



ADA Live!

EPISODE 24: THE SCHOOL YEAR HAS STARTED - AND IT'S NOT GOING WELL. WHAT CAN I DO?

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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 ADALive. On behalf of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University and the ADA National Network, welcome to the 24th episode of ADALive.

My name is Sally Weiss, and I am 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. Georgia is also the Project Coordinator for the Parent Detailer Project, which is part of the Autism Plan for Georgia.

Last month, Georgia talked about what parents need to know before the school year begins. In this episode, Georgia will be talking about what parents can do if it seems that their child's school year is not going as well as they had hoped.

ADA listening audience, you can submit your questions about IDEA, 504 and ADA at any time on ADALive.org. Georgia, welcome back to our show.

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

SALLY WEISS: I would like to start with a question from our listener. School started two weeks ago and my child is having a very hard time. Every day he says he hates school and that his teacher is mean. What should I do?

GEORGIA FRUECHTENICHT: It is upsetting to have your child come home and say that they hate school and the teacher is mean, but I think my first bit of advice on that is not to panic. Transitions are difficult. Getting back into a school year, think about it, you're getting up earlier, you have got a completely different schedule than the summer, there is a lot more structure at school. It is difficult. And it's difficult for typical kids, and especially difficult for children with disabilities.

I wouldn't panic, but I would definitely pay attention and talk to your child about that, and think about the last school year, that adjustment period. Was that difficult? And what all could be going on? You may want to delay communicating with the school for a bit, but you certainly don't want to ignore it.

SALLY WEISS: Do you have suggestions for parents while they are in 'wait and see' mode?

GEORGIA FRUECHTENICHT: I think talk to your child, as much as you can, about what's going on. Sometimes they just have feelings that they need to process. It is important to listen to their feelings and not discount their feelings. I will give you an example of a mistake I made with my own child. He's in seventh grade. He was coming home with a lot of anxiety and feelings and all of this emotion, which, you know, seventh graders tend to have. And I found myself saying this is real life, it is a lot of work, and it is hard.

And then, after one such conversation where he really explained to me, you are not helping. I realized what I was doing was discounting his feelings. And what I needed to do was just acknowledge and listen -- yes, this is hard, and then stop -- instead of giving him a big lecture about real life.

And so be careful that you don't discount your child's feelings because you want them to continue to talk to you.

Keeping a journal is really helpful, because sometimes you can see patterns, and when you do have that communication with the school, which you probably will, unless things work themselves out. Then you will have some actual data. You want to keep the date and you want to keep some of the conversations.

You can find some things that you can practice. For example, if a child has an accommodation at school that maybe is not being followed, you can do some role-

playing with your child on asking for that accommodation, maybe it's extra time on a test.

But I think it is important to A, not panic, and B, let them process through some of that transition --- because we have a saying at our house about building our struggle muscles. We have muscles that make us strong, and we say that we have a muscle called our struggle muscle, and it is important that we learn how to struggle. We do not want to jump in and fix everything, because part of growing up and having that transition is struggling a little bit.

SALLY WEISS: Are there situations when it is not a good idea to wait and see?

GEORGIA FRUECHTENICHT: Yes, there are, and three come to mind. If your child does not have access to the education, and that could be physical access. Maybe the accessible parking is blocked because of the way the carpool lines load, and your child cannot get into the building. You don't want to wait and do a journal entry. You want to address that immediately.

If your child's IEP or 504 plan is just blatantly not being followed, then you want to address that immediately.

For example, if your child has a 504 plan that says that he can go to the restroom every hour because maybe he has a medical condition that requires him to go to the restroom more often. But the teacher is not allowing him to do that, that is a safety issue and a health issue. So that would need to be addressed immediately.

I think anytime you do not feel like the child is safe or the child does not feel safe, then those issues need to be addressed immediately. I do not recommend waiting and seeing, if it is a safety issue.

SALLY WEISS: Regardless of whether a parent waits or needs to intervene right away, how can you figure out who you should contact?

