



How can I get more services from my child's school?

This question is a frequent one received by the Autism Society of Oregon (ASO). Parents and caregivers of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) want the best possible education for their child and sometimes feel like they are running in place, losing valuable time and getting no where in the special education system.

The intent of this article is to outline some steps when advocating for your child with ASD within the school setting. We always recommend that parents advocate in a positive way, showing respect, applying good listening skills and making a strong effort to relate to your child's education team. You want to develop a team whose number one interest is the education of your child.

1. **Develop a blueprint for your child with ASD:** Autism is a lifelong developmental disorder and parents need to plan for this. Look at the long term picture, not just the child's educational needs for the next school year. Before you go into the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting, ask yourself this question: What do I want my child's adult life to look like? Then establish goals around how to achieve them over a student's lifetime. What are the functional life skills that are important now, and what are the critical life skills that need to be learned for a student to be more successful as an adult? By looking further down the road, parents are able to identify and prioritize lifelong goals so that the whole team can work towards greater success for a student. This can look like more service time, but more often results in better, more specialized and effective service time. When a parent comes with specific goals in mind, many teams do a better job of writing individualized goals that really make a difference. Special education teams accomplish more when they have a larger end goal in mind.

2. **Quantify your concerns:** Many parents go tell the special education team "I don't think my child is improving". The school district needs more information than this to evaluate your concerns. You might want to look at the IEP short term goals and try to quantify the data. If it says the goal should be hit 80% of the time, try working on the goal with your child at home and record your findings. Maybe not as scientific as the school districts but will still have a quantifiable element to it to help support your position with the special education team. If the team response is "We don't see that at school. He/she is meeting all of his goals here", remind them that good results need to transcend school and occur in ALL environments-school, home, work environment, grocery store, etc.



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3. **Call an IEP meeting:** Yes, as the caregivers of your child, you are entitled to call an IEP meeting at any time during the school year. You do not have to wait until the annual IEP meeting date to discuss your concerns. Sometimes a 5 minute conversation with the special education teacher will suffice, sometimes not. If you do request an IEP meeting, our suggestions are:

- Put your meeting request in writing
- Send it to all the IEP team participants and don't forget to include the special education person from the school district
- Outline in detail what it is you want to accomplish in the meeting
- Do your homework before hand, quantifying your concerns as much as possible as recommended above
- Make time recommendations (before school/after school?) and give the team an idea of how long you think the meeting should be. In all due fairness to the teachers and specialists, they are very busy people too so be respectful of their time.
- Check out the IEP Partner Program with Oregon PTI, www.orpti.org, 1-888-891-6784. The IEP Partner can help you prepare for the meeting and take notes during the meeting. If you can't get an IEP Partner, take a friend and ask them to take good notes for you.

4. **Tap into the community beyond school:** Check out other autism non-profits such as the Autism Society of Oregon, Bridgeway House, Kindtree, Autism Research & Resources of Oregon, Northwest Autism Foundation and the parent support groups around the state. Oregon PTI, www.orpti.org, sponsors great workshops on the IEP process, transition services, transitioning into kindergarten, how to advocate in the IEP meeting, etc. These workshops are free and occur throughout Oregon on a regular basis.

5. **Tap into private therapies:** If your budget and/or insurance allow it, get additional therapy for your child beyond what is being offered at school. Oregon has many specialists offering speech, sensory integration, ABA, RDI, behavioral consultations. Check the resource listings on ASO's website at www.oregonautism.com or call ASO at 1-888-AUTISM1 for specialists in your area.

6. **Share your concerns with your state representative!** Last but certainly not least, contact your district legislator and tell them more services need to be allocated in the education system for kids with ASD. Tell your legislator that Nancy Latini, head of Special Education for the Oregon Department of Education, is advocating for more funding in the 2009 session (The Oregonian, March 13, 2008). Remind your elected officials of how important education is for children living with autism. In the long run, their life will be greatly improved with the right education services made available to them today.