



HELPING PARENTS KEEP THE BIG PICTURE IN MIND

Understanding Why Some Issues Linger &
How Schools Can Help Parents & Teams Move
Forward Together.

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This session is intended to help participants understand:

- WHY some parents sometimes appear to be “fixated” or “hung-up” on events in the past that appear to others to be irrelevant to the ongoing decision-making process of the child’s education, and
- HOW to help parents focus on the ongoing and current educational decision-making process that all parties need and want for them to participate in.

We will do this through a combination of roleplaying exercises and conversations, as well as a short presentation.

DEFINING THE PROBLEM

Part One

Why are we still
talking about this?

Many teams, especially when there are current or historically high levels of distrust and/conflict between the school or district and the parents, struggle to return the IEP team to the functional collaborative decision-making body it was intended to be.

One barrier to that return to functionality (assuming the team was ever functional, which it might not have been) is that some teams are “stuck” re-litigating or re-discussing issues that do not appear to be relevant to the team’s current work and take up the team’s energy and resources. Even if the team is able to move forward, talking about these issues takes up valuable trust, time and interpersonal capital and frequently the process must be repeated every meeting, or may resurface as an issue when any new conflict or need to expend interpersonal capital arises.

This section is designed to help school professionals understand why parents may bring up “stale” or “old” concerns, “meaningless” errors or “merely procedural” mistakes.

EXAMPLES

WHY ARE WE STILL TALKING ABOUT...

- Why does this parent **STILL** care about the fact that the school psychologist's report got some of the family's social history wrong in her report at eligibility 2 and ½ years ago!?
- Do we have to talk about the fact that we missed the deadline for the pre-meeting paperwork at every meeting? She got what she needed before the meeting!
- Why is this parent harping on the MDR from 2 years ago?
- Does it really matter that the absence code is correct for every one of the students' absences – they are all excused!

SO WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?

Part two

Because talking about it serves an purpose or function for the parent!

Exert some power and control when they feel overwhelmed and disempowered; a desire to “level the playing field” if they don’t feel heard, or if they feel that they are being treated unfairly.

**SOME EXAMPLES OF
THOSE FUNCTIONS**

Shift blame back to the school or district, especially in response to what they see as blaming/shaming by the school.

Demonstrate competence in the face of presumed incompetence; reflects a desire to be treated with the same courtesy/professionalism/deference as other team members.

Avoiding collateral consequences not immediately apparent to school team.

Rejection of perceived lack of power - Parents frequently see a mistakes by the school has reflecting the parent’s low status/low power in relation to the school

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?

Unmet need of parent

Parent feels that school does not take her perspective seriously, and gives too much weight to a related service provider.

Parent brings up “old” or “unimportant” issue

Meeting starts with parent complaining that school did not comply with timeline to provide materials in advance of meeting, while it appears that rest of team has had materials for quite a while. Or parent refuses to meet because the materials were not provided in a timely fashion.

Parent's need is met, at expense of team's productivity or capacity

Parent has demonstrated competence (I know the rules about sharing documents in advance) and forced the school to acknowledge that.

BREAKDOWN THE EXAMPLES IN GROUPS

Unmet need of parent

Remember - Parent's need does not have to be school-created. It can be, but it does not have to be.

Parent brings up "old" or "unimportant" issue

Remember the issues and the unmet need don't have to be directly or topically connected.

For example, a parent's feeling that the school is blaming her for child's behavior may result in the parent wanting to shift that blame back to the school by pointing out their incompetence or ineffectiveness via a discussion of teacher turn over or poor achievement on statewide assessments.

