

CHAPTER ONE



The Dance Toward Partnership

Using the Dance Metaphor to Understand Parent–Professional Partnerships

Forming partnerships between parents of children with disabilities and the professionals who work with them is like learning a new dance. At first, the parent dancer and the professional dancer do not glide together gracefully across the floor. Their moves are likely to feel stiff, uncertain, and awkward. The partners may have different expectations, needs, and constraints. Each seems to be listening to his or her own music, with its own tune, words, and rhythm: there's the child's song, the mother's song, the father's song, the teacher's song, the special

educator's song, the administrator's song, the therapist's song, the physician's song—no shortage of music! No wonder some partnerships are not as graceful as others; the absence of shared music and familiar dance steps causes collisions. Toes—and feelings—get stepped on (Fialka, 2001).

Forming effective partnerships between parents and professionals requires that partners take time to listen to their own song and each other's song. This kind of listening has the potential to open the partners to a fresh approach and a broader perspective on what the child needs. As parents and professionals share their insights, worries, dreams, and suggestions with each other, a new song—a new plan—is created, one that contains the contributions of many voices. This new plan weaves together several perspectives. It's no longer just "your" swing dance or "my" salsa. It's an original musical score with new choreography based on the unique needs and gifts of each child.

No one person can "dance the dance" or create the best program for and with the child. The best plans are built upon the insights, perspectives, and expertise of both parents and professionals, eventually with the full participation of the child as she or he grows. It takes teamwork—and a complex choreography in which the synergy of the dancers creates the most comprehensive and effective supports and interventions for the child.

This dance of partnership, easy to describe on paper, is far from easy to achieve in reality. Partners will not always be graceful, and few get it right on the first tries. Master dancers achieve success through practice and skilled coaching. The performers on *Dancing With the Stars* do not spin, twirl, and whisk each other across the floor on the first take. They practice, persist, and listen to each other as well as their coaches. They bump into each other with impatience and frustration. They worry about how they might be judged by the onlookers. Eventually, if they are going to make it to the finals, they learn to trust each other and to share the same rhythm—or at least complement each other's unique rhythms. Ultimately, theirs is a dance that awes and inspires audiences.

The dance image can be useful to parents and professionals in guiding their understanding of partnerships formed on behalf of children.

To sit at the conference table together and discuss the child with disabilities is an essential beginning, but it does not automatically result in a genuine partnership. We may look like partners but not *be* partners—yet!

The best dance results from a strong, ongoing commitment by all partners to listen to each other's music, try out each other's dance steps, and trust that a new dance will be created, one that integrates the most creative contributions of each partner.

At the forefront of this work, we must remember that parents and professionals must set aside their egos and work together on behalf of the child. The reward for a well-performed dance of partnership comes from knowing that the child has been given the support needed to reach his or her fullest potential—rooted in the highest of expectations. That accomplishment—the evolving and ultimate ability of the child to dance his or her unique dance—is sweet music to everyone's ears!

HOW THE DANCE BEGINS

There is no escaping it these days. Partnership is a recurrent buzzword in the fields of education, health, and human services. "We must be partners. Collaboration is the name of the game." This is the message of administrators, policy makers, professionals, and parents. Articles, posters, and textbooks echo this refrain.

Partnership is indeed a worthy cause, one that appears easy to believe in and own. However, effective partnerships can be elusive, hard to grasp. "So—is this a partnership?" "What's it supposed to look like?" "Why is it so hard?"

After reading and thinking about parent-professional partnerships for several years, we realized that the frustration sometimes felt by parents and professionals is often due to misunderstandings about the nature and evolution of partnerships. For example, there is often the expectation that parents and professionals become partners the moment they sit down at a conference table to discuss plans and goals for a child. Our experience has been just the opposite: Partnerships evolve over time and go through a series of developmental phases during the course of working together. It is our intent to describe the phases parents and professionals cycle through as they form and maintain effective partnerships.

It Takes Time

Before we explore parent-professional partnerships using this developmental model, it is important to understand the social-cultural

context in which these relationships exist. We live in a society seduced by immediate gratification—a fast-food mentality. What began with instant burgers and instant coffee now includes instant messaging, instant banking, instant information—all of which feed our expectation that things can (and should) happen *now*. *Right away! This second or sooner!*

But not all processes can be shortened and accelerated. There is virtually no way around the fact that relationships take time. They develop through conversations, problem-solving, listening, and overall hard work—all fundamental to creating trust. There is, in fact, no magic for speeding up the process of forming a solid working partnership.

Nor can we expect smooth sailing and effortless perfection along the way. Instead, we must realize that we will have to work slowly and carefully to become true partners; that we will make mistakes and experience setbacks; that we will learn to make repairs; and that we will need large reserves of patience, forgiveness, hope, and trust in order to forge effective and durable relationships that benefit our children.

We believe that a developmental approach to partnerships is both realistic and useful. Such an approach suggests to us that there are identifiable phases with tasks that must be completed before partners are able to move to the next level. This way of thinking helps us to view challenges and struggles in our relationships as normal and inevitable, rather than as hopeless indicators of a doomed relationship.

Frustrating or challenging as these interactions may be, they can be understood as a “typical” part of the process of working together. Being out of sync sometimes *is* part of the dance. In the words of the visionary author Margaret Wheatley (2009), “We expect it to be messy at times.”

Do I Wanna Dance?

As we hope you can see, the dance metaphor is a particularly useful one for understanding partnership. However, even before two people get on the dance floor together, a litany of questions emerges—questions that float, invisible and unspoken, in search of answers that don’t come easily or quickly. Therefore, it is important to contemplate these unexpressed preliminary questions, because they capture the anxiety and hesitancy that naturally frame the dance toward partnership.

