

The DANCE

Excerpts from *Do You Hear What I Hear?*
Parents and Professionals Working Together for
Children With Special Needs



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Forming partnerships between parents with children of special needs and the professionals who work with them is like learning a new dance. At first the parent-dancer and the professional-dancer do not glide together gracefully across the floor but move awkwardly. Each partner seems to have different hopes, expectations, needs, and constraints. Each seems to be listening to his or her own music, with its own tune, words and rhythm: *The Mother's Song*, *The Father's Song*, *The Special Educator's Song*, *The Therapist's Song*, and *The Physician's Song*. No wonder some dance partnerships are not as graceful as others! The absence of shared music and familiar dance steps causes collisions. Toes – and feelings – get stepped on.

Forming effective partnerships between parents and professionals requires that partners take time to listen to each other's song. This kind of sharing has the potential to open the dancers to a fresh approach and a broader perspective of what the child needs. As parents and professionals share their insights, worries, dreams, and suggestions with each other, a new song is created, one that contains the contributions of many voices. This new song weaves together several perspectives. It's no longer just the cha-cha or the waltz; it's an original musical score with new choreography based on the unique needs of each child.

No one person can "dance the dance" or create the best program for the child. The best plan for the child is built upon the insights, perspectives, and expertise of both parents and professionals. It takes many. Like a square dance, parents and professionals move around the circle by extending a hand to a partner, at the same time holding onto someone else's. The synergy of the dancers creates the most comprehensive and effective interventions for the child.

This dance of partnership is not easy. Partners will not always be graceful and in tune. Few get it right on the first several tries. Master dancers achieve success through practice and skilled coaching. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers did not whisk each other across the floor on the first take. They persisted in their practice and listened to each other and their coaches. They frequently stepped on each other's toes and probably felt impatient, bored, and frustrated with the sometimes slow pace. Eventually, they learned to trust each other and to share the same rhythm. Ultimately, theirs was a dance that awed and inspired applauding audiences.

The dance image can be useful to parents and professionals in guiding their understanding of partnerships. To sit at the conference table together and to discuss the child with special needs is an essential beginning, but it does not automatically result in a genuine partnership. We may look like partners but not BE partners – yet!

The dance of partnership results from a strong, ongoing commitment by all partners to listen to each other's music, to try out each other's dance steps, and to feel hope that a new dance will be created, one that integrates the best contributions of each partner.

At the forefront of this work, we must remember that parents and professionals create the music and the dance on behalf of the child. The reward for a well-performed dance of partnership comes from

knowing that the child has been given the capacity and support to reach his or her fullest potential. That accomplishment – the evolving and ultimate ability of the child to dance his or her unique dance – is sweet music to everyone’s ears!

THE JOURNEY TO CREATIVE PARTNERSHIPS: UNDERSTANDING THE PHASES

We must be partners-now! There is no escaping it these days. Partnership is a recurrent buzzword in the fields of education, health, and human services. “We must be partners. Collaboration is the name of the game.” This is the message of administrators, policy makers, professionals, and parents. Articles, posters, and textbooks echo this refrain.

Partnership is indeed a worthy cause, one that appears easy to believe in and own. However, effective partnerships can be elusive, hard to grasp. “So - is *this* a partnership?” “What’s it supposed to look like?” “Why is it so hard?”

There is often the expectation that parents and professionals immediately are full partners simply by sitting together at a conference table to discuss the plans and goals for a child. Most often it is just the opposite: partnerships evolve over time, go through various phases, and involve different interactions during various points of working together. This article describes the distinct phases which parents and professionals encounter on their journey to forming full and effective partnerships.

It takes time. We live in a society seduced by the fast-food mentality. Many of us are used to getting tasks done in very short snippets of time: we have one-hour dry cleaning, one-hour photo processing, the speed of fax machines and e-mail. Drive-in banking, overnight package delivery, and ten-minute oil changes feed our expectations that things can (and should) happen NOW. Right away! This minute or sooner!

But not all processes can be shortened and accelerated. There is virtually no way around the fact that relationships need time. They need to develop through conversations, problem-solving sessions, and overall hard work. All of which can lead to a sense of trust, the foundation of all relationships. There is, in fact, no magic for speeding up the process of forming a solid working partnership.

We would be wise to assume that we will have to work slowly and carefully to become true partners, that we will make mistakes and experience failure along the way, that we will learn to make repairs, and that we will need to use liberal doses of patience, forgiveness, and hope in order to forge effective and durable relationships that benefit our children.

As uncomfortable or painful as some interactions along the way may be, these can often be understood as part of the process of working together – toes stepped on in the dance toward partnership.

The First Phase: Colliding and Campaigning. Most parents and professionals don’t know each other very well when they first work together. They typically feel awkward and wary during this first phase. The initial phase is similar to being on a blind date. There is a self-consciousness, an uncertainty, and an absence of trust.

Since trust is so fundamental to forming relationships, its absence early on is significant and often results in parents and professionals unintentionally colliding with one another. Their ideas and approaches may seem contradictory and in conflict with one another. Toes are easily and frequently stepped on. Partners seem to be dancing to different music, bumping into each other, and dancing in different directions.

