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School-Based Parent Support Groups – Why and How

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“The mystery – and perhaps some of the stigma - [of learning disabilities] may finally be starting to lift” reports *Time Magazine* (July 28, 2003 “Overcoming Dyslexia”, page 53.) To the parent of a child recently diagnosed with any learning disability, both “mystery” and “stigma” are still foremost in the mind and heart of the parent. I would add to this: isolation and fear.

The world is a competitive place, and certainly the world of academia, especially in the private school sector, is not immune from the American need to compete and excel. Your child’s diagnosis then, at first blush, suggests success is compromised. Your challenge as a parent just increased - exponentially.

I am the parent of an 8th grader in a San Francisco private school. She was diagnosed in the 1st grade and her difficulty was explained to us as follows: “Imagine using an IBM computer with Macintosh software.” Pretty stunning explanation. Mystery, stigma and fear overwhelmed us. How was our daughter going to learn and excel in this competitive world of ours?

After 7 years, I can now conclude that parenting a LD child has forever altered and enlightened me as a parent and as a person – all for the best. I have learned to appreciate and respect my daughter’s uncommon gifts in a way that I would have missed had I not been forced to view the world through her eyes. Her strengths, determination, talents, creativity and heart, continue to astound me.

In our journey, we have been fortunate to find incredible support for our daughter but what about us as parents? Nothing has helped us more than other parents, who like us, were struggling to understand the significance of the diagnosis, and find a way to navigate the difficult road ahead.

I recently helped form a school-based parent support group at the San Francisco private school our daughter now attends. When our daughter transitioned from the Charles Armstrong School in Belmont to a “mainstream” school here, feelings of isolation and fear returned with a vengeance until a group of parents, together with the school’s remarkable and dedicated Learning Specialist formed a parent support group. We are now commencing our second year, and both our accomplishments and goals for the coming year, I think, are truly remarkable.



It was a simple enough first meeting last fall. We sent home a flyer at the very beginning of the school year, entitled “Parent Evening Discussing Learning Style Differences”. We invited all parents to help us form “a parent education group that will meet regularly to share information and experiences and learn more about learning style differences.” The request, again, simple: “Come tell us what you would like to learn about.” The turnout was amazing! We broke into small groups to brainstorm and discuss goals for our parent group and shared them with the larger group. We passed around a clipboard asking anyone interested, to place an asterisk next to their name if they wished to join a steering committee. In one night, an incredible group of dedicated and supportive parents with kids in 2nd through 7th grade volunteered to take on this project. As a steering committee we meet regularly (2-3 times a month) to plan monthly meetings for the entire parent body that alternate between support group meetings and educational presentations. Last year, we sponsored a “Summer Fair” for Bay Area parents of elementary students with twenty plus presenters of “cool tools”, learning specialists and summer programs designed to help LD kids. Again, the turnout told us the need for this kind of information was great and we are certain to provide the Summer Fair again this year.

Our group provides not only practical advice and information but also the emotional support necessary to any parent of a LD kid. We keep abreast of conferences and outside resources as well as share emotions and stories unique to the roller coaster ride of struggling through homework, accommodations, tutors, standardized tests and parent-teacher conferences, all of which is completely overwhelming if faced alone.

In forming your own parent support group, you should consider staff participation. Our school’s Learning Specialist is a member of our committee. It is an important way of communicating with the administration and faculty, as she is also the lower school dean. Parent support groups in other schools have often elected to meet solely as a group of parents as they feel they can be more open about school issues if the meetings are limited to parents.

Our structured presentations during the year are decided by the steering committee, which attempts to address and respond to the concerns of the larger parent body. Our formal presentations have included panel discussions from parents representing a broad spectrum of learning differences. We have brought in outside speakers and learning specialists to address and educate us about learning styles, difficulties and accommodations. This year, our group will write a column in the school newsletter. A simulation of learning differences, provided by volunteers of the International Dyslexia Association is a must for every parent group. For a small fee to the organization, parents are able to rotate through a variety of stations designed to mimic a number of learning difficulties experienced by our children.

PEN is happy to help your school formulate or guide a parent support group. A support group is essential to parenting your LD child in order to grapple with the volumes of literature and programs available. More importantly, it provides an opportunity to find support for what is a most difficult as well as a forum to celebrate the very special gifts and incredible successes your LD child brings to you and your school community.