

SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES IN TRANSITION TO COLLEGE

What parents can do

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One of the perspectives that post-secondary disability support professionals gain from providing academic supports to college students with learning disabilities is that we get to see the real life outcomes of interventions and supports offered to students in primary and secondary schools.

A common experience for disability support professionals is to encounter students who have either been “over-supported” or “under-supported”. Both of these levels of support have some negative consequences in terms of college success. But common to both groups, and to many other students with learning disabilities, is a lack of specific knowledge about either their disability label, or the functional limitations associated with the disability as it plays out in their day to day life. In college, students are asked to independently support requests for accommodations by providing detailed information about their disabilities. This makes the skills of self-advocacy essential to college success. However, the lack of awareness of their disability that we see among students makes self-advocacy difficult because effective self-advocacy must be rooted in accurate self-knowledge.

So how is it that so many students with disabilities entering college are so unaware of the meaning and impact of their disabilities? The answer is complex, and has much to do with the too common view of disability as pathology needing to be fixed, rather than as a natural, normal part of the human experience to be appropriately accommodated. This “pathology” perspective often produces anxiety for parents about the possible negative impact of knowing about the disability on the children. We often speak to parents who, with all good intentions, have either kept the information about the disability from their children, or who have argued for the “right” diagnosis, in an effort to not discourage their student, or have them feel negatively about themselves. While this is an understandable attitude, there are some downsides to this practice. Apart from problems with self-advocacy, we are seeing more and more students coming in to college disability support offices with very vague disability labels such as ‘cognitive disability’, “other health impairment”, “speech and language disability”, “neurological impairment”, or broad interpretations of “learning disability”. This vagueness of terminology makes both the determination of eligibility for services more difficult, and the granting of appropriate accommodations almost impossible.

The question of how best to approach students about their disability is not easy to address. There are so many strong feelings on all sides attached to the big picture of how education can serve students with disabilities that parents can often feel overwhelmed. But there are things that parents can do independently of the school system. From our perspective as disability support professionals, these things can so often make the difference between a student who will succeed and one who will fail. And all of these things that parents can do involve a very conscious and strategic approach to “support”.

We have, unfortunately, been persuaded by decades of pop psychology and self-help books to imagine that “good” support always looks the same - nice, encouraging, agreeing with, standing up for, sympathizing with, etc.. But, the truth of the matter is that effective support has many different faces.

The first thing that needs to happen though is that parents of students with learning disabilities need to find good support for themselves. Anyone who has flown knows the flight attendant’s safety routine by heart – “when the oxygen mask drops, please secure your own mask before assisting your child.” This is excellent advice for parents of students with learning disabilities too. Parenting a child with vulnerabilities can be an incredibly draining experience – physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually. If you are not taking good care of yourself as a parent in all of these domains, it is going to be hard for you to offer good quality support to your child. So, the first step in offering support to your

child is to offer support to yourself, and to your spouse or partner. Find a good therapist, a trusted friend, a pastoral counselor, a hairdresser or an attentive bartender, but definitely find someone with whom you can share both the struggles and the triumphs. Acting “unselfishly” can often have unforeseen consequences for yourself and for your child.

Once that is taken care of, you can consider how best to support your child in the following ways:

1. Soft support – we all need a hug from time to time and someone to just listen to us without offering commentary or advice. Check out some classes in Active Listening or investigate an approach called Focusing (www.focusing.org). Sometimes your child will just need to know that you love them unconditionally and that you are willing to listen and stand behind them and stand up for them without telling them what to do, or solving their problems for them.
2. Hard support – It is equally true that we all need a kick in the seat of the pants from time to time. This is sometimes a hard aspect of support to grasp because sometimes it doesn't feel so good to do, or to have done to us. It is most important to remember when thinking about hard support that the real message is – “We know that you can do this, we are delivering this kick in the seat of your pants so that you will do it!”
3. Partnership support – sometimes the support that we offer looks more like two people walking side by side in equal partnership. Sometimes listening, sometimes offering advice, sometimes kidding the other person along, sometimes offering well-meaning critical feedback – but always trusting that the other person has the ability and character to do whatever needs to be done.
4. Failure – for most of us, our failures are when we most look for support from others. Too often though we get the soft support that may help with our hurt feelings, but may do little to help us grow and learn. For many parents and professionals, students' failures are often felt by the parent and the professional as their failures. This leaves little space or opportunity for the student to learn and grow from mistakes and failures. For parents and professionals, making the shift to a view of failure as normal, as welcome, as opportunity, as necessary to growth, can be difficult but is an absolutely essential part of the future success of the child.

Each of these four areas are important points of departure for mature and open discussions between parent and child. Just negotiating how all of these kinds of support will look in the relationship can be remarkably helpful because it can start to give the message to the student that they are responsible for their own education and that they also have to pay attention to other people's needs and feelings. There are no good rules and guidelines for how to have this conversation because every family is different, but do start to have this conversation as soon as you can.

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