



THE GROWING BRAIN

EPISODE 20: How to Advocate for your Child who has Special Needs at School

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IEP, 504, RTI... so many acronyms! For parents who are starting the journey of special education services, this episode is for you. It can be overwhelming to know where to start and how to be your child's best advocate. Dr. Méroudjie Denis helps shed light on this important topic.

Welcome to The Growing Brain, a social emotional health podcast. I am Maureen Fernandez with Momentous Institute, a nonprofit in Dallas, Texas, dedicated to all things, social emotional health. Welcome to Season Two, where we're diving deeper into some of the most challenging aspects of parenting - dating, sleep, ADHD, anxiety, and so much more on this season of The Growing Brain. Thank you for joining us.

Maureen *Welcome back to the growing brain. Our guest today is Dr. Méroudjie Denis. Meroudjie is a licensed psychologist and an educational consultant with us at Momentous Institute. She has a strong background in special education, which is of course the subject we're talking about today, Méroudjie is here to speak with us about how to advocate for your child who has special needs at their school. So thank you so much for being here today.*

Méroudjie *You're welcome, Maureen. Thank you for having me. Um, I'm so excited to be here today to talk about a subject that is so near and dear to my heart. And I think so important, um, for parents on how to advocate for their children as they maneuver the special education world, which can be so overwhelming and complicated.*

Maureen *Perfect. That's exactly what I was thinking. Just coming in today, I was thinking about this topic is, it is so overwhelming and complicated. And I think that there are so many factors here, which makes it even more complicated. The fact that every child is unique, every diagnosis is unique. Every school has its own policies, district, state laws, and laws. And there's so many factors here. So we could spend all day talking about this and just barely scratch the surface. Um, but today I just want to talk a bit about some of the things that parents can know to equip them to be the best advocates that they can be for their children.*

Méroudjie *Awesome.*

Maureen *So in a minute, I want to talk about the kids who have received a diagnosis of some kind, so the kids who are on the autism spectrum or have dyslexia, or have, you know, been tested and received a diagnosis. But before we do that, I want to talk about the parents listening, who are just maybe wondering if there's something going on with their child. So they're, you know, parents who*

think, I don't know if my child's needs are being met at school and it may be related to, uh, a special need that my child has. So if your child hasn't been given any diagnosis and you don't have any experience with special education, then you're just hearing all these buzzwords like IEP, 504s... and I just imagine it's so overwhelming. Where do you even start?

Méroudjie So. I think you start with some basic understanding. So I'm going to take us through just a couple of things that I think are really important for parents to know as they even begin this journey, because they are going to hear a lot of buzzwords. Um, and I'm glad that you mentioned laws and guidelines that regulate special education, because I do think it's important that parents know that there are both federal law and state law that provide guidelines for identifying a child, um, with special education. So that being said, parents should be mindful that things can vary slightly based on their state, that, where they live, if that makes sense.

And speaking of laws without getting in too much in the weeds, I also want to clarify two important terms before we jump in. Parents may hear the terms, IDA and 504. These are two federal laws that dictate the provision of services for children with disabilities in school. IDA is an educational law or statute specific to special education and ensures a free and appropriate education for a child with a disability. 504 the other hand is not specific to education, but it protects students from being discriminated against, based on their disability.

Okay, so a student can receive services in school under a 504 plan or through an IEP, which is an individualized education program under IDA. So basically it's to remember two separate laws, both protecting students with disabilities, but with different eligibility criteria and different levels of protection.

Okay. So maybe back to your question, the world of special education can be very confusing even for educators and administrators. Um, so my heart does go out to parents who are trying to navigate all of this. It's really important that parents understand and know their rights as well on how to advocate for their children.

Um, so I'm going to take us almost step-by-step through. So if my child is struggling from the beginning, what should I do? And what can I expect?

Maureen *Perfect.*

Méroudjie Um, to try to create a little bit of a guideline for them. Um, so if a parent feels like their child's academic needs are not being met at school, this should start with a conversation with their teacher to voice their concerns and see what is being done in the classroom to support their students.

