



# Supporting Meaningful Consultation with Parents

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British Columbia Council of  
Administrators of Special Education (BC CASE)

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# Meaningful Consultation

Meaningful consultation is not a structure; rather it is a process that underpins educational decision making. Meaningful consultation is necessary when decisions are made that will have an impact on a student's educational program, and it is essential that this process includes the student's family and/or caregivers. To the extent appropriate to the student's age and ability, the student should also participate in the process.

*"At its heart, meaningful consultation is about interactive, two-way communication and dialogue. Such consultation is undertaken to seek information, advice and/or informed opinion for consideration **prior** to decision making."*

[Lower Mainland Directors of Student Support Services, 1998].

## Guiding Principles for Meaningful Consultation

### **The family is the expert on the child**

School teams bring to the decision making process expertise on curriculum, educational programming, and knowledge of the interaction of the student in the school setting; families bring an in-depth understanding of the needs of their children.

### **Mutual respect is essential for meaningful consultation**

Mutual respect is characterized by an understanding that all individuals involved in the consultative process have a contribution to make. Families and school representatives may enter the process with differing levels of need, strength and skill. Mutual respect is best maintained when all participants recognize that everyone is working to achieve best/balanced decisions and the best outcome for the child.

### **Everyone participates as an equal partner**

This process often means creating an atmosphere that allows all participants to feel that they have the opportunity to express their point of view and that their opinions and input are respected. It also means recognizing that some participants may have their own constraints (e.g., past history and past school experiences, different values and cultural expectations, transportation and time availability needs). The opportunity to 'put heads together' signals a shared responsibility for the student's well-being.

### **Meaningful consultation does not mean parties cannot disagree**

The process of meaningful consultation does not suggest a right of veto or assume that, at times, a mutual agreement may not be possible. Rather, it is a way to work through such situations towards a decision or action that includes a means of assessing the effectiveness of the consultation, and to provide follow-up.

## What Meaningful Consultation *IS*

Meaningful consultation includes families in making decisions about their child's education. It is facilitated by ongoing dialogue and participation in planning processes with school teams. It is characterized by a willingness on the part of the school and the family to openly discuss decisions and options available, and a willingness to listen to each other and work collaboratively toward best/balanced decisions. It is also characterized by clear communication of the results to all participants, including the decision reached or action taken, with the rationale for the decision. It is usually not a one-time process, but should fulfill a specific need for input regarding a decision under consideration. When done well, parents feel that the school team is listening to them and that their experience, knowledge and ideas have been taken into consideration.

## What Meaningful Consultation *IS NOT*

Meaningful consultation is not the delivery of a preconceived decision or plan. It is not persuasion, nor is it a large group of professionals discussing what is best without actively seeking the views and engaging in dialogue with interested/affected individuals and other key sources of information. Meaningful consultation is not a process whereby families are only included in order to document that consultation has taken place. Meaningful consultation is neither a right of veto nor does it require all parties to come to an agreement about decisions when made.



	Meaningful consultation	Meaningless consultation
Consultation happens ...	in an on-going fashion, and prior to any decisions.	after the decision is made – families are informed of decisions.
Schools ...	carefully consider student and family needs, and their perspective.	see themselves as “knowing better”.
Families ...	are actively encouraged to share their strengths and perspectives and to consider the school’s needs.	are peripheral to process.
Skills demonstrated include ...	communication skills and a commitment to the process.	ineffective communication i.e. body language that contradicts the words used.
Interaction style ...	is respectful, genuine, and collaborative.	uses jargon and talks “at” rather than listens.
Approach toward each other includes ...	trust and mutual respect.	defensiveness, blaming and lack of respect for differing points of view.
Process is ...	open, timely, and receptive to family participation.	secretive. Meetings occur without family involvement. Timing in the school exerts pressure to “speed up” the process.
Information sharing is ...	timely, adequate, and relevant information exchanged.	guarded with limited access to information.
Communication is ...	on going. Individuals feel safe to state their points of view.	not direct communication between parents and school staff making the decision. Communication is only “official” .
Outcomes result ...	in improved decision making and relationships that benefit the student.	in no improvement for the student.
Follow-up includes ...	continuing dialogue about the student’s well being.	possible resentment, anger and alienation.

# Critical Elements for Meaningful Consultation

## Relationships

Relationships between families and schools are at the heart of meaningful consultation. It is important to:

- Communicate to parents that their involvement and support make a great deal of difference in their children's school performance
- Plan for opportunities to learn more about each other and what strengths, needs and values each individual brings to the process
- Invest time in developing relationships through open communication
- Emphasize that parents are partners of the school and that their involvement is needed and valued.