GEORGIA FRUECHTENICHT: Sometimes that is difficult to figure out who to call. Getting to know your school system is important, and sometimes that will help you learn who to call.

If it is something that is happening in the classroom, then you will want to start with the teacher. I think it is really important to start with the person that can help you solve the problem.

I had a parent call me, it was a couple of years ago, she was furious at the teacher, and she told me that she called the President of the United States.

Okay, so I applauded her tenacity and her willingness to get the problem solved, but the President of the United States was not the one to solve that problem. The one to solve that problem was the special education teacher. So start with who can address and fix the problem.

Sometimes it is the special ed teacher. Sometimes it is the regular ed teacher who maybe does not understand the reasoning behind an accommodation or needs some education about your child's disability and what your child needs to be successful in a regular education classroom.

And it also could be multiple teachers. When you get into middle school and high school, you have got a whole bunch of teachers. So if you work out an issue with one teacher, and it is a great idea and it really helps build relationships, then you maybe send an email and share with the whole team. If it is a school level issue like the issue that I was talking about earlier on, not being able to get into the parking lot or into the building because of the carpool line, then you need to go to the principal because the principal is in charge of the school.

That is true also if it is like an issue in the lunchroom, it's an issue in the gym. Lunchrooms and gyms are really difficult for kids who have a lot of sensory issues. They are really stimulating, and that can cause a lot of anxiety. So the principal would be the one to contact.

If it is a bus issue, and a lot of things come up on the bus, then you have got multiple people. You want to talk to the transportation folks at the district level. But then you also want to keep your school people -- the principal as well as the case manager -- in the loop.

SALLY WEISS: Once they have figured out who to contact, can you talk a bit more about how we contact them. Do we do it by email, by phone call, by a note sent in to the school?

GEORGIA FRUECHTENICHT: There are multiple ways, and I think you have got to figure out the situation and cater your contact to the situation. Picking up the phone is a great way to build relationships. It is a way to be able to collaborate and solve problems.

The challenge with phone calls is that teachers are teaching, they do not really have time to talk on the phone. If they've got 15 minutes or 30 minutes to eat lunch, you really want them to eat their lunch so they are not grouchy later. So the phone is sometimes hard.

Also if you did pick up the phone and you call, maybe you have a great conversation with a teacher, but that conversation is not documented. And the reality is sometimes people forget conversations on the phone. So I think if you do the phone call, then you want to follow up with some documentation.

If you are going to call, you want to really be respectful of their time. You want to be prepared with what you are going to say, and you want to be brief.

And that documentation piece is important, so if you do the phone call route which is fine to do, you want to follow it up with a short email that documents the conversation.

SALLY WEISS: Georgia, when would starting with an email be appropriate?

GEORGIA FRUECHTENICHT: Most of the time. An email is a great way to communicate with teachers and administrators. It does a lot of things.

One of the things it does is it allows you to be intentional about the way that you can communicate. It allows you to edit, which I love, because sometimes when I speak -- like maybe on the telephone I wish I could take something back -- and with an email I can ramble in an email, and I can get it all out, and then I can go back and edit it to say exactly what I wanted to say and to make sure that my tone -- an email is challenging sometimes because you have to be very careful that your tone is what you want it to be.

So I would encourage you to decide on the purpose of your email, be brief, be direct. Teachers do not have a lot of time. So you do not want your email to just get skimmed; you want them to really get the points of your email.

So I would use bullet points to label items like in a series. I would number the items. If you have things you want specifically answered, you have questions that you want an answer to, you may consider numbering those and maybe bold-facing them.

So spend some time on the email so it is easy for them to read and you know that they get your point.

You also may want to limit the number of issues that you bring up in one email. Because I don't know about you, but there have been times that I get an email and it is really long and it covers a whole lot of things, and I need to address a lot of those things, but I get kind of overwhelmed with it. So I have a tendency to go -- I will look at that later, and I go do something else and I do not respond immediately. You don't want them to do that. You want them to respond immediately. You want to make it as easy as possible for them to respond.

