



Each and Every Child

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An e-newsletter by the Iowa Department of Education

The struggle from within

Many parents anguish turning their children with special needs over to teachers

Don't be a stranger, the saying goes. Yet most teachers are just that at the beginning of the school year.

To be sure, it can be unsettling for students. But it can be downright jarring for parents who have children

on Individualized Education Programs. "Will the teacher do what's best for my child?" is a common question asked among parents. "And will the teacher even know what's best for my child?"

"There's a period of about six weeks after school has started that I struggle," said parent Susan Selby. "I used to think it was the boys who struggled, but it was actually me. It was really difficult to turn them over."

In order to understand Susan's struggle, it's important to understand her story. For Susan and her husband, Bob, their struggle actually began in 2006. That's when Susan, 28 weeks pregnant, developed a life-threatening condition in which the doctors were forced to induce birth. The premature baby, Jack, wasn't expected to live. But he had other ideas.

Then against all odds, it occurred



Photos by Iowa Department of Education's Deborah Darge

Susan and Bob Selby with their sons Jack (left) and Tommy along with their family dogs Dave and Georgia.

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again three years later, resulting in the premature birth of their son Tommy.

"In the neonatal environment, we had to educate ourselves," Bob said. "The nurses and staff were very good, but we were in their environment and we were intimidated. We finally realized we had to slow them down and ask, 'What does that mean?' 'What does that acronym stand for?'"

In many ways, that was the training ground for advocating for their sons in schools.

"It was really difficult for me to turn them over to their new teachers," said Susan, herself a teacher and family engagement consultant at the Iowa Department of Education. "When they started off life, we had to depend on others for the survival of our kids. I had to trust they would do the best for them. That trust is hard to establish."

The Selbys' story of struggle could be that of any other parent whose children are entrusted to a new teacher each fall. The budding relationship between parent and teacher, if done improperly, can lead to a push-pull competition, in which the expert in pedagogy (the teacher) can clash with the expert in the child

(the parent).

Usually, they are both right. And always, they both want the same thing: excellent academic and emotional outcomes. Still, those excellent outcomes need to be defined clearly, lest they derail the relationships.

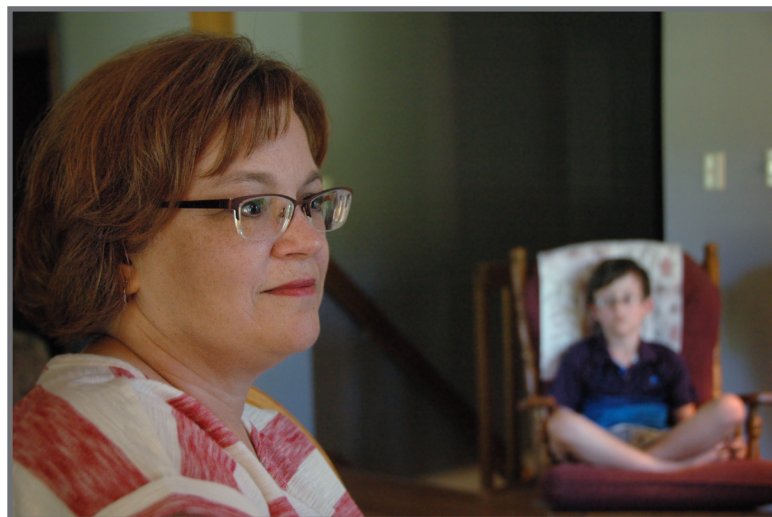
"When Jack was finally at home following his birth, we ran into problems with his therapies," Bob said. "We knew we had become the experts in our child."

"We were told that Jack would never walk, and that he probably would be wheelchair bound and need a one-on-one aide in school," Susan said. "I sat there thinking, 'not my kid. If this is the expectation you have of our kid at 18 months old, you are not the physical therapist for our child.'"

"The issue was that we weren't willing to accept that as finality," Bob said. "We weren't willing to quit."

And because of that, Jack walks today, none the worse for wear.

"There is a fine line in asserting yourself and maintaining the relationship," Susan said. "So when Jack went to preschool, we established very good relationships with the teachers. Our teachers were great advocates



Susan says after being her sons' No. 1 advocate, trust is initially difficult in establishing with a new teacher.

for both of the boys."