The first question often asked is, “Do I even want to be at this meeting, at this dance?” For parents in particular, the partnership with professionals is not a chosen relationship. Most parents did not plan to be involved in special education or special services, so although parents might need the support, guidance, or knowledge of the professionals, they often feel hesitant about stepping into this new and unsought relationship. Thus at the outset, the partnership is a dance of ambivalence: “I need you in my life, but I don’t always want you in my life.”

Professionals, on the other hand, typically feel eager to share their expertise, resources, and skills. “Let’s begin this dance. I am ready! I have much to share with you.”

When their enthusiasm is met with hesitation, folded arms, or other signs of parental disengagement, professionals may feel frustrated, even hurt. Quietly they may be thinking, “I’m only trying to be helpful!”

My Reflection: What can be done or said to ease this awkwardness, ambivalence, or initial uncertainty?

Seasoned professionals offer the following advice when encountering a hesitant parent: “Don’t take it personally! In most situations, the reluctance to connect is not about you, the professional, but rather about the life-changing circumstances forced onto the family. It’s important to remember that most parents didn’t choose to be at this dance.”

With time and support, families move onto the dance floor having choreographed their own dance based on their family’s values, preferences, and strengths—based on *their* music! Families grow, adjust, and thrive in their own ways and in their own time. It is up to the professionals to get to know each family and to honor each family’s unique ways of coping, shaping their lives and supporting their children.

Professionals, too, may experience elements of an unchosen quality to their dance. Most professionals chose to work with children and rightly feel that their primary partner is the child. Yet professionals soon learn that along with the child comes another set of partners—the parents, who bring another set of important issues, expectations, and desires. Moreover, in many situations, professionals, early in their careers, may have limited training, experience, and guidance working with families. Having the parents as part of the team comes as a challenge, sometimes even as a surprise. Professionals may ponder, “Wait . . . you mean I have to dance with *you* too! How do I do that? What do I know about *your* music?”

Increasingly, because of the mounting expectations to “do more, with less,” providers are feeling the squeeze of too many partners on the dance floor. Nowadays, it is common to hear providers whisper behind closed doors, “I love my work, but I don’t know how I am going to handle so many children, families, forms, requirements, and meetings.”

Thus both parents and professionals often begin this working alliance with a certain reluctance or ambivalence—not an easy way to begin.

In addition to asking “do I wanna dance?” other common questions may linger back stage.

- What if I am ready to dance hard and fast when you want a slow, gentle dance?
- If I follow your lead, where will you take me? Will you follow my lead?

- What if we collide, trip, or fall? Will we be able to pick ourselves up and continue dancing?
- Can I set aside my experiences with previous partnerships and truly begin this new one with a clean sheet of music?
- And for those who have already been dancing strenuously on behalf of their children or students, a quiet question, born of exhaustion: How much energy do I have to begin another partnership?

These are basic but important questions. Ignoring them can complicate the partnership process; being sensitive and open to them can heighten the possibility of a rich beginning.

My Recollection: If I remember only one thing from my reading about the parent-professional partnership and the dance metaphor, it is

PHASES OF THE PARTNERSHIP DANCE

A Cautious Beginning to the Dance

When parents meet with professionals for the first time, they are likely to feel out of place. Everything is unfamiliar: the faces, the titles, the little chairs, the language, the forms, the procedures . . . the overall experience.

Even veteran special education teachers who unexpectedly become parents of a child with a disability will attest to how awkward they feel at their first meeting as a parent. Despite their years of knowledge and expertise, they report a strong sense of vulnerability and even helplessness.

Professionals, too, may feel uncomfortable encountering parents for the first time. What will this family be like? Easy to engage? Reluctant? Quiet? Withdrawn? Trusting? Emotional? Hard to read?

In many ways, this initial meeting is like a middle school dance. There is self-consciousness, uncertainty, and an absence of trust. Like young teens at their first dance, potential partners eye each other cautiously, wondering who should make the first move.

My Reflection: What can professionals and parents do and say to acknowledge and ease some of the awkwardness of these initial meetings?

Phase 1:

Colliding and Campaigning

Despite the awkwardness that new partners are likely to feel, the time will come when they are face to face on the dance floor and the music begins. The dance is under way. Unfamiliar with each other's rhythms, moves, and styles, these new partners will not be in synch right from the start. Instead, they're likely to stumble, lurch in opposite directions, and even collide.

For experienced partners who have learned to trust and understand each other, a little collision along the way is no big deal. It's a cue to pay closer attention, and by carefully communicating with each other, they can quickly recover and continue on with their dance.

For new partners who lack a depth of experience and common understanding, an initial collision or conflict, no matter how small, can shut off the fragile connection that has begun. In an effort to restart the communication, or at least to make themselves be heard, parents and professionals frequently move into a "campaigning" phase.

During this phase, both partners strongly articulate their own perspectives in hopes of persuading the other to see the child, the problem, or the intervention similarly. Much like politicians during an election year, each campaigner carries his or her sign with space enough for only one viewpoint. It is the very nature of campaigning to cleverly and powerfully put forth one's idea. Dialogue is not part of the process.

Partners come to this dance with deeply rooted values and perspectives that have been developed over decades, even generations. Opinions on solutions, interventions, or next steps are fiercely held, and the ideas or approaches of the other may seem unfamiliar or contradictory. People often jockey for power, protect territory, block the other's solutions, and try to sell a particular position. Although these behaviors seem negative and difficult, such campaigning is actually a positive reflection of the partners' strength of commitment to the child or the program. The problem is, "campaigning" partners are not working together. They are dancing solo . . . and solo dancing ultimately and dangerously limits how a child learns and grows.

My Reflection: Think about a time in your own personal life when you felt strongly about a situation. Describe the circumstances. What did you want to have happen? What was underlying that desire—what values, dreams, past history, and expectations? What did you want the other person to understand about your perspective?

The Language of Colliding and Campaigning

In this phase of the partnership, we frequently hear language like this: “I really want it done this way.” “This is the way it works.” “That’s not how we do things here.” “That wouldn’t work.” “I really know what’s best.”