## School culture

School culture has a critical role to play in many aspects of student life and learning and in the relationship parents may have with the school. It is important to establish and maintain a school culture that:

- values diversity as a strength
- models respectful interactions at all time
- has a climate where all parties feel safe to share ideas freely
- accommodates family experience, diversity and literacy level and parent level of advocacy
- understands that parents differ in their ability to communicate their hopes for their children
- understands that parents may have had a negative experience in previous interactions with schools, and may find a large professional team intimidating
- understands that parents want to hear about the strengths of their child as well as the needs.

## Communication skills

The effectiveness of meaningful consultation also rests on the communication skills of all participants. If necessary, school personnel should receive training to assist them in learning the impact of:

*Non-verbal communication (body language)*

*Verbal communication*

- Listening skills
  - Active listening skills
  - Giving opportunity for both sides to be heard
- Expressive skills
  - Learning that it is not what you say, it is how you say it
  - Avoiding jargon and talking in code (i.e., acronyms)

*Written communication*

- Choose carefully what you want to share to avoid misinterpretations and misunderstandings

## Timely, open sharing of information

Sharing information in a timely and accurate way is an essential part of helping to deliver better services to children and those individuals who teach them. All parties involved in a consultative process need to participate with timely access to the same information.



*Seek first to understand and then to be understood.*



## Benefits of Meaningful Consultation

Schools and families who engage in meaningful consultation have reported that there are many benefits to working together toward solutions. Meaningful consultation may help to:

- Avoid angst
- Keep everyone solution focused
- Maintain mutual respect
- Proactively avoid future problems
- Avoid wasted time
- Find the best possible successful solution for the child

## Risks of Not Engaging in Meaningful Consultation

Imposing a decision or reaching a decision without meaningful consultation may result in:

- Ongoing difficulty – problems solved without consultation tend to resurface
- Growing anger and resentment, that may make subsequent consultation difficult
- Loss of credibility and trust
- Inaction

## Barriers to Meaningful Consultation

Implementing the philosophy of meaningful consultation may mean some changes in the way decisions are made, and certain barriers may occur in the implementation:

- Consultation fatigue – schools and parents may feel that it will take too much time
- Judgment, or a culture of blame
- Fear of change (leads to defensiveness)
- Use of emails and potential for misunderstanding
- Time pressures



# Frequently Asked Questions

## **When do we use meaningful consultation?**

Because meaningful consultation is a process that underpins all interactions with families, it follows that informal consultation should be initiated early and then maintained in the relationship. More formal consultation that includes families as active partners may be considered for any situation that involves decisions around the educational programs of students. Some examples of these situations could be:

- Deciding to adapt or modify a program
- Individual educational planning
- Moving to a different program or class
- Involving the school psychologist, counselor or other professional with the student
- Referring the student to Special Education programs and services

## **At what point is meaningful consultation concluded?**

Ideally, meaningful consultation continues until a solution satisfactory to all parties is reached. However, the purpose of meaningful consultation is to facilitate informed decision making, not to make the decision itself. A meaningful consultation process is concluded when those individuals making the decision communicate the results clearly to all contributors, including the decision reached or action taken, and the rationale for the decision.

## **What if the individual/s affected do not agree?**

The school and families may choose to continue to work toward consensus. While aiming to achieve best balanced decisions, an interim decision can include some of the ideas developed through the consultative process. Meaningful consultation does not remove the responsibility that rests with a school board to provide an educational program that meets the needs of each student in a school district. However, an informed decision making process, based upon a meaningful dialogue should include a commitment to review a decision after a trial period and a willingness to reconsider the decision based upon new information.

## **What if one party is not willing to engage in meaningful consultation, but wants his or her own way?**

When all parties listen carefully to the others, it is often possible to find some middle ground. Sometimes this process means listening to the content of the message and putting aside the method of delivery (e.g., threatening language, anger, extreme emotion). Meaningful consultation is about respectfully hearing what others have to say. It is not about any one side "winning".

