



ADA Live!

EPISODE 23: BACK TO SCHOOL – WHAT PARENTS NEED TO KNOW BEFORE THE SCHOOL YEAR BEGINS

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Presenters: Georgia Fruechtenicht, Parent to Parent of Georgia

Host: Sally Weiss, Southeast ADA Center

VOICE-OVER ANNOUNCER: Blog Talk Radio. (Music) Welcome to WADA ADA Live! Talk radio. Brought to you by the Southeast ADA Center, your leader for information, training and guidance on the Americans with Disabilities Act. And here's your host.

SALLY WEISS: Good afternoon and welcome to WADA ADA Live. On behalf of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University and the ADA National Network, welcome to the 23rd episode of ADA Live.

My name is Sally Weiss, I'm the Director of Knowledge Translation for the Southeast ADA Center. Our guest today is Georgia Fruechtenicht -- Curriculum and Learning Specialist, Trainer, and Navigator Team Leader for Parent to Parent of Georgia. She's also the Parent Coordinator for the parent detainer project, which is part of the autism plan for Georgia.

Today's topic is "Back to School What Parents Need to Know Before the School Year Begins." ADA listening audience, you can submit your questions about IDEA, 504 the ADA at any time on ADAlive.org. Georgia, welcome to our show.

GEORGIA FRUECHTENICHT: Thank you, Sally, I'm glad to be here.

SALLY WEISS: Today we're talking about what parents need to know to help their child's school year off to a good start. Georgia, can you tell us what you think the first thing a parent needs to do?

GEORGIA FRUECHTENICHT: Sure, I think the first thing a parent needs to do is to spend some time deciding what type of relationship do you want to have with the

people at your child's school? My recommendation is to be determined to have a positive relationship that's really more of a partnership. Where each person brings something to the table. So, I think as soon as I find out who my children's teachers are, I send them an e-mail and I try to get to know them. And I really, I try to understand, get to know them as people and understand their perspective and that determination will affect all of my interactions with the school system. So, just creating a foundation of a positive relationship is really important, because then later, when something comes up that may be not so positive, you've got that foundation of something positive.

SALLY WEISS: Georgia, that makes a lot of sense. Do you have some suggestions about how parents can help their child who is very anxious about going back to school?

GEORGIA FRUECHTENICHT: Absolutely. I have this situation at my house, for sure. The anxiety about the first day of school can be debilitating. Sometimes you hear -- I recommend communicating that anxiety and requesting accommodations. Hopefully the accommodations are already discussed and mapped out in the IEP or the 504 Plan, but sometimes parents will get push back from a school. They'll be discounted somewhat and the school will say, you know, everybody's anxious on the first day of school. I think it's important to distinguish a child with a disability's anxiety, from maybe a neuro-typical anxiety. The way I've done that in the past, that's worked well -- the difference between typical anxiety and my child's anxiety is the frequency, the duration and the intensity of the anxiety.

There's lots of things you can do to help with that. Visiting the school, visiting the school when it's not packed with kids in the hallways. So maybe when it's empty, taking pictures works well. Meeting the teachers, meeting the lunch room folks, getting the schedule in advance. And walking through the schedule. At home, you may want to use social stories, you can Google social stories and find a lot of support online for that and also, maybe, a picture schedule or a visual schedule that you could post on the refrigerator or somewhere around the house that has pictures of, of the schedules.

SALLY WEISS: Georgia, can you talk more about a visual schedule? Can you tell me what it really looks like?

GEORGIA FRUECHTENICHT: Sure. Many kids, especially kids with language processing issues, process visual information with less anxiety than auditory information. And so, a visual schedule would be just what it sounds like. It would be a schedule that is pictures, and those pictures could be real pictures. Perhaps you visit the school beforehand and you take pictures of the classroom, of the teachers, of the outside of the school and you post them around your house, so they're there and your

child gets used to what they look like and you can have a conversation about that. They're really helpful for non-readers or children with auditory processing issues. If you have a child who's a strong reader, but still needs that visual on what to expect, you may have the words written out, it may not be pictures. The pictures don't have to be real. Google Images has tons of pictures. It could be cartoon-type pictures.

Another thing, as far as preparing in advance -- is sometimes if you have a child going into middle school or high school, the locker can be a source of anxiety. And so finding out the type of lock they use with a locker, and practicing that at home can reduce some of that. All of the little things really add up. The more you find out about that experience, the more you can prepare your child for it and so, it won't be so overwhelming.