Hope and possibility are easily swamped when campaigning prevails.

Imagine the Dance of Colliding and Campaigning: The Story of Josie

Jim and Donna Lopez are parents of a blended family that includes Donna’s teenage son, Jim’s 9-year-old daughter, and their daughter together, Josie, age 6. Josie, who was born with moderate cognitive impairments, loves animals, art, all the Disney princesses,

and “going to school.” This past year, Josie went to a special education preschool-kindergarten, where she received speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, and physical therapy within the classroom setting. As the school year came to a close, Josie’s annual review meeting was scheduled to review her progress and to determine services and supports for the upcoming year.

Jim and Donna Lopez arrived at the meeting with mixed emotions. They felt some anxiety because their little girl would soon be leaving the cozy environment she had come to know so well. On the other hand, they were excited about Josie starting first grade at Jefferson Elementary, the neighborhood school their older children had attended and where Donna herself had gone 30 years ago.

The meeting began on a cordial note as the parents, teachers, and therapists shared their observations of Josie’s progress over the past year. Josie’s teacher remarked on her improving verbal skills, and the occupational therapist reported that Josie was making strides with writing and using scissors. Mr. and Mrs. Lopez noted that Josie, despite her stubborn moments of “I won’t,” was overall happy and helpful at home, often putting her toys and clothes away with only a little bit of nudging.

The meeting was off to a good start, until the discussion turned to plans for Josie’s next school year.

Ellen Watkins, the school psychologist, smiled at Mr. and Mrs. Lopez and reiterated how pleased the team was with Josie’s progress this year. She expressed their confidence that Josie would continue to excel next year in the school district’s Opportunity Room, a special education class recently moved to the new school “just a short bus ride” from the Lopez home. The class was taught by Anna Tseng, a seasoned special education teacher highly regarded for her ability to create a nurturing classroom.

Josie’s current teacher enthusiastically chimed in, “Oh, you’ll love Miss Tseng! She has the same high expectations for students as I do, and we know that’s important to you. Miss Tseng is also a master teacher with the new reading program—perfect for Josie.”

This enthusiasm was met with pained looks and a stunned silence from Mr. and Mrs. Lopez. The staff was baffled by the parents’ reaction. They had taken great care in making their recommendation and genuinely wanted the best for Josie.

“But . . .” Donna glanced at her husband for support, “we want Josie in the *regular* first-grade classroom, maybe even with

Mrs. Todd.” Mrs. Todd had taught both of their older children—and perhaps now it was Josie’s turn. Moreover, Josie’s parents had rigorously researched educational options for their daughter. They began to see how Josie would and could excel in their neighborhood school, with the right supports, just as their other two children had.

Ms. Watkins was quick to sympathize. “Yes, it must be hard to envision a different experience for your daughter. But we’ve considered it carefully. We feel that Josie is not quite ready for a full general education experience yet. We believe that students with cognitive impairments integrate better *after* they’ve spent the initial couple of years in a more specialized program . . . getting ready.”

“But . . . we’ve thought a lot about this. I know some other people—” Mrs. Lopez faltered on, “my cousin’s son in Florida has Down syndrome, and he was included all the way through school. We know it works . . . it’s what is best for Josie.”

“But that’s not been our experience,” said Ms. Watkins. “And Josie will get lots of opportunities to be with typical students, as she’ll be with them during art and gym classes. The special education classroom at Sutton School is the best environment for your daughter right now. She’ll be in a supportive, nurturing classroom with a specially trained teacher . . .”

“In a separate school and in separate classroom. . . . To us, that’s segregation!” exclaimed Mr. Lopez, his face red with emotion. “You just said that Josie was doing well . . . we want her in the regular classroom with support and with our neighbors’ children.”

What had begun as a friendly meeting rapidly deteriorated as parents and professionals volleyed back and forth—getting more entrenched, getting more demanding, getting nowhere. It was as if the Lopezes were waving a sign that said “Do Not Segregate Our Daughter” and the professionals were waving a sign that said “The Special Education Classroom Is Best.” At that moment, neither side felt they could put down their sign and listen to the other. Both sides were campaigning, with the best intentions, but still without any movement.

Still stuck in their positions after almost an hour of fruitless debate, the parents and professionals in Josie’s annual review meeting finally agreed on something: they needed a new approach to plan for Josie’s next school year.

My Reflection: Describe three feelings that the parents are experiencing and three feelings that the professionals are experiencing. Identify some of the interests and values influencing or shaping the two different opinions about where Josie should be next year—from both the parents' and the professionals' perspectives.

Moving Forward: Dance Steps to Practice

STOP: It's impossible to learn new steps while you're still dancing the old. So pause, breathe deeply, find a place of patience. Modulate your voice to a conversational tone so you can move away from the dance of debate and toward the dance of discussion.

LOOK: Step outside yourself for a moment. What would an impartial observer see and hear? Observe and describe what's happening. Acknowledge that there is a difference of opinion and articulate it. "OK, it seems that we don't exactly agree right now. Let's take some time to identify our different perspectives." Don't pretend or gloss over the differences.

LISTEN: In order to dance smoothly together, partners must get to know each other. Especially if they've gotten off on the wrong

foot, now's the time to be curious, not furious. Being curious requires dropping the defenses, leaning forward, and asking for more information.

Resist the impulse to debate. This does not mean abandoning your position; it merely means setting it aside for the moment so you can hear what your partner has to say. Remember, this step is all about listening. Similar points of view and possibilities for compromise are more likely to surface when partners feel heard and respected.

“Tell me more about what you are thinking” is an important follow-up prompt, as it encourages the others to share the hopes and worries they may not articulate at first.

Remember that listening does not imply agreement. Rather, it implies a commitment to learn more about the other's point of view.

