Inclusive School Practices Toolkit

Parent Perspective Tool 3: The Necessity of Negotiation and Compromise with your Child’s School

This tool has been developed as part of the *Inclusive School Communities Project*, funded by the National Disability Insurance Agency. The project is led by JFA Purple Orange.

## Introduction

This tool is the final in a series of three related tools written by Michaela Banks from her perspective as a parent.

Learning to negotiate well with your child’s school and acknowledging that compromise, from both parties, is part of that negotiation will help to create a strong relationship and ultimately the best outcomes for your child. The reality is that there will be instances that your child’s school cannot meet your requests and you will need to compromise working with the school to find an acceptable alternative or solution. For good negotiation and compromise, we need multiple modes of communication with the school and a good relationship founded on mutual respect. This tool is written for parents/carers and discusses negotiating and compromising when it comes to getting the best for your child at school.

## Ideas

Communicating with Your Child’s School

It is important to establish ongoing, honest and open communication between yourself and your child’s school using various informal and formal modes of communication. The relationship you develop with your child’s school will have an impact on their experience at school; effective communication is an essential ingredient in establishing a positive, respectful, and cooperative relationship. “Research shows that the more parents and teachers share relevant information with each other about a student, the better equipped both will be to help that student achieve academically”[[1]](#footnote-1).

Informal modes of communication may occur on a daily or weekly basis, whereas formal modes are less frequent with face to face meetings regularly scheduled throughout the year.

Examples of informal communication:

* Text message
* School mobile apps
* Communication book or diary
* Quick chat with staff at drop off and pick up

Examples of formal communication:

* Email or letter
* Individual Education Plan (IEP)/Negotiated Education Plan (NEP) meetings
* Face-to-face meetings
* Parent teacher interviews

Establishing a Framework for Mutual Respect

Let’s consider three ways to establish a good long-term professional relationship of mutual respect:

1. Maintain a positive attitude
	1. Remember that everyone is doing the best they can at the time with the tools they have
	2. There may be times when you need to take a firm stance, but if being positive is the default, it makes firm far more palatable for the recipient
2. Lead by example
	1. Act and communicate in a way that you would like the school to reciprocate
	2. Consider this in both how you approach negotiations and when to compromise
3. Say thank you
	1. Feeling appreciated makes us all feel good, even if we’re just doing our job
	2. Thanking when appropriate after a negotiation leads us back to being positive and maintaining a good relationship
	3. Being specific and sincere when thanking e.g., “Thanks for giving me the time to talk to you about this and working together to come up with the best solution for everyone.”

Negotiation will be an ongoing process between you and your child’s school to agree on tools, solutions and strategies to support your child’s learning.

Tips for a Successful Negotiation

* Ensure the issue you wish to discuss is clear from the start
* Consider possible responses from the school and plan for them
* If meeting in person, make sure you have all the right people there:
* Decision makers such as parents and school leaders
* Those with valuable insight to your child such as Allied Health professionals, teacher and teacher aides
* Listen respectfully and allow each person to share their thoughts and concerns
* Even if it’s difficult to hear what someone is saying, you could identify a solution and a way to help them see the situation from your perspective
* Keep an open mind about exactly what the final solution might look like
* REMEMBER: It is possible to compromise during a negotiation and still achieve a successful outcome

Negotiation will be most successful when the parents and the school are working together to further the best interests of the child. So, whilst each negotiation is working towards resolving an issue, the primary objective for all parties remains the same: a positive schooling experience for your child with good social and academic outcomes.

## Actions

When the time comes that you have a topic or issue that you wish to discuss, consider how best to communicate with the school based on your established modes of communication and using the framework for mutual respect.

To determine the best mode of communication, who should be part of the discussion and whether any number of outcomes may be successful will depend on the issue being raised, if it has been raised before and the possible impact to the child.

For minor negotiations with a low impact on an issue that hasn’t been raised before, an email, a quick chat with the teacher or teacher aide or even a note in your communication book should be enough.

If the topic is likely to have a large impact on the child, such as major changes to routine, staff or goals or if it is an issue that has been raised multiple times and not resolved, a face-to-face discussion with the appropriate support people both for you and the school is likely to result in a better outcome. When preparing for the meeting, keep in mind the tips above for a successful negotiation.

Parents may use the following examples to build their own and other parents’ confidence around negotiating and compromising with school. Each example applies the framework for mutual respect outlined above and highlights the actions taken by the parent to get the best outcome for their child.

Example 1

A parent arrives at school to collect their child and sees them with a new teacher aid who has packed their communication system away before the end of class. Their child, therefore, has no way to communicate with the class. This is an issue that cannot be compromised on - the child must always have access to their communication device. The parent adopts the following methods:

1. Informal communication
	1. It’s the first time this has happened, so the parent immediately has a quick chat with the teacher and teacher aid
2. Positive attitude
	1. The parent welcomes the new teacher aid to the team working with the child and expresses enthusiasm for their contribution.
	2. The teacher aid and teacher feel valued and are invested in finding a solution together
3. Lead by example
	1. The parent takes out their child’s communication device and shows a few things that the teacher and teacher aid could have modeled on the device to help the student participate
	2. This demonstrates the value of the communication device and ensures greater commitment from the staff

Successful outcome WITH NO compromise:

They all agree that in future, the teacher aid won’t pack away the child’s communication device into their school bag at the end of the day but will leave it connected to their wheelchair or over the shoulder of the teacher aid. This is written down in a communication book for all staff to read, which ensures consistent practices among everyone working with your child.

Example 2

A parent has requested that the school take the child to the toilet whenever the student requests to go. This aims to mimic their set up at home. The school needs to have 2 staff in attendance during toileting and is struggling to meet this request. The school adopts the following methods:

1. Formal communication
	1. A face to face meeting is booked in by the school with the parents
	2. The parents request for their Occupational Therapist (OT) to attend for additional support and insight
	3. As this may result in a complete change to the student’s plan, it is important that all parties are present and able to participate in the negotiation
2. Positive attitude
	1. Each party remains respectful during the meeting and the focus remains on the student’s access
	2. The parents listen to the school’s concerns around staffing and acknowledge that they are doing their best within the parameters of their Health and Safety Policies
3. Say thank you
	1. The school thanks the parents for compromising on this issue (see outcome below) and agree to revisit it when better access is established

Successful Outcome WITH Compromise:

All parties agree that the student will have scheduled toilet breaks with two teacher aides available to assist at these times. The times will be clearly communicated to the student. Staff will do their best to accommodate any other toilet requests that the student may have outside of these scheduled times as they too are focused on the student's success. The parents have compromised, but the focus has remained on a positive outcome, with some flexibility from the school.

By switching between formal and informal communication modes, within a framework for mutual respect, ongoing negotiation and compromise can occur with the primary objective of a positive, inclusive schooling experience for your child that focuses on their social and academic outcomes.

## More Information

Top Ten Tips for Advocates from The Growing Space website https://www.thegrowingspace.com.au/top-ten-tips-for-advocates/

## Acknowledgement

This tool was written by Michaela Banks and edited by JFA Purple Orange.

You can read Michaela’s blog about her son, Harry who experienced a severe traumatic brain injury at 11 months old and her family’s journey <https://givetheboyachance.wordpress.com/about/>



1. American Federation of Teachers (2007). Building Parent-Teacher Relationships. Washington, D.C.: American Federation of Teachers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)