Because once a child struggles, whether academically or behaviorally, there are some basic, um, interventions that teachers are trained to do and, and can

implement easily in the classroom without the child really needing any additional support at that point. So once that happens, if the parent is not satisfied or their child does not seem to be making progress, they can ask whether their child is receiving Response to Intervention, also referred to as RTI, um, or they may also hear the term MTSS, um, some schools use one or the other. So here we go with the acronyms again. Um, I think my first year of grad school, it was going through a foreign language class, trying to figure out what all this means. Um, so I want to give parents enough language to be able to advocate for their children, but not too much to confuse, completely confuse them.

So RTI is a framework that is used to help students who are struggling academically. With RTI, there are three levels of, or tiers of interventions. So basically a weakness is identified. Timmy's having a hard time reading, right? Identifying letters maybe, in kindergarten. So an intervention is implemented and progress is monitored.

If they do not make progress at the first level, then they move on to a second level. So maybe, um, the second level would be now we're gonna pull some small groups of children who are also struggling with letter identification. And Timmy is going to be part of that small group. Then if Timmy continues to struggle, now I'm going to move them to a third tier of RTI. So at this point they may be receiving one-on-one support from a reading interventionist as the score, or they may be placed on a specific, um, reading program to help, um, them continue to develop. Does that make sense?

Maureen *It does. And so is that something you can just ask - that you would ask the teacher or you would ask the principal...?*

Méroudjie Yeah, good questions. Um, so, so a multi-tiered system of support or MTSS, which I mentioned previously is more comprehensive. It often includes the three levels of RTI, but also covers a social and emotional component or, um, support. This is often where behavior is addressed. So if a child's educational needs originates from a behavior or social, emotional need, MTSS will be used.

Okay. Um, an important thing that we forgot to mention earlier, we talked a lot about how a child receives special education, but we didn't talk about how a child receives 504 services. Okay. So with 504 services, um, all they need to have is a disability. So basically, um, it can be a medical disability, so a child can be on a 504 plan for a broken foot. Um, a child can be on a 504 plan for ADHD, a child can be on a 504 plan for autism. If, um, again, all they requires accommodation. Um, and also a child can be on a 504 plan for anxiety or depression. And that's something that parents often also don't know. So it can be a note, um, uh, a letter from your medical doctor or a letter from your psychologist, um, or your therapist just really detailing what the child is struggling with an why support and within the classroom environment would be helpful. Within the public school setting, the parents will be asked to take a

504 form to their doctor for the doctor to fill out. So the doctor could provide a letter along with that form.

Maureen *And a doctor or a psychologist or therapist...?*

Mérourdjie Right. So if it's for a psychological issue, you can, um, if it's for psychological difficulties, it can be a psychologist, psychiatrist, therapist, if it's for a medical issue, um, your medical doctor, your pediatrician would suffice.

Maureen *So you mentioned that, um, you could ask whether the child is receiving RTI or MTSS and did you mean ask the teacher or do you go to the principal? Like how do you, how do you ask about that?*

Mérourdjie Right. So a conversation with the teacher, um, could start there, but also the team that usually manages this whole process is often called the student support team. Or you may hear the teachers talk about the SST team, um, and the parents should be part of that team. So... and typically, um, in the schools, the school counselor is head of the RTI process. So the parent could approach the counselor and say, you know, I'm noticing Timmy is having a really hard time. Homework has been really hard. It doesn't seem like he's catching up as quickly as the other kids, is he part of the RTI process?

Um, if the answer is no then, um, request that he begins, um, to be part of that process. And if the answer is yes, then ask to start attending the RTI meetings because the parents have the right to be part of that meeting and be part of the SST team.

Maureen *Okay, great. So you can, so, and you would do that sort of in collaboration with the teacher, I assume?*

Mérourdjie Yeah. Right. And I think also, um, I might be thinking of a parent who's working and they're thinking I can't take off of work and lose two hours to go to this RTI meeting, ask to join by phone. Um, you can still be part of the conversation and provide your input and give what you need, um, through a phone conversation.