SHARE: Identify the important values, feelings, and goals that emerge during the deep listening. It's likely that you will find some common ground to build on as you prepare to step back out on the dance floor. Typically, when we are at the standstill phase of “campaigning” we share what is at the “tip of the iceberg.” In other words, we share what we want to happen in this situation. In order to get unstuck, our conversation needs to focus on what are the unspoken concerns and deeply held values influencing what we want. In order to get unstuck, we have to explore what's behind our thinking, what's below the surface. This level of conversation is the only way to get unstuck . . . but it takes patience, trust, and a willingness to listen and share. Have no illusions, listening during times of disagreement or differences is exceptionally hard to do. It can't be rushed, and may require that not all the dancers meet together at the same time. Patience and good coaching are needed.

TAKE CARE: Resist rushing to solutions and dashing to decisions. Make sure you understand your partners' goals and perspectives—it can be helpful to write down their main interests for all to see and review. Even experienced partners collide and fall, so return to the listening phase often.

Sometimes it's important to postpone the conversation or bring in someone else to partner, such as another school

professional skilled in negotiation or who has some prior positive rapport with the family or child. An outside mediator who can assist or facilitate the discussion is another alternative. These options need not be seen as signs of failure, but rather as creative steps in working toward resolution in challenging times.

Unfortunately, some relationships never move beyond this first phase of hammering away at separate agendas. But if people do agree, even momentarily, to take time to explore what's below the surface, they are less likely to remain glued to their separate positions. Small new insights might be realized. New dance steps might be tried. Trust might begin to emerge, and the dancers might find ways to compromise or at least quiet the noise of campaigning.

My Reflection: Now that you've reviewed the list of possible next "dance steps," take 10 minutes to write a dialogue—a conversation between the parent and the school psychologist. Free-write what each might say. Follow up with one suggestion you'd make to both the parent and professional for the next steps in working through this impasse.

My Recollection: If I remember only one thing from my reading about the phase of “Colliding and Campaigning,” it is

Phase 2:

Cooperating and Compromising

During the middle phase, partners continue to feel some apprehension and uncertainty but are also likely to feel more of a balance and some hope. As trust emerges, so does a spirit of cooperation. There is an expectation of working together to explore and ultimately arrive upon next steps, programs, and services that best meet the needs of the child. As a result . . . there are fewer collisions, less stepping on toes. An important ingredient to this middle phase is that partners are reliable—they follow through on agreed upon tasks, and if they can’t, they inform the other of their constraints and continue to look for solutions.

How did the partners move out of the campaigning and into the more rewarding phase of cooperation and compromising? The small and fragile trust born in the first phase is strengthened when the partners agree to work side by side without insisting that “my way is the only way.” Compromises can be arranged so that each person feels that crucial goals for the child are being addressed.

At this level, people are more effective in their listening. They are more likely to use the phrase, “Tell me more about what you think.” There are more attempts to genuinely consider the other person’s ideas, hopes, dreams, and expectations, or at least be able

to acknowledge them. In part, these newer and more welcomed ways of interacting occur because partners are getting to know each other. Each feels an emerging sense of respect for the other and begins to believe in the effectiveness of their joint problem solving. There is a sense of moving in a similar direction and of matching each other's dance steps.

The Language of Polite Cooperation

The language that often characterizes middle-phase parents and professionals is the language of polite cooperation: "You do your part and I'll do mine." "Maybe that will work. Let's try your idea." "Tell me more about what you're hoping for, so that we can incorporate it into the goals."

Fortunately, at this phase, people are more apt to listen and ask about others' ideas, with genuine curiosity in their voice and heart! They are more able to suspend—not necessarily abandon—their personal agendas and explore common ideas and areas of potential agreement.

Working together at this level often generates effective supports for children and a sense of satisfaction for partners. Parents and professionals have told us that most relationships remain at this phase and are less likely to move toward Phase Three, primarily because of time constraints for both families and professionals.

This phase should not be dismissed or viewed as a bad place to be. On the contrary, relationships at this phase have cooperation and reliability at their core. Trust is developing as commitments are honored, problem solving is practiced, shared meanings are emerging, and some level of consensus is expected.

Imagine the Dance of Cooperating and Compromising: The Story of Andrew

Mr. and Mrs. Bashid have three children. Their twin daughters are in third grade, and 5-year-old Andrew is in kindergarten. Like his older sisters, Andrew was a happy and precocious baby, walking and saying several words even before his first birthday. But things suddenly changed just after he turned 2. He stopped talking and playing with his beloved squeaky ball. He stared into space. He no longer seemed happy. The Bashids felt as if the Andrew they loved had suddenly disappeared.

Their family pediatrician suggested that Andrew be evaluated, resulting in a diagnosis of autism. Stunned and devastated, the Bashids withdrew from many family gatherings and community activities. Although they had heard the word “autism,” they had no experience with this label or with special education services. Secretly, they worried that Andrew’s autism might be a result of something they had done.

The initial meetings with the school staff were tense and overwhelming for Mr. and Mrs. Bashid. They had immigrated to this country five years earlier and considered themselves bilingual, yet much of this special education language left them confused and annoyed.

Several times, Mr. Bashid raised his voice saying, “You must stop talking about my son as if he is stupid.” The special education staff wondered if Andrew’s father understood their words. “That’s not what we are saying, Mr. Bashid. We didn’t say he cannot learn. We know he can. Please understand that we are here to help.” Over the coming weeks, Mr. Bashid grew impatient with this phrase, which to him seemed patronizing. Inside he fumed, “Does it look like I need your help?”

During this first year of special education services in elementary school, colliding and campaigning were a part of most meetings between the Bashids and the special education team. Discussions were fraught with tension and misunderstanding, and neither parents nor professionals felt they were being heard. Trust and cooperation seemed almost unattainable; it wasn’t a good year.

The next year, before school began, Andrew’s first-grade teacher, Ms. Tenak, invited the Bashids to meet with her before “all those official meetings where everyone seems so serious!” In her phone call to the Bashids, she did her best to sound welcoming. “I’m looking forward to having Andrew in my class. Over the years, I’ve learned that parents have so much to teach me about their children. I’m hoping that we can meet, and you can tell me about Andrew. What’s he interested in? How does he learn best? What does he like to do at home?”

