

ADR Skill of the Month

Relationships Work When You Work at Relationships

If you have been in meetings with me, chances are you have heard me say that the relationship between a family and its school district is very much like a marriage; that statistically – whether we like it or not – these relationships last longer than most marriages; and that successful marriages usually require some tweaking. So when a disagreement comes up (within a family or school site) the chances of a positive resolution are vastly better if you are starting out with a positive relationship.

I remember my first day on the job meeting with Bob Farran, Director of the SELPA, and how he illustrated the importance of good relationships between school staff and families. He said, “Marc, imagine that you are driving a car and that you have just pulled out of a parking space at the local drug store. As you pull out you accidentally hit the car of a stranger. What do you think are the chances that the other driver will sue you for the damages you caused? Pretty likely, right? Now take the same scenario but this time when you hit that car, it just so happens that you know the driver and have a pretty good relationship. What are the chances that you can work something out, avoiding a lawsuit? Pretty likely, right?”

No pun intended but that really drove it home for me. Like many “no brainers,” sometimes you just need a vivid example to not only make the point, but to underline its importance. (As always, remember that these skills are more art than science.) Accidents happen. So do mistakes on IEP documents. Heck, mistakes will happen even if we don’t have an IEP. What happens next is what matters most, and that will largely depend on the kind of relationship already established before the incident.

We need to develop long-term, respectful relationships among administrators, staff and parents. That is the most vital key for working out differences and moving forward.

Marc Purchin, Director of ADR Services

Suggested Tips on Practicing This Skill

1. Prepare and Plan. It’s much easier to get any relationship off on the right foot if you work at making a positive first impression. So make sure that families/advocates, schools/districts know any concerns you may have prior to the meeting. Provide copies of IEP forms, notices and reports in advance. Also see to it that an agenda has been established... and follow it.
2. Have honest and open communication. You might want to review prior ADR Skills of the Month on Positive Communication, Question Strategies, and ‘I’ Messages.
3. Have respectful interactions. Be mindful of your emotional pressure gauge and keep your cool. Present options in a collaborative way. Say “We can...” instead of “You should...” Likewise use “Yes, and...” instead of “Yes, but...”
4. Honor your agreements. Return all calls/e-mails within 24 business hours. Do what you said you were going to do or – if for some reason you cannot – let people know.

Southwest SELPA

Alternative Dispute
Resolution Services
(ADR)

- Mediation
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- Coaching
- Facilitation

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to utilize ADR services,
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