Maureen *So, yeah, that's good advice. Um, and so we talked a little bit about the laws that schools are required, um, to accommodate. And are there any, is it reasonable to expect that the school would accommodate your child if they don't have a specific diagnosis, but you have some sort of questions? Like I think my kid could use a little extra time on their projects if they don't go through those formal processes. Is it reasonable to expect the school to accommodate those?*

Mérourdjie So I think the answer to that would be it depends on the school and it depends on the teacher and it depends on, um, their level of expertise. So I think always collaborate with the teacher. Always start there, um, bring in the administrators, if you need to, hopefully the school will work with you.

But really, um, they're not bound to provide anything, um, above and beyond if the child is not receiving special education or, um, 504.

Maureen *Okay. So you mentioned the RTI and MTSS and... what happens when kids are moving through those, but you're not seeing the results that you would hope?*

Mérourdjie So then that's when the whole special education process begins. Um, and remember we talked about special education and 504, those being two different things. I'm going to talk about them separately to not completely confuse parents. So let's go through the steps for special education.

Um, so like we said, we've gone through RTI or MTSS, and the child continues to not show progress. So requests, um, for special education can be made either by the parent themselves or by, um, someone on the SSC committee. If the request is being made by the parent, I suggest that this request is made in writing. Um, that would, as that is a record of when, um, you sent the letter and exactly what it is that you're requesting, um, a simple letter for special education evaluation, with the reason why you feel your child should be evaluated, um, should suffice. Um, there are some sample letters online that parents can access, just to make sure they read through them and make sure it makes sense. Um, the school has, once the parent sends a letter, the school has 15 days, 15 school days to provide parents or response to whether or not they will evaluate the student.

Once the parent receives that notice that the school will evaluate a student, they must be given the opportunity to sign consent. So sending the letter on its own is not giving your consent for services.

Maureen *Okay.*

Mérourdjie Um, so they have to, they have to sign that consent. And once that consent is signed, then the evaluation report must be completed no later than 45 school days from the day that the school receives their parents' written consent for the evaluation.

Maureen *So I just want to make sure I'm following. So the parent sends a letter to the school, requesting an evaluation. Then the school has 15 days to respond. Then they ask the parent to give consent. And then the evaluation begins.*

Mérourdjie Yes.

Maureen *Okay.*

Mérourdjie I think there's a couple of things that I think are really important for us to understand about what special education is and what it does. And that's when we can talk a little bit about, okay, should my child be receiving 504 or should my child be receiving special education? Cause that's a question that I get a

lot. Um, It's really important to understand that special education is not providing extra help. So I'll often hear parents say, um, Timmy just needs a little bit of extra help. Um, should we ask for special education? It's really, that's not what it's designed for.

Um, in order to qualify for special education and this is really important for parents to understand, there are three key questions that must be answered. Number one, is there a suspected disability? Number two, is there an educational need? That's going to be the most important one for special education. And then is that disability so severe that their child's educational needs cannot be met in the regular education setting? So if the answer is yes, then the child may qualify for special education. And I say *may*, because there's also, as you go through the evaluation, the, um, educational diagnostician or the school psychologist is going to decide along with the ARD committee or the IEP committee, whether or not that child qualifies. So it's not a shoe-in, but those three must be answered. So sometimes a child has a disability, but there's not an educational need. Um, for example, their behavior may be manageable and their grades are fine and they're making satisfactory academic progress. In this case, there's not an educational need. In other cases, there might be an educational impact, but it is not to the degree that it would require an individual action plan.

Maureen *Okay. So I think I'm following, but like we talked about the beginning, it does get overwhelming fast. Um, I'm trying to understand really clearly the distinction between special ed and 504 and, and you're explaining it to us, but I'm just wondering, can you tell us a little bit more clarity around what the difference is.*

Mérourdjie Yes. So maybe um giving an example might illustrate that a little bit.

Maureen *Perfect.*

Mérourdjie So let's take a child with ADHD, right? That's pretty typical. So a child with ADHD could qualify, for, um, special education, but could also be served through a 504 plan. So let's take, we have two kiddos with ADHD, right? So if one child, um, can be supported through things like being given extra time to complete assignments, um, sitting in front of the class so that the teacher can easily redirect them and provide reminders to stay on task, or, um, they can be provided shortened assignments or even a behavior plan. All of these services can be provided under 504 and those services can be provided within the regular education, um, setting and classroom so special education doesn't need to be brought in in order for that kiddo to receive that extra help.