You also want to make sure that the subject of your email is relevant to what your email is about and it gets their attention, and it makes them want to open it and read it.

SALLY WEISS: Can you give us some examples of when a very short email would work best?

GEORGIA FRUECHTENICHT: Sure. When you are requesting a meeting. That could be a very brief email. I encourage you to tell them the reasons you are requesting a meeting. We talked earlier about the phone call, and maybe you get off the phone and you sit down and you say thank you so much for your time today, and this is what we accomplished in that phone call, and this is what we decided. So follow-up documentation on a phone call.

Or the same is true for a conversation. You may be at the school, maybe you are volunteering to make copies or something, and you work out an issue with a teacher when you are walking from the classroom to the lunchroom. So you would want to follow that up with an email, and then it documents that conversation. Email is also great to share with multiple teachers.

And you also may just want to say thank you. I think everyone needs to hear a word of appreciation, and if something worked well, a teacher did something that was nice for your child, then share that with them because I think sometimes they do not hear enough positives.

SALLY WEISS: ADALive listening audience, if you have a question about the, IDEA and 504 or the ADA, please submit it at any time at our online forum at ADALive.org. And now a word from our sponsors.

VOICE OVER ANNOUNCER: Parent to Parent of Georgia (P2P) is a statewide nonprofit that serves families and individuals impacted by disabilities or special health care needs. P2P is a unique organization because callers are connected to staff who are parents too.

We believe that one of the most meaningful sources of support is another parent or family member who has experience 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 a network of parent volunteers across the state of Georgia, P2P is the source of support, education, and leadership development to families or individuals with any disability or special health care need. 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 have been talking with Georgia Fruechtenicht, Curriculum and Learning Specialist for Parent to Parent of Georgia.

Before our break, we were talking about when using email to contact school staff might be appropriate. What if there is something major I want to bring up? Do I have to set up a meeting, or can I bring it up in an email to the teacher?

GEORGIA FRUECHTENICHT: I would recommend if it is something major, and we talked about a few things I would put in that category, that you want to do both. You want to document what is going on in an email, and then you want to request a meeting. Because you may need a meeting, and some examples that come to mind are -- we had the one about the carpool line, or maybe there is an access issue just in the building. The child cannot get into a certain classroom.

Behavior issues is another one that you do not want to let go without addressing. I mean, maybe your child has some really challenging behaviors that are part of his or her disability and he is constantly getting sent to the principal's office or getting sent out of class so he is missing lots of instructional time because of disciplinary issues. That is something you want to go ahead and meet, but you also want to make sure that you document.

Another issue that comes to mind is perhaps if you have in the IEP that a support person is supposed to be specially trained in something specific for your child, and then you find out that person is not trained. And that is an issue that you would want to address in an email to get a documented, and then you want to request a meeting so you can figure out what are the next steps and get that addressed as soon as you can.

SALLY WEISS: But what if I'm really upset? Do you have any advice about sending an email?

GEORGIA FRUECHTENICHT: I do. And it happens for sure. These are our children that we are talking about, it is emotional. Sometimes we have a lot of our own emotions that we need to process through. I encourage you to find a friend or a support person for yourself.

I find that some of my very best friends are other parents of children with disabilities because they get it. So process your own emotions with other parents and people who get it, and not necessarily the teacher.

As far as email goes, you heard me say earlier that I like to write, I process things by writing. Write your email, and if you need to write an angry email, write an angry email, but just do not send it.

Sometimes what I do is I will write an email and I will not put anybody in the "to" field so I'm not tempted to click "send" and it goes to that person.

So write an email and save it in the draft folder and let it sit for a day. If it is not a huge safety issue that needs to be addressed immediately, then most issues can wait a day.

Let someone else read it. There is some good information on a website called writessmall.com. You have to keep in mind it is written by a bunch of lawyers. But one of the advice that they give is when you are writing letters, always pretend that -- they call it letter to a stranger -- always pretend that a judge is going to read your letter, and if a judge read your letter, would they feel like you are a reasonable person?