## How Do We Get Started?

- Be prepared to select a neutral site for the meeting. Parents sometimes feel at a disadvantage when meetings are held on school property.
- Try to listen to the message being communicated and not get sidetracked by how it is delivered.
- Do not get caught in the medical model of thinking where the educators have to be 'the expert'. Parents have significant insights and expertise about their child.
- Provide parents with an overview of the process and a time frame for decisions to be made.
- Stick to agreed-upon time guidelines.
- Do not assume that everyone understands each other's language (e.g. acronyms). Use jargonless language or provide a glossary.
- It is acceptable to wait on a decision. Sleeping on a potential decision can be a good thing.
- Consider the means by which you communicate. Emails and other forms of unspoken communication can leave room for misinterpretation. When possible, engage in face to face conversations.



- Be patient. Building trusting relationships with families can take time.
- Understand that repetitive questioning is not always a challenge of a decision. It can be part of the process towards understanding.
- Consider the parent's perspective. The parents may be grieving the loss of the child that they had envisioned (even years later). They may also feel vulnerable. Many parents of students with special needs, for example, have lost considerable privacy and autonomy. They may feel somewhat like an open book – everyone knows way too much about their entire family life, and often have way too much say in how their lives are run (e.g., respite care, Ministry involvement, medical involvement). In all cases, they are doing the best that they can with what they have. It may also be possible that schools can work with families to support them with additional tools and links to community supports.
- Sometimes adverse reactions are based on fear – i.e., “if the school district can't get it right, who can, and what does this mean to my child's future?”
- Parents may feel trapped when they feel 'the system' is working against them, or at the very least not working with them. Try to engage in novel, creative problem solving. It demonstrates that you are working with them, not against them. When they see that you are on their side, it is easier for them to accept some system constraints. When everyone engages in creative problem solving very few constraints become unmanageable.
- Encourage parents to bring an advocate (i.e., a friend, another family member, someone who has knowledge or special expertise regarding the child) to meetings. It will provide them with a support system. An advocate is someone who supports another person either by speaking on their behalf or by helping them to communicate their own thoughts, feelings or ideas.

# Suggestions for Running a Meeting that Sets the Stage for Meaningful Consultation

## Beforehand

1. Agree upon time, location, etc.
2. Extend Invitation.

## Start the Conversation

1. Establish rapport
2. Communicate philosophy of meaningful consultation
3. Establish purpose of the meeting
4. Set expectations (e.g., what is the length of the meeting, agenda, invite everyone to speak, discuss possibility of several meetings, etc.)

## Painting the Picture

1. Establish a goal statement. What would a successful outcome look like?
2. Describe and analyse the problem and look for patterns and connections
3. Identify the positives
4. Describe what is in place, where the student is and/or what is working
5. Describe the barriers and what needs to be overcome.

## Creating a Manageable Scene

1. Together, develop observable and measurable objectives and criteria for identifying success
2. Steps in the plan need to be positive and possible
3. Develop time lines.



## Making it Happen

1. Explore the options – participants brainstorm for ideas
2. Make sure everyone is involved in creating the plan, which results in ownership and commitment
3. Work for consensus
4. Provide an atmosphere where all ideas are valued
5. Make a decision.

## Follow up

1. Make sure everyone is advised of the results, including decisions made, actions taken, and the rationale for the decision/action
2. Establish a means of assessing the effectiveness of the consultation
3. Determine a method for ongoing discussion
4. Where necessary, provide an opportunity to review interim decisions and resulting experiences.

*Adapted from: Reviewing the Work - DeBoer, Anita (1995-1997)*

# Case Study: Mark

Thirteen-year old Mark is unable to concentrate on his school work. He struggles with reading and his writing skills are significantly delayed. Mark demonstrates a cool 'tough-guy' façade.

The school principal has a decision to make about Mark's program. The responsibility rests with the principal to ensure that meaningful consultation occurs before a decision is made.

## **Is there a need to consult?**

Yes. This decision follows on the heels of a serious concern about Mark's unhappiness at school and the escalation of his externalizing behaviour. A decision to place him in a new school represents a major intervention.

## **Who needs to participate?**

The parents, the case manager, classroom teacher, school counselor.

## **When can we meet (share concerns and hopes)?**

The principal consults with all parties, offering a choice of three meeting times.

## **Set a time and state the purpose of the meeting.**

The principal sets the meeting time, arranges a meeting room and lets everyone know that the purpose of the meeting is to focus on Mark's return to school/schooling and how to support more adaptive functioning (i.e. address his emotional and learning needs).