Maureen *Got it.*

Mérourdjie So you would take that same child with ADHD, and if that child requires, um, pull-outs, um, in order to complete that work or small group instructions, or even what we call inclusion, which would mean having a special education

teacher in the regular education classroom in order to provide extra help or extra support, then that child would qualify for special education. Um, also sometimes, um, we know with ADHD, kids can be impulsive or, um, be really disorganized. So if they need special help with organization skills or, um, impulse control, kind of help developing those skills and they would receive that help within a pullout environment or small group or one-on-one, again, that would warrant them possibly qualifying for special education.

Maureen *Got it. So it sounds like special education runs a range, so it's not just all day, you're in an isolated, special education classroom, but you can qualify for special ed if, just for part of your day you're with the special education...*

Mérourdjie Yes, special education definitely runs, um, through a range and it can start with inclusion, like I just mentioned where a special education teacher is with the kiddo for part of the day, um, as dictated by their special plan, or it could be what we call resource, where they're being pulled out and maybe they go to, um, special education only for math or only for reading or only for half of their day. And then all the way to what we call, um, self-contained where the child might be in that special education setting all day, every day. So it's, that's why it's called an individualized plan. It should be based on what it is that the child actually needs in order to be successful in the classroom.

Maureen *Yeah. That makes sense. This is so much great information. I know there's a lot more to talk about. So let's take a quick break.*

Commercial

Thank you for listening to our podcast. I'm so excited to announce that we have launched an online store where we're selling some of our favorite tools for helping kids develop social emotional health. These are things I use with my kids and they're amazing products. We have posters. We have books. We have a little book that teaches kids about the parts of the brain. Then we have a book for older kids that's a comic book that talks them through how the brain shows up during a typical day in the middle school classroom. We have curriculum, journals, posters, storybooks, all kinds of things in our online shop. So if you are interested, I would love for you to check it out. You can find more at momentousinstitute.org/shop.

Maureen *Okay. So we're back. I want to talk about the, the kids who do have a diagnosis, you've, we've dabbled in that. Um, and I want to talk about sort of, what advice would you give to parents to get started on the right foot at the start of the year with a child who they know has a special need at school?*

Mérourdjie Yes. Absolutely. If your child is, has been identified as a student with a disability and is currently receiving special education, there will be a yearly meeting. Um, in Texas, they call it an ARD meeting, which is an Admission Review and Dismissal meeting. And other states, you might hear it referred to as an IEP meeting, but it's basically a yearly meeting where, um, the school

staff sits together with the parents in order to go over the child's progress, um, and discuss whatever goals they need to set for the following year. So this doesn't necessarily happen at the beginning of every school year because every child will have their ARD at a different time. Yeah. And the time of the ARD meeting really just coincides with their dates of the original ARD.

So once they've had the evaluation and then the original meeting has been had to discuss, um, their eligibility criteria as, as, as well as whatever plan we're going to set for that child. Then, um, yearly after that day, there will be an ARD meeting. So let's say that your kiddo was, had the original ARD in January, which is not at the beginning of the school year, what parents can do is come in and talk to the teacher, make sure that they are aware that your child has an IEP or a 504 plan. Um, and that they're aware of all the accommodations. Um, it can be a lot for teachers to manage because in one classroom, one teacher may have maybe five, six, seven children with, uh, with IEPs. So it can be hard for them to remember who has which accommodation for how many minutes, and then so-and-so has an IEP, but so-and-so has a 504 meeting on top... um, excuse me, has a 504 plan on top of everything else that they're doing, they're already overwhelmed. So that could be an easy way for a parent to start to collaborate with the new teacher, um, as the same time as, um, supporting, um, their kiddo. So after you go through that meeting, if the teacher, um, is, seems hesitant or doesn't quite know how to implement everything in the IEP, the parents should contact their child's case manager.

