

Learning Together

All Children, All Abilities

Tips for a Positive School Experience



Lisa **Raffoul**
& Associates

LEARNING TOGETHER: All Children, All Abilities

Tips for a Positive School Experience

by Lisa Raffoul

This book is dedicated to all of the families whom I have met over the years and to all of the teachers and educational support staff who dedicate their work toward the success of all children.

Designed by Amanda Orr

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Introduction/Purpose

Education for children and a positive school experience is a priority for most parents and educators. Learning fosters intellectual growth and development and cultivates self-esteem and individual empowerment.

“Literacy is a right and it is implicit in the right to education” as stated in the *Education for All, Global Monitoring Report 2015*, published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (**UNESCO**).

All children have a right to learn. Our role is to work together to respond to the uniqueness of every child.

Along with the school board, teachers, and support staff, parents have a very important role as part of the education team.

This book provides information and ideas for inclusive education, effective communication and partnership with your child’s teacher and other educational support professionals.

I believe that good communication will help others to get to know your child and for you to understand what is happening at school. It will also foster positive relationships and will help you become a confident member of the school team.

Content for the book is based on comments, ideas and feedback from my personal experience and from what I have learned from families, school board administrators, principals, teachers, educational assistants and other support professionals.

The word “parent” includes parents, guardians, other family members and caregivers.

Telling your child's story



As a parent, you quickly understand your child; you learn about how they communicate to you and to others; you notice what your child likes and what they don't like, you realize their strengths and and you recognize when they want your help. Parents love and appreciate their children unconditionally and do not define them by what they can and cannot do.

Knowing what you want for your child and what your child wants in his or her life is vital, especially when you are talking with your child's teacher, educational assistant or another professional. You are the person who has shared the day to day successes and challenges with your child. You and your child are the experts about his or her abilities, dreams and goals for the future.

It is important to remember that your child is a child first. Be careful not to speak about her in terms of diagnosis or labels. While a diagnosis may offer valuable information about your child, it should not define who she is and most certainly should not place restrictions on their abilities.

When you talk about your child, try to describe him in terms of who he is as a person rather than in terms of his disability or exceptional health care requirements. Use an explanation that describes your child as an individual. Talk about who they are as a person. The message that you want to share is that your child is a typical child with certain qualities that make him/her unique.

When are labels important?

It is important to have a starting point for your child's education. Medical tests and various assessments are often the first step for laying the foundation for successful learning. Results of tests and assessments can be essential for ensuring that your son/daughter gets adequate and appropriate support at school and funding for support may depend upon a diagnosis.



A label or diagnosis should not limit the child or define his or her learning potential.

The goal is for the school team to come together, develop a plan with both short term and long term goals, determine any accommodations and modifications to support. This plan is created in the best interest of the child and is a guide that is ideally reviewed and updated every 3 or 4 months to be used effectively toward your child's education and learning.

What is Inclusive Education and Why is it Important?



Regardless of ability, all children have a right to education and to learn together. “Inclusive education means that all students attend and are welcomed by their neighbourhood schools in age-appropriate, regular classes and are supported to learn, contribute and participate in all aspects of the life of the school. Inclusive education is about how we develop and design our schools, classrooms, programs and activities so that all students learn and participate together.” (Inclusionbc.org)

I wasn’t always a believer of inclusive education. Please see my story at the end of this book.

It takes courage to advocate for your child, especially when you come across attitudinal and systemic barriers. Keep in mind that the value for diversity begins at an early age when children can learn, grow and play together.

Inclusive education benefits all children by fostering a culture of respect and belonging. It offers an opportunity for children to appreciate their individuality and to understand the uniqueness of others. By learning together, children learn to be innovative and creative so ensure that all of their classmates can participate. This is an important part of their education that they will carry forward as they grow into adulthood and one day, have an influence on broader society.

Of course, there are times when it is appropriate for a student to spend some time out of the classroom, for a variety of reasons. The goal however remains to continue to work toward an inclusive educational experience for all children.

The next sections offer some practical activities and worksheets that will help you to document important facts about your child so that you have some information to share with others.

Getting to Know Your Child



The following is a checklist that will help you get to know some important traits about your child. Fill in the blanks with words or phrases that describe your child.

My child can ...

My child is very good at...

My child really enjoys ...

My child doesn't like to ...

My child communicates by...

My child tells me how he/she feels by ...

It is important for my child to have ...

My child is working toward ...

I know my child is happy when he/she ...

I know my child is upset when he/she ...

I am concerned about ...

Determining your child's learning style



Just as children have unique personalities, they also have individual learning styles. Children begin to show us the best way that they learn very early in life.

