remember:

- Your demeanor (outward behavior) and how you verbally and *non-verbally* interacted with those in the group, and

- Your professionalism and how you conducted yourself, and how you connected, for example, *the manner you presented the diagnostic and/or therapeutic information.* I'm referring not only to the expression of your level of knowledge but your ability to succinctly zero-in and clearly explain the information so the parent understands and can relate. Keep the speech path jargon to a minimum, explain acronyms, simplify your words, and don't provide every detail—only the essential ones. Give concrete, relatable examples. Keep an eye on the parent's non-verbal signals to determine if she is comprehending. If the parent is difficult to read, ask, "Does this make sense to you?" Or "Do you see this in your child at home?"

Extra Practice; Speech-Language Homework

Everyone would agree that extra practice over and above scheduled therapy sessions can be beneficial to the child's improvement. A big problem, however, is compliance. Admittedly, I can send it home, but it doesn't mean it's going to get done.

If you have a homework program, and believe it can be beneficial, then mentioning and briefly explaining your homework process during the eligibility meeting can be invaluable.

Bottomline: *The parent can influence the child's attitude toward not only the speech-language services but provide support for homework.* In my experience, I've discovered some parameters I would recommend including when asking the parent—and the child—to buy-in and do homework:

Explain: Progress is made when we all pull in the same direction. Ask for the parent's help and involvement. Don't just assume they will do it if you send it home. Thing is, many of them, even the parents that want to help, have no idea what "helping" means, or what they need to do, or how long it takes, or even if there are the benefits. So, share some of that information with them.

Emphasize:

- Your child will improve more, and more quickly with extra practice, and frankly, with your support.
- I will send it home in this folder; or I will email it to you; (show and tell).
- During therapy, I will show your child exactly what to do.
- Most practice tasks are easy. I send home tasks that your child can do. The extra practice solidifies learning and consistently.
- Homework time is minimal; please do not practice more than 5 minutes.
- Speech/language homework can be done almost anywhere. The ideal is at home, in the same place as their other homework. Consider taking a break from doing reading and math and practice some speech/language in between.
- I am always available if you have questions. Contact me here (school phone number and your school email). Be sure to get their preferred contact information, as well.

Let them know you will be keeping track of homework that is done and not done and how the child improves.

In conclusion, I'd also like to mention that if you experience a contentious interaction with a parent, and if your administrator is there or even not there, remember, your administrator knows your heart, your qualifications, and your work ethic. In most cases (not always) your administrator will side with you. Administrators, especially principals (of all people!) are familiar with dealing with difficult situations. Therefore, if you have an approachable principal or other type of administrator, and you can talk confidentially, do so. They can give you good counsel. I've done that, and it helps.

Hang in there and stay focused on your therapy-kids as much as possible.

Thank you for all you do. You are appreciated more than you know.

Char Boshart

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