SALLY WEISS: Thank you. We have a question from one of our listeners. It says, I requested an IEP meeting and the school says we should wait a couple of weeks until the teacher gets to know my child. Do I have to wait?

GEORGIA FRUECHTENICHT: It is absolutely the parent's choice. A parent can request an IEP meeting at any time. I think sometimes it might be appropriate to wait. If you have a child who doesn't have a lot of anxiety about school, then, then maybe it is okay to wait and let the teacher get to know the child and the child get to know the teacher and then have a meeting to kind of check in and see how things are going.

But if you've got the situation we just talked about, you have a child who has a lot of anxiety and perhaps has a need for sameness, then having that meeting before school starts can really make a big difference. It can really set them up for being successful. You may want to think about, decide and be intentional, whether you include your child in that meeting. My son, Augie started coming to his meetings in kindergarten. He only passed out the snacks when he was in kindergarten and talked a little bit about what's going on. Then we had him go to another room with another adult and we had the "meat" of the meeting. For him, I remember him telling me, when he was in fourth grade, he felt like having an IEP team was comforting to him. He felt like this is a whole room full of people who care about me and care about my success. He told me, he said Mom, I think everybody needs to have an IEP team. I agree. Everybody needs a group of people that care about them.

SALLY WEISS: Georgia, I think Augie's on to something. I think it's a great idea. ADA Live! listening audience, if you have a question about the ADA, IDEA, and Section 504, please submit it at any time at our online forum at ADALive.org. Now a word from our sponsors.

VOICE OVER ANNOUNCER: Parent to Parent of Georgia is a statewide non-profit that helps individuals and families impacted by disabilities or with special health care

needs. P2P is a unique organization because callers are connected to staff who are parents, too. We believe one of the most meaningful sources of support is another parent or family member who has experienced navigating the educational and health care systems in Georgia. We believe that all families can be empowered to be involved in education and health-related decision-making. With staff and the network of parent volunteers across the state of Georgia, P to P is the source of support, education and leadership development for families or individuals with any disabilities or special health care needs. All of our services are provided free of charge. Call us today at 1-800-229-2038 or visit our website at P2PGA.org. Another parent is waiting to talk with you.

SALLY WEISS: We've been talking with Georgia Fruechtenicht, Curriculum and Learning Specialist for Parent to Parent of Georgia. Here's our next question. What should I do to prepare for the IEP or 504 meeting?

GEORGIA FRUECHTENICHT: That's a great question, Sally. Preparation is so important. We talked a bit about the kid's anxiety with starting school, but the reality is, as parents, we have our own anxiety about our children starting school. So, understanding that and being prepared for those meetings is really important. I already talked a little bit about whether or not to include your child, and I feel strongly that people should include their child in meetings, but it's really, it's a parent's choice. Sometimes it may not be appropriate. You want to, whether it's in an e-mail or phone call, if your child's going to attend an IEP meeting, you want to also prepare the team for your child's attending. You want to make sure it's a positive experience for your child. If you know it's going to be a tough meeting and you know there's some frustration among the teachers and there's going to be some stuff that's negative, perhaps your child has a behavior, some behavior challenges, then you want to prepare the team and say, okay, he's coming to the meeting at the beginning of the meeting, I want this to be a positive experience. I need you guys to be supportive. And for him to feel like he's got your support and you want him to be successful. If you've got really negative stuff to say, wait until he leaves the room.

And so...just making sure that your child knows what to expect and the team knows what your expectations are. This is not a time for you to bring your child in and for them to rag your child around during that time.

Consider the atmosphere, I always bring food. I find chocolate makes people relax, it brings people together. I typically bring chocolate and fruit, because invariably, you've got somebody that's going to be on the diet. Consider bringing food. If you're meeting at lunch time, maybe you want to provide lunch.

Help the team get to know your child as a person. This is especially true if you're going into a new school or into a new grade. Which typically people do every year. You've got a team that doesn't know your child. They get the IEP and see the big stack of paper, but it's my goal for them to see my child as a person and as a kid that has strengths and challenges and not just a disability. There are lots of ways that people do this. Some people make videos. If you go to YouTube and search "IEP video," you'll see a couple videos people have made for the IEP meeting. There's actually an article on Wrightslaw about how to make your own videos. It's really not that difficult. You may bring pictures. For me, I'm a storyteller. I like to tell stories, I'm going to tell a story to help people get to know my child.