With some reluctance, Mr. and Mrs. Bashid agreed to meet. As they nervously entered the classroom, Ms. Tenak thanked them for coming, offered tea, and apologized for having to squeeze into the child-size desks. She smiled and took a deep breath. “I want to know about Andrew—through your eyes.”

Though hesitant at first, Mr. and Mrs. Bashid slowly opened up about Andrew—his fear of dogs, his interest in cars, and his fascination with Legos. They broke into hearty laughter when Ms. Tenak shuffled through a folder of papers from last year and showed a class photo of the dress-up party, featuring Andrew as a huge red Lego. Mr. Bashid proudly pointed to his wife. “It was Mrs. Bashid’s idea. She knows Andrew loves his Legos.”

At Ms. Tenak’s request, Mr. and Mrs. Bashid shared more stories about Andrew. They felt a welcome sense of connection developing with this teacher who took such an interest in their son, even spending time reviewing his last year’s work. As the meeting drew to a close, Ms. Tenak asked if they had any particular concerns. Mrs. Bashid was silent and looked to her husband. Mr. Bashid said, “My son can learn. Do you understand that?”

Tension flooded back into the room, and Ms. Tenak resisted the impulse to respond defensively—to wave a sign that said “You’re not listening to me!” Instead, she consciously balanced herself and replied, “It sounds like you have some concerns. Are there things that are troubling you? What’s important for me to know?”

After a few comments were shared, Ms. Tenak indicated that they didn’t have to solve every problem at this first meeting. “Let’s continue to talk and find other ways to communicate with each other,” she said. “What works best for you?”

Mrs. Bashid softly sighed. Mr. Bashid simply said, “I like seeing photos of Andrew, and I like telling stories about my son.” Ms. Tenak nodded, “That’s a good start. I’m sure we’ll have many more photos and stories to share.” In spite of the slow beginning and a few tense moments, all three left the meeting with some positive feelings about working together.

Although the rapport developed during that first meeting went a long way toward establishing a good working relationship, challenges did arise. Halfway through the year, Ms. Tenak heard about a new program that provided socialization between students with autism and fifth-grade “buddies” as they worked on computer-based lessons. She felt that this afterschool experience would be beneficial for Andrew, and was frustrated when the Bashids did not respond to her two phone calls or the note she sent home.

Just when Ms. Tenak was about to give up on the afterschool buddy idea, she saw Mrs. Bashid in the school hallway. Both teacher and mother offered stiff hellos and barely made eye

contact. Ms. Tenak asked, “I’m wondering if you got my phone . . .” Interrupting, Mrs. Bashid said, “I am sorry . . . we didn’t call. It’s . . . just that we . . . we don’t . . . think that special program is right for our son. He knows about computers; he’s good with computers. We don’t want him to stay at the school so long.”

Ms. Tenak tried to hide her disappointment, “I am glad we’re talking, Mrs. Bashid. I think this would be such a great help to Andrew. Could we give it a try for one month?”

Although the Bashids were firmly against an afterschool program, they were beginning to trust Ms. Tenak’s judgment and wanted to cooperate as best they could with her recommendations for Andrew. After discussing the issue several times, teacher and parents eventually reached a compromise: Andrew would have a fifth-grade buddy twice a week during reading time, just like several of his classmates already did. It wasn’t the program Ms. Tenak had in mind, but it provided Andrew with extra socialization without setting him apart or keeping him after school.

The year was marked with a feeling of growing trust, and although neither the Bashids nor Ms. Tenak felt as if they had the perfect parent-teacher relationship, it was what they called “good enough.” Most importantly, it was a good year for Andrew.

According to Mr. Bashid, “Most of the time the meetings were helpful, especially seeing all the new photos of Andrew in class. The teacher tried some things that didn’t make a lot of sense to us, and she tried some things that we wanted, too. As my grandfather use to say, ‘a little bit here and a little bit there.’ One thing I know for certain: It’s a lot better than the first year when I didn’t feel I could trust anyone, including myself.”

Moving Forward: Dance Steps to Practice

STOP: It’s easy to fall into the trap of labeling the partners in the dance as either “the parent” or “the professional.” When we stop this categorical thinking, we discover that we share a common label. We are all people—each with our own stories, foibles, strengths, interests, and hopes. Casual conversations in the hallways, over the phone, or before and after meetings create opportunities to get to know each other a little bit better. We learn that one of us likes hockey, or enjoys gardening, or works the midnight shift. We may not become best friends or perfect partners, but moving beyond our labels into friendly interactions can enhance and strengthen partnerships.

LOOK: Look for opportunities to follow through on commitments you've made, big or small. Being dependable is a powerful way to build trust. Notify your partner when you anticipate a delay, a change in your agreement, an unexpected barrier, or when you have more ideas. If you begin to feel ambivalent about the agreed-upon plans, share your concerns or questions. Keeping silent will inevitably lead to misunderstandings. As suggested in the phase "colliding and campaigning," continue to be curious about each other's ideas, and look for common ground.

Look to others to talk through the challenges or to seek guidance. Trusted colleagues, family members, and friends can be helpful sounding boards, providing both validation for your feelings and brand-new insights. Stay away from people who encourage blaming or attacking others. That type of negative advice puts a screeching halt to building partnerships.

LISTEN: Listening is the most fundamental and probably the most challenging of all dance steps and must be constantly employed. Work on sharpening your listening skills throughout the dance. Listen for understanding and check in frequently to be certain you're on the same page. During conversations, reflect back on what you heard the other person saying. Ask if you got it right. Listen to your own chatter inside your head. Sometimes that chatter interferes with your ability to be truly open to someone else's thoughts.