There are three primary learning styles that children may use. Some children like to see what they are learning about (visual), others prefer to hear what is being presented to them (auditory) and there are some children who learn best by actions and learning activities (kinesthetic).

The Child who learns by watching. Does your child ...?

- Like to use pictures
- Enjoy art and drawing
- Like puzzles
- Prefer books with pictures
- Daydream
- Get distracted by untidiness or movement
- Forget names, but remember faces
- Learn best when they are shown how to do something
- Prefer teachers who use the board to write things down
- Draw pictures to problem solve
- Notice details
- Have good hand/eye coordination
- Have a vivid imagination
- Have trouble remembering verbal instructions

The Child who learns by listening. Does your child ...?

- Enjoy reading out loud
- Have difficulty reading
- Enjoy listening to others
- Remember names but forget faces
- Like talking on the phone
- Enjoy music
- Remember things easily when they are in a song
- Give directions verbally
- Prefer people who speak with expression
- Have a difficult time concentrating when they are in a noisy room
- Talk themselves through problems
- Like to tell stories and jokes

The Child who learns from their surroundings. Does your child ...?

- Like to find out how things work
- Learn through skits or role plays
- Use a lot of gestures
- Like action books and movies
- Try things impulsively
- Have a short attention span
- Fidget a lot
- Point or move while giving directions
- Prefer teachers who use hands on activities
- Try to put things together without using instructions
- Have difficulty sitting for long periods of time
- Become bored easily
- Show you things rather than tell you about them
- Have a difficult time learning in a traditional school setting
- Learn best when they try to do an activity by themselves

Tips to Help your Child Learn

If your child learns by watching...

- Draw pictures or symbols, use flash cards, write things in colour, highlight important words, create charts or diagrams

If your child learns by listening...

- Turn instructions or information into songs, read out loud together, encourage them to repeat instructions out loud, talk out problems and solutions with them, write out sequences and then read them out loud

If your child learns from their surroundings...

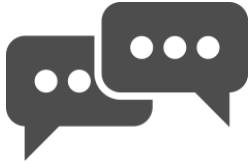
- Let your child fidget while listening, give short instructions, take frequent breaks, combine learning with physical activities such as clapping or jumping when counting, teach them by taking them on field trips, create skits or plays

What to consider regardless of your child's learning personality

- Keep expectations realistic.
- Help your child at home
- Approach your child's teacher with ideas of how to support your child's learning style
- Teach your child coping skills for activities that are not geared toward their learning style

For all of us there is a natural desire to keep on learning. Realize that no matter how complex your child's disability, they also have a very keen passion for learning. You may receive strong opinions from others and may even be told that your child will never be able to learn. If this is a situation that you encounter, try to help others to understand your child's individuality and encourage them to find ways to help your child learn.

Using Effective Communication and Strengthening Relationships



The way we communicate with people is a significant factor of a relationship. If you speak to people in a friendly and approachable manner the more likely you will develop a productive relationship or partnership.

There will be many professionals and support people involved in your child's life and having a good relationship with them will have a positive impact on your child's health and well being.

Professionals have a great deal of education, experience and consideration for your child. It is important to respect their point of view; work as a team; share expertise and develop a plan that will offer the best possible outcomes for your child. Each perspective should have equal value and finding a balance will be important. Collaboration is the key to a successful liaison.

If you have any questions about the policies and procedures of the school, don't be afraid to ask the principal. It is important to value their time and if you do have questions for your child's teacher or other professionals, it is a good idea to make an appointment so that they can offer you their undivided attention.

Team Meetings

As part of the school team, it's a good idea to start the school year with a team meeting. Make your request to your child's teacher or the special education consultant for your school board. Be sure to invite all members of your child's school team, including all school staff involved, community supports like your child's therapists, health care professionals, other support people, and someone who can take notes for you.



Before the meeting, be prepared with:

- Two or three important items that you want to discuss
- An agenda that lists the discussion items for everyone to follow
- A list of questions that you want to ask the school staff

It is important to create an environment of respect for everyone. Emphasize to the school that you want to work with them as an equal partner.

What is *effective* advocacy?



Advocacy is a term that is used to describe the action of supporting, pleading or arguing for a cause. Parents who have children with disabilities will do a lot of “advocating” on behalf of their son or daughter.

Your success in getting someone to understand your point of view will depend upon the approach that you use. A positive approach will get you positive results. Others are more likely to listen to what you have to say if you talk to them in a respectful and courteous manner. This is called *effective* advocacy. Using effective advocacy is an approach that will help you and your child get what you want.