One that I like to tell on Augie, who's now 12, but this happened when he was in first grade. He got in the car and I said, "How was your day?" He said, "Bad." I said, "Tell me about it." He said, "Well, my teacher told me I need to worry about myself but I'm not sure what to worry about." Well, that tells the team a lot about Augie. It says, basically, you need to be careful of your language because that teacher was telling him to mind his own business. He was all up in, he's a strict rule-follower and he was all up in everybody else's business. They were probably not following the rules and he needed to work on his own work and focus on his own stuff and not be worried about everybody else.

But for Augie, he's very literal and so, she told him to worry about himself and he was willing to do that, but he wasn't sure what to worry about. So...you can see that, you get to know Augie a little bit as a quirky little kid. And I hope you smiled when you heard that story. That's my goal for the IEP team to get to know him as a quirky kid that makes you smile.

Another thing is you may want to take someone with you to your IEP meeting or your 504 meeting. It could be someone who knows a whole lot about the law and the process and all of that stuff, and it could be your neighbor who doesn't know anything, but she helps you feel calm. And she makes you feel like you're supported.

I think it changes the atmosphere when you bring someone with you. I typically bring my husband and I've been asked if he's allowed to talk in an IEP meeting. Absolutely he is allowed to talk, but he doesn't typically talk much in those meetings, but he takes notes and that's really important. Sometimes the person in charge of the minutes will miss something and Gary will catch it. And so...so that's important as far as someone that can maybe take notes and someone that can make you feel supported. Sometimes parents feel like it's all of these people at the table and then it's me. And that feels kind of lonely.

You may want to create a one-page agenda, or I call mine a parent report. And that's just to keep you on track, because the meetings do get intense and you go into all kinds of different things. And typically on my parent report, for Augie's, they all have Augie's strengths and the positives. This is what's going well and then this is what's challenging. And then, these are some concerns I have. And then here are some considerations for the team. And some parents will, instead of considerations, they will have parent requests. And that's your choice, but for me, I really want the team to make decisions. I don't want it to be me requesting stuff and them saying yes or no. I want a collaborative effort. I find sometimes the Special Ed folks do better at coming up with stuff than I do. If I just have things I want them to consider, we can consider them as a team.

One last thing on preparation, I know this is a big topic. We could talk the whole time about that, so you may consider creating a one pager about your child for teachers, admin folks, the lunch room folks, maybe special folks, the people who aren't going to see the whole IEP. That one pager may include some strengths of your child, some challenges that your child has, and then some strategies that might help. It's not important to include a diagnosis, it's really more important to, these are the things we're good at, these are the things we struggle with and this is how you can support me.

SALLY WEISS: Thanks, Georgia, that's a really great idea. Is there something else that might be important for parents to do?

GEORGIA FRUECHTENICHT: I think it's really important to talk to your kids. Educate them about their strengths as well as their challenges. I think it's important to start those conversations as early as possible and, and make, I mean, have the attitude that disability is a natural part of life. It's not anything to be ashamed of, it's just part of who we are. Augie has a disability just like he has brown hair and food allergies. It's just part of who he is. So, I think it's important to talk to your kids, I think it's important for them to know and every child's going to be different, as far as how much they understand and how much they can do this, but I think it's important to share the accommodations with the kids. My 10-year-old, Virginia, pulled out her 504 accommodations and showed them to the teacher. She had a copy in her desk because her teacher forgot about one of them. That self-advocacy, you can learn that really early. I think that's important.

Also, it's important to know what your rights are. That'll help you be prepared and it's going to help you communicate with your team and it's going to help you be reasonable because you're going to know what you have the right to do. I think it's important to let the school know that you know what your rights are, without beating them on the head with it. I've never taken a statute to an IEP meeting, but I do use

language like “least restrictive environment” or an “appropriate education” or “FAPE,” which stands for “Free Appropriate Public Education.” I use language that lets them know I know what my rights are and I understand. There's a lot of training online. Parent to Parent, if you're in the state of Georgia, does a lot of free training. It's important to know what your rights are so you can navigate the system.

SALLY WEISS: That's another good point for our listeners to understand. Thanks a lot, Georgia. You provided us with quite a bit of valuable information. Before we continue, here's a word from our sponsors.

VOICE OVER ANNOUNCER: The Southeast ADA Center is your leader in providing information, training and guidance on the Americans with Disabilities Act and disability access tailored to the needs of business, government and individuals at local, state and regional levels. The Southeast ADA Center, located in Atlanta, Georgia is a member of the ADA National Network and serves eight states in the Southeast region. For answers to your ADA questions, contact the ADA National Network at 1-800-949-4232.