If you are really angry and letting it rip in an email, the judge is going to read that and think this guy is out of control. So you want to be careful about the way those emails are worded, because if it is a really passionate email, it is going to get forwarded and moved up to the next level. And sometimes you want it to be.

So you have just got to make sure that you are being perceived in the way that you want to be perceived. And these relationships are important.

So I encourage you to let it sit for a day, let a friend read it, let someone that you know that you trust their judgment.

My husband has a tendency to be a lot more reasonable and not quite as passionate and impulsive as I am, so he is a great person for me to say read this, and he says all right, you are too emotional here, and he could give me good feedback.

SALLY WEISS: Thanks. That clears that up. How long should I wait to see if a situation is being resolved?

GEORGIA FRUECHTENICHT: I think give it a reasonable time, and I know that that is a vague answer. I wish I had a more specific one, and I know that a reasonable amount of time is very subjective, and my husband and I disagree often about what is reasonable and what a reasonable amount of time is. For him it may be a week, and for me it may be one day. Because he is a lot more patient than I am.

It depends on the situation. If you have an urgent situation, you are not going to want to wait as long. But you want to think about the teacher's perspective.

If you send an email at 10:00 o'clock in the morning and you have not gotten a response by the end of the day, you can take that as a positive that your teacher is really engaged in teaching and not looking at her email.

And if she does not respond at the end of the day, perhaps her children had something going on. So you think about the teacher's perspective and give her time to process your email and think about her response.

And also don't assume just because you have not gotten a response yet that there is not anything being done. There are situations that I have had experiences with parents where they called me, they said I sent this email, this is the situation going on, and it is a situation that I felt like I wanted to help the parent in the way that I could reach out to the school system.

So I might get permission from the parent to talk to the school system folks to see if I can help, and what I find when I do talk to the school system folks is that they are working on it, and they have got a lot of things figured out and they are making great progress, but they have not been very great about communicating back to the parents.

So do not assume just because you have not heard from them means that they are not working on it. But, absolutely, give them a little bit of time and figure out for yourself, maybe talk to some other people about what a reasonable time might be for that situation.

SALLY WEISS: If a parent has not heard anything from the school after about four or five days, what should the parent do?

GEORGIA FRUECHTENICHT: Well, I think you should absolutely follow up if you have not heard back in four or five days. Especially -- really any issue, four or five days is completely reasonable in my opinion.

You have to be careful about how you word --- I usually will send a follow-up email. I will send the same email I sent earlier and just forward it. I just ask them -- Have you had time to look at this email? You may want to confirm that you got their email address correct.

I remember a situation that a nurse, I felt like she was being rude and not returning my email. Well, I had mistyped her email address so she really had not gotten it. So you may want to confirm that.

You can also use kind of a follow-up email as an excuse kind of add more information and say -- I look forward to hearing from you on this, which tells them that you have not heard from them. But I also wanted to let you know, something like add another nugget of information that you had not shared with them, and that gives you an excuse to reach out to them.

SALLY WEISS: Thanks a lot, Georgia. You have provided quite a bit of valuable information. Before we continue, here is 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 have talked about the less formal communication between a parent and the school. What happens if the parent, or maybe the parent and someone at the school, thinks that a change needs to be made to a child's IEP? Are they required to convene another IEP meeting?

GEORGIA FRUECHTENICHT: Sally, that is a great question, and it is one that a lot of parents ask and a lot of parents do not know the answer to.

When they reauthorized the IDEA, which is the law that governs special education, in 2004, they put in the new law that an IEP can be amended without a meeting, as long as the parent and the district both agree. And this is encouraging, because what this does is it prevents having a team meeting just for the sake of having a team meeting.

If you have 10 people on an IEP team, and two people -- the parent and one person -- could solve the issue, then we do not want to bring those 10 people away from their jobs and their teaching and all of that to solve something that two people can do.