At the beginning of the meeting the principal sets the stage by making introductions and welcoming each person. He asks Mark's case manager to take notes to be copied at the end of the meeting for everyone. He clearly states that parental involvement and support are appreciated because they are essential elements of school success. Each person is invited to give a perspective and speak to important aspects of how to

support Mark. Discussion centers on Mark's strengths, needs and how to best intervene in the short term to stabilize his behaviour and provide for meaningful learning/progress. The principal listens to the contributions of each person. He ensures that everyone has the opportunity to speak and directs the conversation by thanking members for their statements, re stating what he has understood and offering his own perspective. He concludes the meeting by expressing appreciation for each person's attendance and contribution, stating his wish for Mark's success. He is clear in when he will make his decision about Mark's return to school and confirms contact information so he can call or email parents and school staff once his decision is made. He is also clear that once the decision is made, the course of action will go forward with a review date to be included with his decision.

# Case Study: Janice

Eight year old Janice is a student with autism spectrum disorder whose academic progress allows her to read and write with minimal support. Her ability to communicate her needs has improved considerably since her Grade 2 year. Janice uses full sentences and is able to stay on topic for question and answer sessions about her school day and about the daily story. Janice is well accepted by her peers who enjoy playing on the monkey bars with her.

The school based team feels that Janice has enough skills to be independent. They feel she is able to work without the support of a teacher assistant for an hour in the morning and an hour and a half in the afternoon. During that time Janice will complete reading tasks, join in class discussions by answering questions about the novel study and join in the daily physical activity. The decision for the principal is whether the teacher assistant time should be reduced and offered to another student at this time. Janice's parents are fearful that any change in routines will put her emotional stability and progress with communication at risk.

The school principal has a decision to make about Janice's program. The responsibility rests with the principal to ensure that meaningful consultation occurs before a decision is made.

## **Is there a need to consult?**

Yes. This decision will affect the basic structure of Janice's school day and has potential intended and unintended consequences.

## **Who needs to participate?**

The parents, the case manager, classroom teacher, school counselor.

## **When can we meet (share concerns and hopes)?**

The principal consults with all parties, offering a choice of three meeting times.

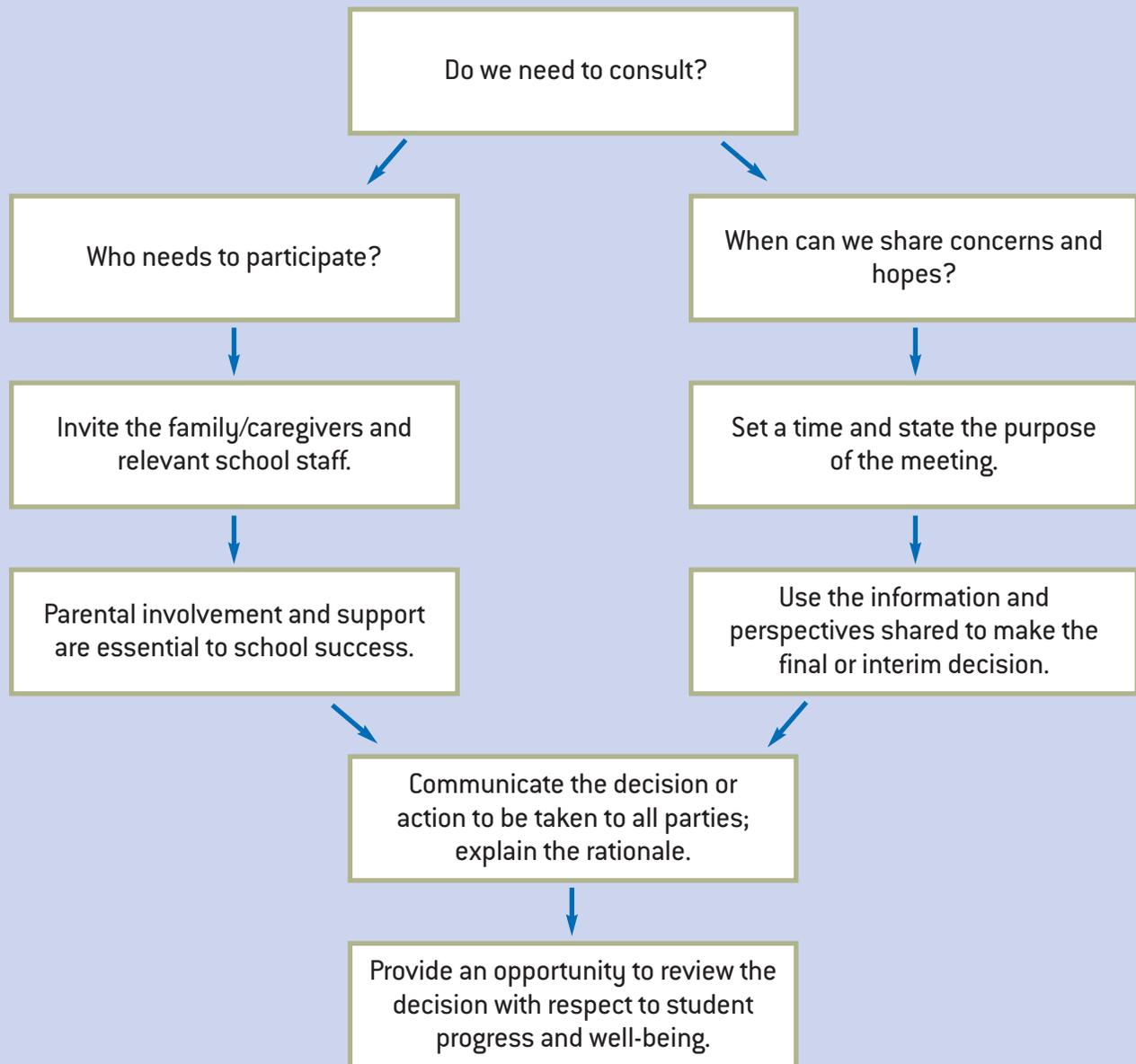
## **Set a time and state the purpose of the meeting.**