In an effort to foster understanding or at least move in the same direction, parents and professionals frequently campaign. Much like politicians during an election, first-phase partners promote their platforms so fervently that they have trouble integrating ideas other than those they originate. Each campaigner

carries his or her own sign with space enough for only one viewpoint. It is the very nature of campaigning to cleverly and powerfully put forward your idea. Dialogue is not part of such an equation.

During this first phase, campaigning often occurs with parents and professionals as they actively articulate their own perspectives in hopes of persuading the other to see the child, the problem or the intervention similarly. In addition, each tries to convince the other to accept the specific solution he or she believes is the right approach. It is not at all unusual for each of the partners, during this phase, to cling to one position because it is rooted in their dreams for the child.

During the initial phase, parents and professionals may not readily listen to each other. People often jockey for power, protect territory, block the other's solutions, and sell a particular position. Although these behaviors seem negative and difficult, such intense campaigning is actually a positive reflection of the partners' strength of commitment to the child or the program. These behaviors also reflect the fact that trust is not readily present early in relationships.

At this point in the dance toward partnership, we frequently hear the language of caution or constraint, including phrases such as: *"I really want this done this way."* or *"This is the way that works."*

Professionals and parents who pause to ask for more information from each other and who try to see the other person's point of view can often find an area of overlap in their visions for the child. They may see points of similarity in their intervention approaches. Some relationships never really get beyond this first phase of hammering away at separate agendas. If people join together even momentarily to explore possibilities rather than remaining glued to their separate positions, small ways to coordinate or cooperate often surface. Trust begins to emerge, and the dancers are then on the way to the next level on the partnership journey.

The Middle Phase. Coordinating, Cooperating, and Compromising. Partners continue to feel some apprehension and frustration during the middle phase but are also likely to feel more of a balance and some hope. The work is of a more cooperative nature. By coordinating service delivery more carefully at this level, partners avoid duplication and reduce the number of collisions. Partners more often experience each other as being reliable and following through on agreed upon tasks. The small and fragile trust born in the first phase is strengthened when the partners agree to work side by side or to take turns without insisting that "My way is the only way." Compromises can be arranged so that each person feels that crucial goals for the child are being addressed.

People are more effective in their listening ("Tell me more about what you think.") and more genuine in their consideration of the other person's hopes, dreams, and ideas. Each feels an emerging sense of respect for the other and begins to believe in the effectiveness of their joint problem-solving. This phase illustrates a sense of moving in a similar direction and of matching each other's steps.

The language which often characterizes middle-phase parents and professionals is the language of polite cooperation: *"You do that part your way, and then I'll do the next part my way."* or *"Maybe that will work-let's try your idea."*

People are better at asking each other to explain more about their ideas. They are more able to suspend their personal agendas and explore for common ground.

Working together at this level often generates effective programs for children and a sense of satisfaction for partners. Partners' trust in one another and their problem-solving skills can grow to the point that they find themselves climbing toward the third level.

The Third Phase: Collaborating and Creative Partnering. Inquiry and listening continue to be the cornerstones of successful alliances at this level just as they were at the earlier levels. Third-phase partners tend to share their interests, needs, fears, worries, and hopes with one another readily and fairly openly. The security that comes from knowing that your dreams, goals, and concerns are truly important to and valued by your partner enables a kind of exploration and problem-solving that results in brand new

solutions – fresh ideas for intervention. No longer are partners dancing separately; nor are there two distinct dance lines as we often see in the middle phase. Instead, the music and the choreography are now original works. Together the partners have written new music and designed new dance steps.

Partners at this third level typically see the child in a similar way and share common dreams for him or her. When situations are viewed differently, which still happens, partners are open to exploring and understanding the differences. At this third level of creative partnering, the child is central to the dance. He or she is in the middle, the focus, the reason for the partnership.

During this phase, partners do not feel the need to have and sell their solutions; rather they believe that innovative and totally new solutions are possible and probable if they join one another instead of taking turns or working alone. When conflict or differences in opinion are present, they are not viewed as threatening. Conflict during this phase is acknowledged as a normal part of partnering and viewed as an opportunity to really work on the “important issues” to ensure that the child reaches his or her potential. Partners know that they will get a clearer understanding of everyone’s concerns and hopes as they explore the conflict and differing ways of viewing the problem. Challenges still occur. Toes get stepped on. Instead of ignoring or glossing over the injury, however, partners at this level acknowledge their part and offer the necessary “repairs” with care and compassion.

Power and decision-making tend to be balanced. Interventions become blended, integrated, and unique.

Creative partners experience a sense of excitement and promise as well as feelings of efficacy and satisfaction. Their solutions are far from perfect but can be adjusted and refined in order to assure the best setting, supports, and interventions for the child.

This is the phase in the relationship that genuinely feels good and satisfying.

A Few Caveats: No one dances through these three phases in a clear, predictable, and ascending manner. We move up and down, back and forth, get stuck, skip stages, repeat and revisit former phases. Circumstances can cause us to move erratically in our relationships. For example, a new diagnosis, a transition to a new school or program, a change in personnel, and family stressors for either the parents or the professionals can all have an impact on our ability to partner. Few working relationships get to the third level of creative partnering. Most of us have only a few people throughout our lives with whom we can feel that unwavering sense of trust. The third phase of partnership as described here takes time, conversation, courage, and a strong belief that working on the relationship is worth it.

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