Listen for the times when communication feels awkward or tense. Don't dismiss it or pretend it doesn't exist. There's a reason for the uneasiness. Paying attention can promote communication. Listen for when differences emerge, acknowledge the different perspectives, and explore the range of opinions.

SHARE: Notice what is working well in the partnership. Let your partners know what has been productive, what you appreciated, and what was helpful. Feedback like this has a reinforcing impact. Partners are more likely to keep doing what worked when it is acknowledged. Most of us second-guess ourselves, at least occasionally. Receiving appreciation and specific feedback bolsters confidence and energizes partners and the relationship as a whole.

It's also important to share when unusual stresses or life changes, such as a family illness or an unexpected deadline, might impact interactions or the partnership. Details aren't necessary, but a heads-up can help explain changes in the routines or even how communication is handled.

Some parents experience an unexpected and increased sensitivity at significant anniversaries, birthdays, or other predictable times such as at the annual review meetings or during what some parents call the "I.E.P. (Individualized Education Plan) season." Being aware of these possibilities enhances the team's ability to be sensitive, kind, and understanding.

Don't forget to review the dance steps from Colliding & Campaigning—We never outgrow our need to keep practicing the basics!

TAKE CARE: When we stumble on each other's toes, apologies go a long way to repairing and strengthening the partnership. An honest "I'm sorry" is a natural part of all healthy relationships. Take care and work toward a shared meaning of the vision for the child and for how "success" is defined.

My Recollection: If I remember only one thing from my reading about Cooperating and Compromising, it is

Phase 3:

Creative Partnering and Collaborating

Inquiry and listening continue to be the cornerstones of successful alliances at this level just as they were at the earlier levels.

Third-phase partners tend to share their interests, needs, fears, worries, and hopes with one another fairly readily and openly. They are more apt to talk about what is below the surface, what really matters. The security that comes from knowing that one's hopes, dreams, goals, and concerns are truly important to and valued by one's partner enables a kind of exploration and problem solving that results in brand-new solutions and fresh ideas for intervention. No longer are partners dancing separately; nor are there two distinct dance lines as we often see in the middle phase. Instead, the music and the choreography are now original works composed by all the partners. Together the partners have written goals and strategies that result from many ideas, not "yours" or "mine," but rather ours. As the child gets older, she or he becomes an integral partner and, with support, authentically participates and ultimately leads, to the extent possible, the discussions, planning, meetings, and future visioning.

Partners at this third level typically see the child in a similar way and share common expectations for him or her. When situations are viewed differently, which still happens, partners are open to exploring and understanding the differences. At this third level of creative partnering, the child is central to the dance. He or she is in the middle, the focus, the reason for the partnership.

During this phase, partners do not feel the need to "tell and sell" their solutions; rather they believe that innovative and totally new solutions are possible and probable if they explore ideas and work together. When conflict or differences in opinion are present, they are not viewed as threatening. Stomachs don't churn and faces don't flush quite as easily as they do in the earlier phases. Conflict during this phase is acknowledged as a normal part of partnering and viewed as an opportunity to really work on the "important issues" to ensure that the child reaches his or her potential. Partners know that they will get a clearer understanding of everyone's concerns and hopes as they explore the conflict and differing views of the issue. Challenges still occur, but instead of ignoring or glossing over the bumps, partners at this level acknowledge their part and offer the necessary "repairs" with care and compassion. "I'm sorry" or "I regret" are valued and understood to be part of the working partnership.

Power and decision-making tend to be balanced. Interventions become blended, integrated, and unique.

The Language of Possibility

The language often heard in this phase is the language of creative opportunity and possibility, which sounds like: “Let’s see what we can create together.” “I think ‘ours’ is better than ‘mine’ or ‘yours.’ ” “I’ve been worried about this program for my child. I want to talk about it with you. Maybe we can create something different. What do you think? I could really use your ideas about how to handle this situation.”

Creative partners experience a sense of promise and hope, as well as feelings of efficacy and satisfaction. Their solutions are far from perfect but can be adjusted and refined in order to assure the most appropriate setting, supports, and interventions for the child.

This is the phase in the relationship that genuinely feels safe, satisfying, creative, and most productive.

Imagine the Dance of Creative Partnering and Collaborating: The Story of Tyrell

When her adult daughter, a single parent, was killed in an automobile accident eight years ago, Bernice Ruby was left to raise her two grandchildren, Keisha, then 8, and Tyrell, then 3. Although Keisha was never sick, Tyrell, who had been a colicky baby, was plagued with bouts of diarrhea, stomach spasms, eczema, asthma, and hives. After countless examinations, the pediatrician referred Tyrell to an allergist to determine if these ongoing medical issues were allergy-related. Not surprisingly, tests indicated that Tyrell was allergic to peanuts, tree nuts, eggs, dairy, pollen, mold, and dust. His allergies were severe and potentially life-threatening.

Frightened by this serious diagnosis, Mrs. Ruby was determined to protect her grandson while keeping him as typical as possible. On the pediatrician’s advice, she received early intervention services in her home. Tyrell went on to receive services as a preschooler and then as an elementary school student. Over time, and with lots of work on the part of his family, Tyrell learned which foods were “Tyrell-friendly” and which were not allowed. He knew that anyone playing with him needed to wash his or her hands first, and he tried his best at alerting an adult immediately if he “felt ‘sick-y’ or breathed funny.” Coaching Tyrell over the years to help him understand his needs and having a few well-informed adults nearby resulted in a childhood remarkably unscathed by serious health disasters.

When Tyrell entered kindergarten, Mrs. Ruby was extremely anxious about her grandson's welfare. So many children, so many interactions, so many dangers! But she quickly found the school staff to be understanding and willing to make adjustments to ensure Tyrell's safety. Together, Mrs. Ruby and the school professionals crafted a plan to protect Tyrell from allergens throughout his school day. The school agreed to these measures:

- Designate Tyrell's classroom and his lunch table in the cafeteria as peanut-free zones.
- Provide a paraprofessional to wipe Tyrell's desk and lunch table, to make sure he eats only "Tyrell-friendly" foods, and to watch for signs of breathing problems.
- Provide EpiPen training to Tyrell's teachers and paraprofessional.
- Provide wipes to each classmate to be used after lunch and recess.