So, this is exciting. One example that comes to mind is a speech, perhaps there is a speech therapy goal that needs to be amended. Well, as a parent you and the speech therapist can figure out what is the new goal or accommodation, and then you can do an amendment; you can get the case manager to do an amendment to the IEP, and they will communicate that to the whole team. So then the whole team did not have to meet.

And then also an example that comes to mind is there is some cases that there is an issue in a new school year that did not exist in the last school year.

An example that comes to mind on that is perhaps you have got a child who is in the band, and he is having trouble putting together his -- maybe he has motor skill issues - - having trouble putting together his band instrument.

There is no way the IEP would of thought about that last year because he was not in the band last year. So that is a situation that is really an easy one that you could put in an accommodation that he needs help putting his band instrument together, and that is an amendment. You communicate the amendment to the whole team, and that is the

case manager's responsibility to communicate that to the whole team, but as parents we are on the team and we need to help the case manager remember that communication, and we can all take part in that.

SALLY WEISS: Georgia, we are almost out of time today. Do you have anything else you would like to say to parents?

GEORGIA FRUECHTENICHT: I do, and I think it goes back to a point that I made earlier about parents seeking out emotional support. I think sometimes -- and I know I do this -- sometimes I put my children's needs before my own, and as a parent of children with disabilities, it is important that I take care of myself. I will be more effective taking care of them if I take care of myself. And where you get that emotional support is important.

I think sometimes it is easy to seek out that emotional support from teachers, and I would encourage you to try to avoid doing that.

There are some teachers that are awesome and they are totally willing to provide that emotional support. But we really want our teachers focused on teaching the children and not supporting the families.

There are a lot of organizations that do family support. In every community, I would argue there are groups of parents of children with disabilities.

In our state, the state of Georgia, we have Parent to Parent of Georgia, and you heard the commercial about that, which is a nonprofit that supports families of children with disabilities.

The way I got started with Parent to Parent is Augie was diagnosed with autism when he was two. And if you had asked me, Georgia, how are you doing with emotional support, I would've said I am covered up with emotional support. I have bible study, my tennis friends, college friends. I've even got some friends from high school. I'm good. I connect with people well. But even though I had all of that emotional support I felt completely alone and I was devastated about that diagnosis.

So I called Parent to Parent, and they were able to match me with another parent of a child with autism who was actually a little older than Augie, and it was such an awesome experience for me to talk to someone who got it. And she was able to introduce me to all of these other parents who had children on the spectrum, and all of a sudden I found myself in this club, and it was not a club I would have signed up for had I seen a list of clubs, but it is a club of amazing women. So I encourage you, whatever community you are in, to seek out the parents of other children with whatever -- with similar needs to your child.

And there are some organizations, like every state, we talked earlier about the IDEA which is the law that governs special education. In Part B of the IDEA there is funding for every state to have a Parent Training Information Center.

So I encourage you, and in the state of Georgia Parent to Parent is the PTI or Parent Training Information Center, so I encourage you -- you may not have a Parent to Parent in your state, you might -- but you do definitely have a Parent Training Information Center.

So find out what is in your state, reach out to them to get that support, and also give that support. If you have the support to give, reaching out to other parents, I find sometimes the more I reach out to parents, I start out reaching out and getting the support, but I end up giving the support too.

So I think it is really important that we are intentional about taking care of ourselves, and that we are looking to get that support from other parents and not necessarily from the teachers.

SALLY WEISS: Thank you, Georgia. I would like to thank Georgia Fruechtenicht, Curriculum and Learning Specialist, Trainer, and Navigator Training 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 our ADALive listening audience. The Southeast ADA Center is grateful for your support and participation in this series of WADA ADALive broadcasts. You may submit questions about any of our ADALive topics by going to ADALive.org.

Please join us again on October 7, 2015 for another episode of WADA ADALive.

If you have questions about the Americans with Disabilities Act, please contact your regional ADA Center at 1-800-949-4232. Once again, that's 1-800-949-4232. All calls are free and confidential.

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