"We've been lucky with both boys," Bob said. "We have had educators that get it, and who accept there is Plan A and Plan B and even a Plan X. One of our favorite things to do with a new team on an IEP is that we bring a picture of the boys when they weighed just a couple pounds. We'll say 'we just wanted everyone to know where he has come from.' It sets the tone. When everyone is on the same page, there's the greatest chance of success."

"I understand that teachers have their own bag of tricks they like to try, but there are other bags of tricks, too."

"Reflecting back on those experiences," Susan said, "the commonality I see in the relationships between the teachers and us – and the doctors and us – is that they included us in the decision making. They will turn to us and ask, 'What do you think the next step should be?' The parents and teachers need to be at equal levels."

Since Jack was born, Bob and Susan have seen the beginning of a new philosophy taking form in which the parent is being acknowledged as a



"Once that relationship is on solid ground, the IEP meeting is a much more relaxed environment," Bob says.



Because of teamwork, Jack, age 11, has exited special education.

vital component of success.

"The parents are the experts of their kids," Bob said. "Whereas a physical therapist may have one piece of the puzzle, the doctor may have another and so on. Everyone plays an important role."

And so it goes in education. In embracing everyone's vital roles, relationships must take center stage.

With one teacher, Susan said, "What I appreciated most is she would talk to us as every day people and develop that personal relationship that was not necessarily connected with the boys. I think it's important for teachers and parents to develop that kind of relationship – there's a trust factor that grows. That personal connection

underscores that the teacher isn't just a teacher but that she's a real person.

"If you have that personal connection established, you can lean on it when you have to talk about the more serious stuff. You have a responsibility to each other because you need to be working as a team. What we both are working for is our two little guys."

"Once that relationship is on solid ground, the IEP meeting is a much more relaxed environment," Bob said. "I honestly don't know if it's as important to the teacher, but it sure is important to us."

Without that teamwork in place, the Selbys said, Jack would to this day be a struggling student. But because of the teamwork, he exited special education. And because of ongoing teamwork, Tommy is expected to exit within the next year.

The bottom line? It takes everyone to ensure the best outcomes.

"My mom was a teacher," Bob said.

"And she would always say, 'if you don't think you're a vital part of raising this kid, you are in the wrong profession.'"



Eight-year-old Tommy's progress has been steady and on target, and he's expected to exit special education within the year. Both boys will attend Ballard East in Cambridge.

TEACHERS:

- Put yourself in the parents' shoes.
- If you were a parent who never had been in an IEP meeting, how would you feel going in there?
- Ask them about their story.
- Know that this child has gone through a journey for several years before setting foot in your classroom.
- Have an open door policy, encourage families to visit classrooms, to have an understanding of what's going on in the classroom.

PARENTS:

- Keep an open mind.
- Know that teachers are there to help their child – they didn't get into the profession because of high salaries, but because they wanted to help and support kids.
- View teachers as vital team members.
- Be able to communicate; at least be able to email or text a teacher when you suspect something that occurred in the classroom and you're not sure what the real story is.

A tip from a teacher

Be proactive when communicating with parents! Invite them to meet and visit the classroom the first weeks of school. Discuss their child's strengths, interests and preferences. Share something positive that you have learned about their child in the first few days. Keep the lines of communication open throughout the year.



– Teacher Leader Heather Howland, Janesville CSD

Because concussions aren't just sports-related...

The Iowa Department of Education, in partnership with the Iowa Department of Public Health, has put out Concussion Management Guidelines for Iowa Schools. These guidelines expand recommendations currently available through a community-based model for concussion management.

[Newsletter article](#)

Looking for a few good family-school partnerships

Do you have – or know of someone who has – a great family and school partnership for children receiving special education services and supports? The Iowa Department of Education wants to hear from you.

Since there is a lack of consistent family and school partnership practices in the state, the Department is looking for promising practices – whether it's a program, service, strategy or policy that shows potential for developing into an evidence-based practice. Promising practices can be in the early stage of implementation.

Nomination and application papers will be available soon. Questions? Contact: kim.drew@iowa.gov or deb@askresource.org.

Save the date!

The Iowa Department of Education will be holding a special education symposium June 11 and 12. Put it on your calendar and make plans to attend! Details will come later.

Just because we want you here:

NEXT YEAR'S SPECIAL EDUCATION
SYMPOSIUM



will be held **June 11-12, 2018**

Save the date!

Have a tidbit you'd like to share? Send to jim.flansburg@iowa.gov.