As allergies had always been a part of his life, most of the time Tyrell accepted these precautions matter-of-factly, and his six years at the elementary school went by with no major health incidents—a relief to everyone! Even the few close calls and everyone's willingness to discuss what could be learned from these near-slips helped build trust and confidence in the team's efforts to maintain a safe environment for Tyrell.

Tyrell participated in Little League and Boy Scouts and played the drums in the school band. There were days when Tyrell seemed irritated by all the fuss at lunch time. There were a few times the staff had to search for Tyrell when he didn't appear in the cafeteria for lunch. But more days than not, he seemed to accept the routines established at school.

Now things were about to change: Tyrell would be entering middle school in the fall. His upcoming annual review meeting was extremely important since a new group of professionals would be learning about him, and together with Tyrell, his grandmother, and the elementary school team, designing a program at the middle school that would address his unique health needs.

Mrs. Ruby was anxious. The more she thought about Tyrell in middle school, the less she slept. His new school was huge—it seemed larger than the new shopping outlet. No matter how

many staff members kept their eyes on Tyrell, she knew he couldn't and probably shouldn't be "watched" all the time. What if the student sitting next to him had an egg for breakfast or peanut butter for lunch? The elementary school staff, students, and parents had understood the seriousness of the situation. Would the middle school staff be as vigilant, understanding, and compassionate?

Sheila Brown, the director of special education, was also anxious about this meeting. She had invited several of the elementary school staff along with key staff from the middle school to participate. She knew that the strong relationship between Mrs. Ruby and the elementary school was the result of years of ongoing honest conversations, continuously making adjustments, and problem-solving between home and school. Her goal for today's meeting was to make sure that an equally strong partnership be created, or at least initiated, with the middle school staff.

The large elementary school music room was used as a conference room to accommodate everyone. Mrs. Brown greeted the large group as her eyes circled through each of the 24 people sitting around the table, including Tyrell and two of his classmates. "We certainly are a village!" she chuckled. "I want to welcome all of you and share what we've learned as a team since Tyrell began his first year here as a kindergartner. We have a list of our 'lessons learned' to review with you. But before we share these, I want to get a little bit philosophical with you. I hope you don't mind." She paused and waited for a few heads to nod.

"When our team started this journey with Tyrell and his family six years ago, frankly we were worried, maybe even scared at times. The 'what if's' hung over us like ominous rain clouds. At the time, I was reading Peter Senge and his work about learning organizations. Inspired by his wisdom, I discussed with my staff one of his main points: 'Begin with the end in mind.' This simple phrase reinforced for me how important it was for teams to create a shared vision as a guide to their day-to-day practices." A few of the staff nodded as they recalled those earlier days.

Mrs. Brown continued, "Six years ago, as we sat at this same large table, I encouraged our team to begin with a shared vision about Tyrell's future. I asked Mrs. Ruby what she wanted to happen for Tyrell during his years in our elementary school. I can still hear what you said, Mrs. Ruby. Do you remember?"

Mrs. Ruby nodded, "Of course I do . . . I said, 'I want my grandson to be safe *and* be a *regular* kid in his school.' "

“Yes, Mrs. Ruby. Exactly! Your words focused us. It may sound a bit simple, but this vision has guided us in our planning every single day. We hope it helps you—his new team at the middle school.” For a moment, the room filled with an unfamiliar stillness, not typical of the music room.

Mrs. Brown took a deep breath, smiled at Tyrell, and said, “It’s your turn, Tyrell!” Tyrell jumped up and with his two classmates raced to the AV cart, announcing with pride, “We made an awesome PowerPoint called ‘Welcome to Tyrell’s World.’” With confidence and humor, they told stories of how they learned about “Tyrell-friendly foods” and the importance of frequent hand washing. They showed cleverly captioned photos of Tyrell and friends proudly displaying their blue ribbons at a science fair, hanging out in the band room, and goofing off at recess. It was abundantly clear that Tyrell was, indeed, a “regular kid” at school.

Tyrell’s principal, school nurse, teachers, and therapists went on to describe his program, his strengths, needs, and interests. As they spoke of the many accommodations that were currently being provided, Mrs. Ruby nodded gratefully, wiped her tearful eyes, and voiced her thanks to the team that had worked with her to keep Tyrell safe and healthy for all these years. Mrs. Brown reminded everyone that the success they saw at this meeting didn’t just happen. “We want to stress that our ability to work together was a result of numerous conversations and problem-solving moments. It’s been done here, and it can be done at the middle school. We want you all to continue our work to keep Tyrell out of harm’s way.”

Ms. Trice, the director of food services at the middle school, took a deep breath and stated, “Well, I can’t say I don’t have some concerns, but if the elementary school can do it, so can we. We will designate a peanut-free area in the middle school cafeteria where Tyrell can eat and be with his friends.” She indicated that she would also review all food items and remove those containing nuts. Looking directly at Tyrell, she said, “OK, young man, we’re going to make some changes to keep you safe. But we’ll need your help too. Don’t think we can do this all by ourselves.”

Tyrell rolled his eyes, “Sure . . . I’ve heard that before.”

Mrs. Ruby liked how the staff talked directly to Tyrell, and she was relieved that the cafeteria would now be a safer place for her grandson. She felt even better when Mrs. Brown said, “Let’s talk

about all the other things we do for Tyrell here and see how we can do the same at the middle school.”