Ways to Increase Your Advocacy Skills

- Develop good communication skills so that you are able to clearly state your needs in a positive and constructive manner
- Find out who can assist you should barriers arise
- Talk to other parents and share strategies
- Keep a record of phone calls, home visits, and other communications with parents, agencies, school boards and government
- Attend conferences or workshops that will enhance your skills and knowledge
- Look for opportunities to share the parent perspective throughout your community

Tips for Communication



Your success as a skilled advocate for your child will largely depend upon the manner in which you communicate with others. Here are some practical tips for communication to obtain the results you want.

BE POSITIVE

Believe that you can make a difference and you will. Believe in your team.

BE A PARTNER

Supporting your child is a team effort and you have a major role in this partnership. Have reasonable expectations. Enter every meeting with ideas for solutions but also come prepared with back up plans. Be open to consider other suggestions put forward by other members of the team.

RESPECT ROLES & OBSERVE PROTOCOL

Be sure to follow the proper steps for communicating with certain professionals. For example, if there is a concern at school, speak to the teacher first.

BE PREPARED AND HAVE A PLAN

Have all of your records up to date, gather as much information as possible concerning the topic of discussion, if possible get your child's input, research anything that is unfamiliar to you, prepare a list of topics to be discussed as well as questions you wish to ask, have copies of documents you wish to distribute and come prepared with note taking supplies.

TALK TO YOUR CHILD

Review your child's concerns with them. What are their issues? Work with your child to prepare a report card of their experiences.

LISTEN AND BE COURTEOUS

People are more willing to listen to you if they receive the same courtesy. Listening will provide you with a number of different and useful perspectives. Interrupt only when there is something that you do not understand. Do not interrupt to offer your own opinions. Write down your concerns so that when given the opportunity you can present them.

BE RECEPTIVE

Acknowledge what is being said, even by nodding your head. Do not rush the speaker. Use “We” Statements. Approach a situation by asking “what are we going to do about this situation”?

DO NOT BLAME

Do not put people on the defensive; they will only respond negatively and may become uncooperative.

KEEP ON TOPIC

Make a check list of the issues that you wish to discuss during the conversation. Feel free to add other issues that spark your concern and introduce them later if they are not addressed to your satisfaction during your discussion.

TAKE NOTES

This will help you to remember what was discussed and also reinforces your commitment to the topic.

BRING SUPPORT

If it will make you feel more confident, bring someone along for support. This could be a friend, family member or anyone else whom you trust. Ask them to take notes.

ASK QUESTIONS

The only silly question is one that is not asked. Do not be afraid to ask for clarification of something you may not understand. However, be careful that you do not present your questions as disagreements and make sure that others are aware that this is not your intent.

RESPOND TO SUGGESTIONS POSITIVELY

Even if you do not agree with the suggestion provided you should still appreciate the offer. All you need to say is “Thanks, I will certainly consider your idea.”

BE CONCRETE

Draw on your vast experiences and tell your stories. This will help others to gain a better understanding of what you may be trying to explain. Sharing your insights will be appreciated.

OFFER SUGGESTIONS RATHER THAN CRITICISM

Do not point fingers or dwell on mistakes. The solutions that you offer should be related to the issues that have been identified. The most effective solutions are developed together.

BE ASSERTIVE WITHOUT BEING AGGRESSIVE

Address the discussion with confidence. Although being cooperative will ensure that you have a productive meeting, it doesn't mean that you cannot say what is on your mind.

KEEP COOL

Try to avoid outbursts, stay calm. If you feel that your emotions are getting out of control take a break.

PICK YOUR BATTLES

Save your energy for the most important issues.

FOLLOW UP

Always schedule a date for the next meeting.

REMEMBER TO SAY “THANK YOU”

Appreciation goes a long way. You may even want to send a letter or phone a supervisor to offer a compliment.

SEND COPIES OF YOUR NOTES TO ALL WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE MEETING

Sending copies of your notes will remind everyone of their responsibilities and it will also provide the opportunity to clarify any misunderstandings.

Developing a Relationship with Your School Community



Parents and schools are part of a working partnership that results in the best possible education for your child. Parents may request meetings to have their questions answered and to advocate for their children. Members of the school staff are committed to working with parents in any way they can.

Here are some strategies that parents have found to be useful to building positive relationships with their son's or daughter's school:

- Attend parent's nights
- Help out with fundraising projects
- Volunteer on a field trip
- Join the parent advisory committee
- Participate in social events organized by the school

About Communication Books



A communication book is a tool for both parents and teachers to provide updates to one another.