SALLY WEISS: We've been talking about what to do in an IEP or 504 meeting. What about afterwards, Georgia? Is there something you'd recommend that parents do?

GEORGIA FRUECHTENICHT: Absolutely, I think it's really important to follow up after the meeting and express your appreciation. Even if the meeting is not going well at all. They did take the time out of their day to meet with you. I think it's important to thank them. I usually do this in an e-mail. You can use stationery if you like, but I like to send an e-mail that says, thank you, I appreciate your spending time with me and list what you accomplished at the meeting, what was positive about the meeting. Something happened that was positive. Even if you have to try hard to make something up. You can make up something that is positive. This is what we accomplished at the meeting. If there are any open issues, maybe someone was going to check on an occupational therapy evaluation or maybe, you know, maybe there was something that's open that people were going to check on or maybe you didn't come to a decision on something. That's another opportunity, after you said thank you, and you listed some positives, and some accomplishments from the meeting, to talk about what are the open issues and then who's responsible for them. Jane said she was going to check on this. I look forward to hearing from Jane. Then Jane knows she's on the hook to do what she said she was going to do.

Also, for me, I'm always thinking about man, I wish I would have said something. This is another opportunity for you to, if you forget to say something, you can add that in that meeting. You can also ask for your e-mail to be part of, part of the record.

SALLY WEISS: So far, we've been discussing the grades K through 12. Because more students with disabilities are going on to community colleges, vocational schools or four-year institutions -- do you have suggestions for what these students and their parents need to know?

GEORGIA FRUECHTENICHT: Absolutely. I've alluded to this a little bit, as far as talking to your kids and making sure they understand their disability and how it affects their education and their accommodations because once they get out of school, they don't have an IEP anymore. So, they're going to have to ask for accommodations. The parents aren't going to be there, okay? It's up to the child – who's not a child, they're a young adult by then. It's up to the student to ask for those accommodations and be able to explain what supports they need to be able to access their education. And for some kids, this is really a challenging transition, especially if they're used to the IEP team and their parents doing all that for them.

So, I think the earlier you start preparing them for requesting accommodations, being able to communicate clearly about what they need, the better off that transition is going to go. I think it's really important to know that transition is coming up and you want to prepare for it.

SALLY WEISS: Georgia, we're almost out of time. What do you hope our listeners take away from today's broadcast? Are there key points you hope they remember?

GEORGIA FRUECHTENICHT: Sure, I think...to go back to my very first point about being intentional, being intentional about your relationships and being careful you don't let your emotions dictate your relationship with the school. It's challenging. These are our children we're talking about. It's emotional. If you treat that relationship very intentionally and be determined to create a positive partnership, I think of it more as a professional friendship than a personal friendship. My goal is to end up with a positive friendship by the end, by the middle of the year, really.

Don't send any e-mails when you're angry, save them in your draft box, let them sit for a couple days. Let someone else read it before you send it, because you can't get them back. And sometimes that can, I'll give you an example of that, before Augie started first grade, I was a mess, I was really anxious about that, him starting first grade, probably more than he was. I e-mailed his teacher to start that positive relationship, I didn't hear back from her. I e-mailed her again in a couple days, still didn't hear back from her. I think I e-mailed her a third time and got frustrated that she was ignoring me. I was tempted to go over her head. I drafted a very angry e-mail but I left it in my draft box. Something told me to hold on. I didn't want to ruin my relationship with her at the beginning of the year. Turned out, her father died right before school started.

So, if I had sent that angry e-mail, then I would have probably ruined my relationship for that whole year, but I didn't send it, so I had the opportunity to be compassionate and cut her some slack. She was grieving in a big way. It was a very sudden death. Think about that and just keep your end goal in mind. Keep the fact that your goal is the best interest of your child. And..so keep that in mind, don't let your emotions dictate your relationship.

SALLY WEISS: I'd like to thank Georgia Fruechtenicht, Curriculum and Learning Specialist, Trainer, and Navigator Team Leader for Parent to Parent of Georgia, for joining us today. This show will be archived on our website, ADAlive.org, along with a resource sheet containing information about IDEA, 504 and ADA. Thank you also to the ADA Live! listening audience. The Southeast ADA Center is grateful for your support and participation in this series of WADA ADA Live broadcasts. You may submit questions about any of our ADA Live topics by going to ADAlive.org. Please join us again on September 2nd, 2015 for another episode of WADA ADA Live. If you have questions about the Americans with Disabilities Act, please contact your local regional center at 1-800-949-4232. All calls are free and confidential.

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