

## Discussion Guidelines

One of the most powerful tools we can use to champion and defend the educational rights of students with disabilities is to talk to others about those rights. As advocates and activists we have an obligation to speak up whenever we encounter the misconceptions and negative belief systems that rob our students of the opportunity to realize their innate potential.

Whether we are commenting on-line, speaking professionally, or just chatting with friends and family, the *manner* in which we speak has as much potential to harm our cause as it does to help. For this reason SPEDWatch urges to you to observe the following guidelines in any discussion about special education:

1. Remember that your understanding of and experience with special education may be very different from that of the person(s) with whom you are speaking. Many people assume that students with disabilities are incapable of succeeding and contributing to society. Most people are completely unaware that these students have their educational rights violated routinely, that they are failing in huge numbers as a result, and that their parents have to fight like hell to protect their educational rights. This does not make your audience stupid or mean-spirited. It merely means they are uneducated about the issues. It is your job to teach them the facts.

2. Take the other person's lack of familiarity with special education into account. They may not know what an IEP is, what the TEAM process entails, what evaluations are all about, what least restrictive environment means, or what a BSEA hearing is. If you use such terms without first explaining them they will likely tune you out and you will have lost the opportunity to educate that person.

3. Remember that parents of students with disabilities have a reputation as unreasonable, whiny, complaining, disgruntled individuals who are pushing schools to give their children every expensive service under the sun whether they need it or not. Many believe parents try to get their students found eligible for special education just so they'll have an advantage over others by way of extra services, accommodations, etc. Be very careful in your choice of words -- ***do not use inflammatory language*** or make statements that would reinforce this reputation. ***Err on the side of civility at all times.***

4. The best way to hold someone's interest and persuade them to your way of thinking is to communicate in a crisp, clear, straightforward manner. Confine your comments to a few issues that your listener can easily "manage."

5. Always remember that the intent of your comments should be to educate, correct misunderstandings, and build empathy for the cause of children's special education rights.

SPEDWatch understands that following these guidelines may be difficult for those who have watched a child be hurt so terribly in our dysfunctional education system, and those who have spent tens of thousands of dollars to secure what a child had a right to all along. We know, because we've all been there. However, it is critical that you ***exercise assertive restraint*** if we are to move our cause forward.

SPEDWatch is a nonprofit civil rights movement fighting for the educational rights of all Massachusetts students with disabilities, ages 3-21. For more information go to [www.spedwatch.org](http://www.spedwatch.org) Copyright © 2008 Ellen M. Chambers. All rights reserved. SPEDWatch is not engaged in rendering legal, educational, medical, therapeutic, or other professional advice.