



Telling Classmates About Your Child's Disability May Foster Acceptance

Parents often become experts on their child's disability. Through their own learning process, many see the value of teaching their child's classmates about the effect of the disability at school. **Parents and professionals find that if classmates understand a child's disability, they may become allies in helping the child.** The children may also be less likely to view accommodations or individual support as unfair advantages.

One of the best ways to teach children about a disability is to talk to them at school. For many families, presenting at school is an annual event. Sometimes, an IEP team writes it into a child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) document. The event is an opportunity to:

- Discuss why a child may look or behave differently from other children in the class
- Point out the many ways in which the child is like classmates
- Offer classmates tips for interacting with the child

"I found that children rose to the occasion when they understood the reasons for my son's challenges," said one mother. "When there's an obvious difference and no one is talking about it, children become confused and think there must be something 'bad' about it. When the children understood that the disability was not bad, but just different, many were eager to help him."

Several PACER advocates suggest how to talk to students about a child's disability or health needs.

The parent will probably need to begin the project

Because parents know their child better than anyone else, they are the ones to broach the subject. Schools and teachers are very concerned about sharing private information about students. They know that parents have varying attitudes about publicly discussing a child's disability. For example, the family of a child with an obvious physical disability may feel comfortable talking about the disability because curious people have probably asked about it before. The family of a child with a less apparent disability, however, may not wish to draw attention to it. If a family wishes to explain the disability to their child's classmates, a telephone call to the school or teacher can begin the process. Parents find most teachers and schools open to the idea.

Some parents may not feel comfortable speaking in the classroom. In that case, someone else from the IEP team, such as the special education teacher, school nurse, or a therapist, may be able to speak to the children. In addition, the classroom teacher may wish to lead the discussion. If the students are in middle school or older, bringing in a disability expert or other professional may be the way to go. An older student with disabilities may do the presentation him or herself after practicing with parents or staff.

Work with the teacher or school

Involving the teacher early is important. It is the courteous thing to do, and the teacher may need to change lesson plans to provide for the session. Some teachers use the session as a springboard for other classroom discussions and may already have planned similar sessions with other families. Helping to plan the presentation may also encourage a teacher to learn more about the child's challenges.

Most parents (or others) talk to their child’s classmates early in the school year. A parent whose child is physically vulnerable may need to confirm that an IEP or Section 504 (of the Rehabilitation Act) supports are in place, and then address students the first week of school about the child’s safety issues. Another parent may prefer to wait a couple weeks into the school year so that others are more familiar with the child.

If someone other than the parent talks to the class, the speaker and family should confer ahead of time to convey what the family intends.

Ways to present

The age of the class determines the content, amount of presentation time, and who should give the information. If presenting to young children, parents can keep the session short and simple. Sometimes discussions occur during “circle time.” Most parents advise, “Leave time for questions.” One mother said the session was more about the children’s need to have their questions answered than it was for her to inform them about the specifics of her son’s disability.

Including a child in the presentation and class discussion is an individual choice. Participating may become more awkward as a student grows older. Many parents who spoke at their child’s preschool or elementary school ask someone else to present in middle school and high school. As youngsters grow up, they may be less comfortable having Mom or Dad at school.

Props may be used, particularly with young children. One mother found a picture book about disabilities to launch discussion. She then donated the book to the school. Another parent illustrated “brittle bone disease” by using a piece of uncooked spaghetti and a licorice stick to compare the child’s bones with those of classmates. Someone else brought along their younger child because she wanted the class to see that “I was just a mom and that my son had a little sister, just like another family might have.”

Children are usually fascinated by technology. If the child with a disability uses assistive technology, showing how it works will often hold the class’s attention. Speakers can also explain that such an item is not a toy and must be handled with care.

Written pieces can augment class discussions. One parent wrote a brief article about her child’s disability for the school newspaper after speaking to the class. Another made a small card with the child’s photo and a brief “All About Me” description to hand out at the session (and in other situations where people were meeting her child for the first time). While a “live” presentation offers an immediate opportunity for students to ask questions, other methods can deliver information. As students enter middle school and high school with multiple classrooms and teachers, parents may find it more practical to use written materials to inform staff and classmates about a student’s disability. Others may wish to do a short video or overhead presentation, if they have the resources.

Results

Most families who talk to children at school about their child’s disability find improvement in the way their child is perceived and treated. In addition to informing current classmates, doing such presentations helps prepare for the future.

As one mother put it, “*It was a wonderful way to show my child self-advocacy—to give him the words and ways to speak for himself.*”