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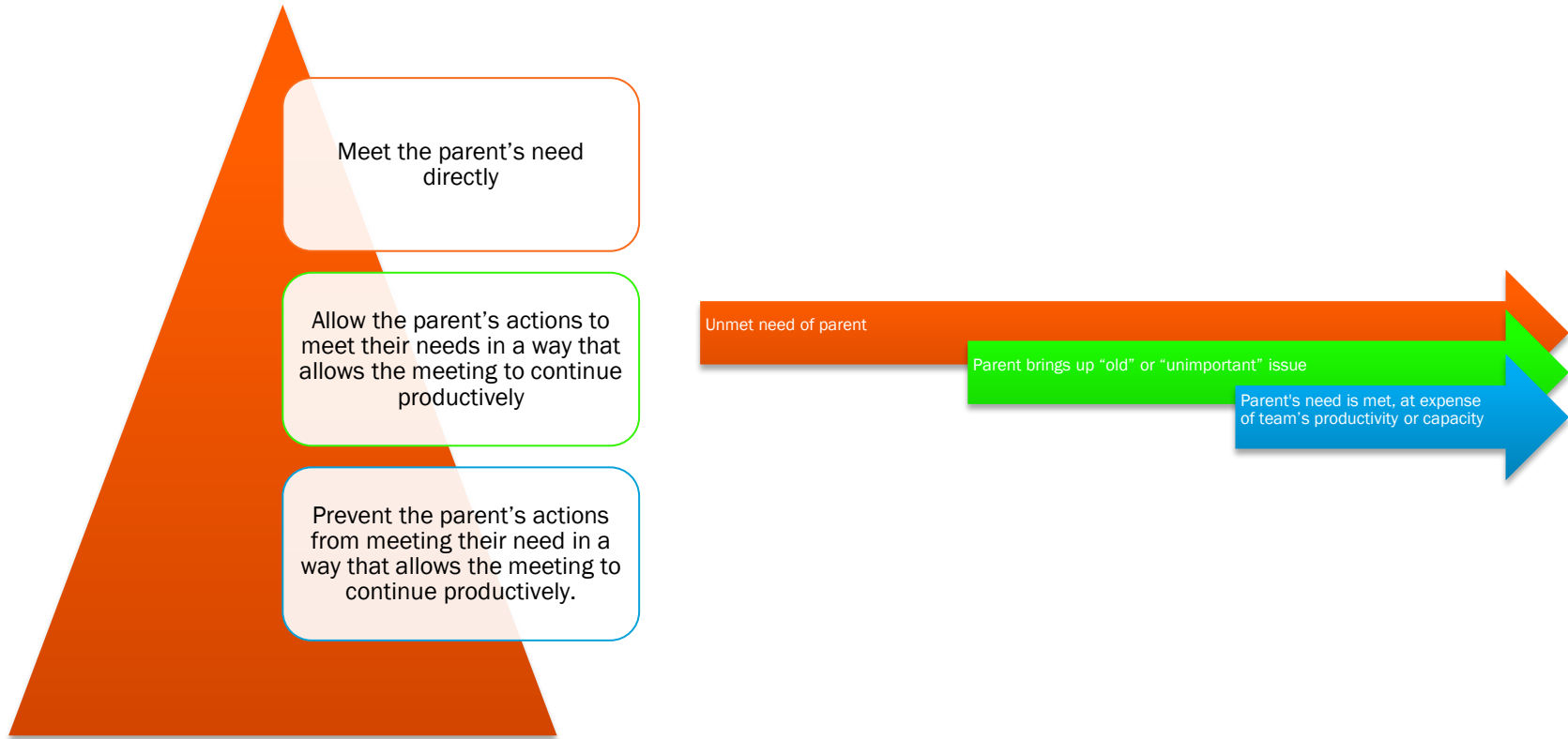
What does the parent gain by bringing up this old issue?

WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO ABOUT IT?

Part three

Meet the unmet need of the parent in a way that is allows the team to move forward together.

WHERE WE CAN INTERRUPT THIS PROCESS



HOW TO INTERRUPT THE PROCESS

Use the 4 A technique to identify the Parent's unstated needs.

- **Acknowledging** what the parent is saying. *I hear you saying...I hear that you are....I think you are saying...*
- **Asking** for more information. *I see that this is very important to you – why is that? Do you feel that it is getting in the way of the student making progress? Do you feel it makes your job harder as a parent, member of the team?*
- **Apologizing** – When it is needed. *I am sorry.*
- **Addressing and/or Accepting** what needs to be done, and if nothing can be done, saying so. *What can I do to address this? If there is nothing I can do, why is it something that it is important that we talk about?*
 - You may need to re-start the 4As here if parent shares a reason that is substantially different than the initial concern.

PRACTICE USING THE 4 A TECHNIQUE IN SMALL GROUPS

Remember, this is a way to identify parent's needs, that sometimes up meeting their need too, especially if they feel unheard.

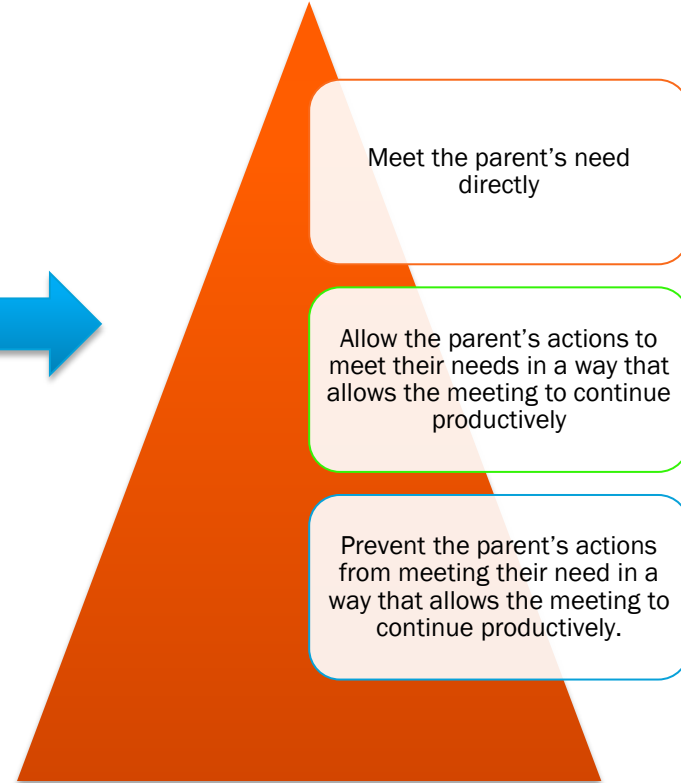
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SOME EXAMPLES OF UNMET NEEDS