The nurse said she would be happy to teach the sixth-grade teachers how to use the EpiPen and emphasized that she would be on call if an emergency arose. The school custodian promised to order wipes for all of the students in each of Tyrell’s classes. Mrs. Ruby was reassured that Tyrell’s paraprofessional would be accompanying him to the middle school, but here she spoke up. “This is a big concern for Tyrell,” she said. “We have to work on not letting her hover over him. She’s excellent at supporting Tyrell, but if his new friends see Tyrell coming down the hall with a ‘mother’ attached to him, they’ll avoid him like the plague.” Tyrell’s two friends confirmed, “You got that right!” The new principal noted that he’d place this issue at the top of the discussion list.

The school bell sounded, announcing the end of the school day. For Tyrell and his buddies, the meeting was over. They gathered their supplies and hurried off to band practice.

Uncertainty still hovered over every adult in the room, but Mrs. Ruby felt the stirrings of hope replacing the dread she’d carried for the past several weeks. She and Mrs. Brown shared a smile, both believing that this new team was starting on the right foot. A new dance was beginning, and the partners left the meeting with feelings of resolution, commitment, and hope—and as to be expected, a few worries too.

Staying Put at Creative Partnering: Dance Steps to Practice

STOP: Periodically stop and reflect on how trust was achieved in this partnership. What did it take? What challenges did the team face? How were compromises reached? Remember what it took to arrive at this phase of creative partnering and collaboration. Spend a few minutes at an annual review meeting to stop and acknowledge the strategies practiced by the team. Keep a written list to share with future teams.

LOOK: Look to the future and anticipate what new partnerships will be formed as the child moves forward in his or her schooling. Intentionally plan how the team will make a smooth transition to new partnerships. Allow for time to express feelings that come with saying “good-bye” to partners with whom you’ve worked.

LISTEN: Teams never outgrow their need to listen to each other. Even at this advanced phase of partnership—when trust is enduring and the foundation is strong—listening is as important as it was at the very first meeting. As the child grows, remember to encourage and support the child’s genuine participation in meetings and planning.

SHARE: Share what supports, interventions, and activities have been effective. Keep a list that can be given to new partners or new programs. Remember that the only constant partner for the child is his or her family. Professional partners, though important, will come and go. It is only the family who is most likely to remain at this dance with the child. Support families to be strong and effective advocates by sharing the knowledge, resources, and strategies discovered over the years.

TAKE CARE: Take time for self-care. Families and professionals have enormous demands pulling at them in numerous directions. Ask yourself, “What do I need to do to restore my energy and refresh my perspective?” Taking care of ourselves is not a “nice thing to do when there is time.” It is as necessary as the air we breathe! Having a hobby, regular exercise, reflection time, recreational or spiritual activities—whatever provides enjoyment and rest—is as important as a well-written I.E.P.

Remember to review the dance steps in the previous phases.

My Recollection: If I remember only one thing from my reading about Creative Partnering and Collaborating, it is

Caveats and Suggestions

As in all developmental models, no one moves through these three phases in a clear, predictable, and ascending manner. We move up and down, back and forth, get stuck, skip stages, repeat and revisit former phases. Circumstances can cause us to move erratically in our relationships. For example, a new diagnosis, a transition to a new school or services, a change in personnel, and family stressors for either the parents or the professionals can all have an impact on our ability to partner. Each child, family, and team of professionals has a unique way of interacting and moving toward the phase of creative partnering. There is no one right dance—no one way for all partnerships.

We have also learned from many parents and professionals that few working relationships get to the third level of creative partnering. Think about it. Most of us have only a few people throughout our lives with whom we can feel that unwavering sense of trust. The third phase of partnership as described here takes time, conversation, courage, and a strong belief that working on the relationship is worth it, in the short run and long run.

Each of these three phases is rooted in real events and expectations. We gain insight as we better understand our current position in these phases. If we know where we are, we can explore how we got there and what we can do to move forward.

We will not be able to dance gracefully with everyone, in every situation, every year. Sometimes we have to ask others to do the dancing for us or with us when we are at a standstill with a particular partner. Maybe the teacher consultant or other staff member might partner more easily with a particular teacher, rather than having the parent immediately intervene. This type of mediation need not be seen as a failure, but rather as a creative way to deal with personalities that may clash or with circumstances that need more time or a brand new approach.

What seems important is that we all pay attention to the relationship and not discount or underestimate its significance in creating and achieving meaningful supports, plans, and programs for our children. In our partnership trainings, we suggest that the first goal of every plan, every Individualized Family Services Plan (IFSP), Individualized Education Plan (IEP), or any other service plan

should be “to strengthen the parent-professional partnership.” When we suggest this, members of the audience often smile in amusement, but begin nodding their heads in agreement. “Yes, that makes sense.” When we genuinely function as a team, the plan we map out is more attainable, and success for the child comes closer to fruition.

Practical Suggestions

- As you begin a new relationship, think about the dance metaphor and the three phases that comprise the dance of partnership:

Phase 1: Colliding and Campaigning

Phase 2: Cooperating and Compromising

Phase 3: Creative Partnering and Collaborating

- Remember that not all partners dance through these phases in a clear, predictable, ascending manner. Circumstances may cause partners to move up and down, return to former phases, or leap ahead.
- Remember that relationships need time to develop. Conversation, problem-solving, and hard work are required. Remember that smack dab in the middle of the word, *collaboration* is the word *labor*. Indeed, partnerships take work!
- Remember the importance of listening in establishing and nurturing a partnership. “Listening allows you to demonstrate precise understanding of what another has said, and helps you be perceived as being competent and a worthy collaborator” (Friend & Cook, 2010).
- Rely on the insights, perspectives, and expertise of your partner, as both parents and professionals have much to offer.



MORE RESOURCES

Harvard Family Research Project

<http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources>

A Student's Guide to the IEP—National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities

<http://nichcy.org/wp-content/uploads/docs/st1.pdf>

Special Quest: Multi Media Training Library

<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/teaching/Disabilities/Staff%20Support%20and%20Supervision/Orientation/specialquest-training-library/specialquest-multimedia-training-library.html>