The principal sets the meeting time, arranges a meeting room and lets everyone know that the purpose of the meeting is to focus on Janice's current strengths and needs as a learner and a member of her class.

At the beginning of the meeting the principal sets the stage by making introductions and welcoming each person. He asks Janice's case manager to take notes to

be copied at the end of the meeting for everyone. He clearly states that parental involvement and support are appreciated because they are essential elements of school success. Each person is invited to give a perspective and speak to important aspects of how Janice's progress with communication and academics may allow her to have more independent access to the curriculum throughout her school day. Discussion centres on Janice's strengths, needs and how to best honour them as well as for meaningful learning/progress. The principal listens to the contributions of each person. He ensures that everyone has the opportunity to speak and directs the conversation by thanking members for their statements, re-stating what he has understood and offering his own perspective. He concludes the meeting by expressing appreciation for each person's attendance and contribution, stating his wish for Janice's success. He is clear in when he will make his decision about Janice's one-to-one support and confirms contact information so he can call or email parents and school staff once his decision is made. He is also clear that once the decision is made, the course of action will go forward with a review date to be included with his decision.

# Meaningful Consultation – A Process for Collaboration and Shared Responsibility



# APPENDIX 1: Sample IEP Preparation Questionnaire

Child's name: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Child's strengths:

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Child's challenges:

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Child's preferences/likes:

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Top 3 'wishes' for my child (academic and/or social) are:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Top 3 'concerns' regarding my child (academic and/or social) are:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Additional comments:

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## APPENDIX 2: Sample IEP Planning Team Members Form

Student's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Team Members	Services Provided
Parent	
Administrator	
Classroom Teacher	
Case Manager	
Learning/Resource Teacher	
Counselor	
Speech/Language	
Pathologist	
Occupational	
Therapist	
Physiotherapist	
Special Education Assistant	
Other	
Other	

# APPENDIX 3: Sample Summary and Action Plan of Meeting Form

Student's name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Team Members Present:**

Action Item	Person/s Responsible	Implementation Date	Review Date

## APPENDIX 4: Sample Action List Form

Student's name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

Action:

Done:

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# APPENDIX 5: Sample Implementation Plan Form

Student's name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Activity	Who	By When	Done
			<input data-bbox="1292 531 1351 590" type="checkbox"/>
			<input data-bbox="1292 741 1351 800" type="checkbox"/>
			<input data-bbox="1292 936 1351 995" type="checkbox"/>
			<input data-bbox="1292 1136 1351 1194" type="checkbox"/>
			<input data-bbox="1292 1335 1351 1394" type="checkbox"/>
			<input data-bbox="1292 1530 1351 1589" type="checkbox"/>
			<input data-bbox="1292 1726 1351 1785" type="checkbox"/>

## REFERENCE

*Working Together: The Art of Consulting and Communicating and Interpersonal Style Questionnaire*

Anita DeBoer, Ph.D., Ed.D.

1995 – 2000 (Third printing)

Sopris West