- Parent needs to be heard.
- Parent needs for his/her thoughts & experiences to be valued
- Parent needs blame to distributed appropriately.
- Parent needs to feel competent as a team member.
- Parent needs validation.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER; USE THE 4 A TECHNIQUE TO DETERMINE HOW TO MEET PARENT'S NEED

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EXAMPLES OF MEETING THE NEED DIRECTLY

Parent repeats high-conflict concerns from the past that have historically resulted in school/district listening to him at start of meetings, even though they are not at issue now.

- School/District uses 4 A technique to identify parent's need – he does not feel school hear his concerns at the meetings unless he invokes previous conflicts.
- 4 A technique meets parent's need to feel heard and provides an avenue to meet that need moving forward if addressing/accepting portion of 4 A technique is implemented.

Parent complains about errors in 3 year old social history, uses it to undermine credibility of current staff who had nothing to with errors.

- School/District uses 4 A technique to identify parent's need – she feels the errors mean that at every meeting she needs to fit to reestablish her own credibility and explain child's history.
- School/District explains how parent can supplement student's education record and potential for reevaluations. School/District may also apologize for error or correct the error at meetings so parent does not feel she has to bring up the issue again.

EXAMPLES OF ALLOWING THE PARENT'S ACTIONS TO MEET THEIR NEEDS

This is often most applicable when the Parent is attempting to meet a need around his/her feelings of competence and adequacy as a member of the team.

- As difficult as it is, think about how the school may be contributing to the creation of that need.
- Sometimes, reframing the response to Parent's potentially derailing actions can be very effective here. This requires potentially means praising parent for past zealous advocacy, or being a “mama or papa bear.’ By doing this the school/district proactive is preventing the Parent from needing to raise the issue, and by doing so in response to the parent’s statement you can prevent it from derailing the meeting.

EXAMPLES OF PREVENTING THE PARENT'S ACTIONS FROM DERAILING THE MEETING

This is the most difficult of the three to manage, but if the Parent is bringing up the old issue and you can not meet the need it is addressing, you can still prevent it from derailing the meeting by -

- Neutralizing it at the outset. Frame the previous disagreement in the introductions at the outset of the meeting or give the parent time and space to articulate it early in the meeting. This limits the potential of the issue to derail the meeting as long as the school does not reengage around it. If appropriate, acknowledge past mistakes and agree to disagree, and/or agree that the matter can not resolved at the table.
- Provide Parent with access other forums and dispute resolution processes, and decline to make the IEP meeting available for this conversation. Parent training in IDEA and school governance can be very helpful here.

Collaborative agenda setting is particularly useful in those of these.

PRACTICALLY - WHAT TO WE DO WITH ALL THIS INFORMATION?

Part four

Now that we understand where these old issues are coming from we can more effectively use traditional meeting management methods.

PUTTING ALL THIS INTO ACTION

Once the parent does not feel that their needs are being ignored and/or feels that they are being met in some way, it should be easier to keep the conversation on track by using traditional meeting management methods such as;

- Articulating the big picture goals at outset and linking team actions to them.
- Using an agenda (consider a collaborative created agenda where parent has some real ownership).
- Establishing ground rules and procedures
- Providing time estimates (and sticking to them!)
- Determining areas of consensus and points of agreement.
- Distribution of materials in advance if appropriate

These traditional methods are especially important in high conflict relationships because they structure and limit the scope of conversation. However, using the 4 A technique and finding parent's unmet needs, does not guarantee that there won't be conflict, but we hope any conflict will be more substantive.

WHEN THOSE OLD ISSUES DO BUBBLE UP!

Emphasis the big overarching goals of the child's IEP & the meeting's connection to those goals. This is the big picture we want to keep in mind.

Generally when these issues reappear, use the 4 A technique to see if it is connected it to the conversation or issue at hand. Sometimes, there is a connection that can and should be addressed by the team. However, many times the issue is being brought up for a functional purpose to met an unmet need.

If your attempts to get the Parent unstuck aren't working, you can also

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WHEN THOSE OLD ISSUES BUBBLE UP AND JUST WON'T SIMMER DOWN.

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ONE LAST ROLE PLAY!

AND FINAL REFLECTIONS

THANK YOU!

Ideas for improvement? Questions? Other feedback?

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