Here are some useful tips:

- Keep your entries brief and to the point
- Offer helpful information to the school
- Your positive communication will inspire a positive relationship
- Ensure information is individualized and relevant
- Be specific about what information you want from the school
- Make sure your expectations are clear to avoid unnecessary assumptions
- Avoid having an *argument* in your child's communication book. If you have a concern, schedule a meeting instead

Going to High School

The transition from elementary school to high school, is a time of major change in your child's life. Not only are they moving to a different school, they are also entering their adolescence. The goal will be to help your child achieve his/her individual level of independence while still having appropriate support.



Some ideas to consider:

- Include your child in making decisions that are about his/her life
- Listen to your child's ideas
- How will friendships be maintained?
- How will your child be included in the typical high school experience?
- How can you encourage inclusion?

How I Became a Believer of Inclusive Education



I have to admit; I wasn't always a believer in inclusive education. Having my child go to school with all of the *normal* kids? That didn't seem possible.

The idea was first introduced to us when Eric was about 2 years old. One of the early intervention specialists had suggested that it might be time for him to go to preschool and strongly encouraged us to enroll Eric into an inclusive community school; a school where all children went, regardless of ability.

"Are you kidding me?" I thought. "There was no way that would work."

Eric was a complicated child. He would scream for most of the day and rarely took a nap. All of his food had to be pureed and he used a g-tube for all of his liquids. Eric had reflux so any food that went in, would often come out. Eric could not walk and he used a wheelchair. He was not able to sit up on his own and required a special seat to support him in a regular chair. He couldn't talk and he was hearing impaired.

"How could they ever take care of him?" I wondered. I certainly didn't want to impose this task on anyone; this was our responsibility", I believed.

Nevertheless, we decided to enroll Eric into a preschool that was more tailored to children with a disability. I was still not convinced that I should hand my complex child over to anyone, however the comfort with this school, was that he would be surrounded by people who specialized and focused their work on teaching and supporting exceptional children. It was a safe decision.

Every morning, when the school bus arrived, Eric would get excited. This told me that he enjoyed where he was going. He came home happy and we were comfortable with our decision.

One day, (about six months later), I had to pick Eric up from school for an appointment. As I sat in the lobby to wait for him, I had a major epiphany. I suddenly realized that while this was a good school and Eric was enjoying himself, he and all of the other children who attended, were isolated from the rest of the world.

"This wasn't right", I thought. "I had to get him out into the world with everyone else." It was the only way that others would get to know him and by doing so, they would begin to learn about the kind of support he needed to live in the real world and hopefully make changes accordingly.

"Also," I considered, "If Eric was less isolated, then I could be less isolated too."

As soon as I got home I called our family support coordinator and said that it was time to enroll Eric into an inclusive preschool. I could sense her delight and planning began for this important transition.

This time, I had no doubt or worries. It was the right thing to do.

After touring a few options, we chose a school called Storybook Early Learning Centre. The Director of the school was warm and welcoming and the staff were friendly and approachable. The overall attitude was that Eric belonged there and felt confident with him being there. We worked as a team to ensure that the proper equipment and supplies were in place and off he went.

It didn't take long before pictures were sent home of Eric and his friends. It felt so good to see other children talking to him, holding his hand and involving him in their play.

And remember what I had said about getting the kind of support he needed once others got to know him? Well, the preschool Director quickly understood how challenging it was to support Eric. When he would get ill, she knew that I was taking care of him by myself and that it could be quite difficult. So, she applied for flexible funding to our local government office that was responsible for Children's services. This meant that the funding that was provided for him at preschool could be unlocked in a sense, so that on the days when he was too ill to go to school, a staff from the school would come to our house to assist in his care. Guess what? It was approved!

After that, I knew that we had made the right decision, for Eric, for us as a family, and for everyone else in the world.

Taking that first step was quite intimidating. We didn't know what to expect.

Looking back, we know that it made a difference in our lives. We no longer made decisions based on what was comfortable and safe, but rather on what was going to raise awareness, teach others, promote change, improve accessibility, foster inclusion, and most of all, provide a better life for Eric and all children with a disability.

Everyone is on an individual journey, at their own pace. You will know when it feels right for you. I believe that teachers and educators want to make a difference in the lives of all children. As a parent, you can provide the leadership and the inspiration.

Believe it and you will see it!

- Lisa

About Lisa

Lisa Raffoul is a Family Coaching and Training Specialist. She started her career as a teacher however her life took a different path when her son, Eric, was born. Diagnosed with global developmental disability, Eric was the inspiration for Lisa's career move.

John Lennon's lyrics, "Life is what happens to us when we're busy making other plans", soon became one of her favourite quotes.

Lisa has learned so much through sharing her life with Eric, who passed away just before his 15th birthday in 2009. She truly believes that with every challenge comes an opportunity. Despite the difficulties, there are so many things that she has learned and discovered and she made it her mission to share her insight with others.