Um, in special education, every child is given a case manager and that person really acts as almost a bridge between the parent and, um, the school and is designed to help, um, the student and just ensure that their IEP is being implemented to the best of everybody's ability and to monitor that the goals are being met, um, and all of that.

So connecting to the, your child's, um, case manager can be a great way for you to add an extra layer of support, um, to ensure that your child is making their educational gain.

Maureen *So this case manager, is this someone, if you're at the school for the second or third year in a row, you would probably know who your case manager was from the year before, but if you're coming...*

Méroudjie *Maybe.*

Maureen *Okay, yeah. Right. Cause it could switch. Um, but how do you know who your case manager is? Is the responsibility of that on the parent at the start of the year, if they know that their meeting is not, like you said until January?*

Méroudjie *So parents should know who their case managers are from previous, um, ARD meetings.*

But as we know in schools, things don't always work perfectly because people are overwhelmed. So if you're not sure who your case manager is, you can, you can ask. Uh, um, at the ARD, at the very first ARD, that would be a great question to ask, who will be my case manager. And let's say that your child is transitioning from elementary school to middle school. That would be another question to ask. So there should be what they call a transition ARD from elementary school to middle school, from middle school to high school, um, that the parents again have the right to attend and should attend. And if, um, when they do that, they can ask, okay, who would be my point person? Who's the case manager for Timmy at this new school?

Maureen *Okay. Right.*

Méroudjie And speaking of, um, parents' rights around ARD. I wonder if, um, I could go through a couple of, of things that I think are important around that and questions I often get?

Maureen *Yeah, definitely.*

Méroudjie So I think it's important for parents to know their rights again, um, knowing the rights in order to advocate for your child is the most important thing cause it's such a confusing process. So, um, parents have the right to attend an ARD meeting. If the ARD meeting is scheduled at a time that you cannot physically be there, but you do want to be there, you can either join by phone, or if being physically present is important to you, you can ask them to reschedule.

Um, now of course we need to be reasonable. It can't be, you can't ask for an ARD at 8:00 in the evening and things like that, but the school should be able to work with you if it's important for you to be there. And I do think it is important for parents to be there. Also, I think an important thing to know is that parents often think that they have to wait a whole year in order to come before the ARD committee. Um, I already had my ARD in January and now it's, you know, August of the next year and Timmy is really, really struggling again, what can I do? So I think it's important for parents to know that they have the right to call an ARD meeting at, um, at any point. So again, it needs to be reasonable. So an ARD can't be called because I want to ask Ms. Jones how Timmy did on his math test or, um, it can't be called, um, just because you want to connect with the teachers, but if you have a question about your child's programming, about your child's, um, If I have a question about your child's programming or about how they're advancing in school, you have that right to call the ARD.

You also have the right to ask for the IEP to be changed. Now, again, it is going to be an ARD committee decision and the parent is not the only person in the ARD committee, but truly the parent and the administrators are the most important people in an ARD meeting. So technically an ARD meeting cannot occur unless there's a parent and an administrator, and the only way that an ARD meeting can take place without a parent being there if parent signs a

waiver that they will not attend the ARD. So I think that's also really important to have..

Maureen *Oh, okay. So not only do you have a right to be there, there's an expectation.*

Mérourdjie There's an expectation. And you also have the right, um, to bring in somebody to support you. So for example, I know at Momentous we work really collaboratively at the intersection of mental health and education, and it is not uncommon for some of our therapists sometimes to go to an ARD meeting in order to help the committee understand some of the child's needs and some of the things that maybe they've been working on, um, in therapy or, um, in order to help support their child, of course the parents would have to give consent and all that, but that, that is also the parents' right. So I think there's a lot of things that parents, um, don't, don't know that they have right to, and I think it's important.

Maureen *Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. That's great.*

Mérourdjie One last thing about parents' rights is, um, I want parents to know that they have a right to a translator if English is not their primary language. Um, so, and then you also have a right to receive an audio recording of that meeting if the meeting was translated.

Maureen *Okay.*

Mérourdjie So that's also something that, um, parents don't often know.

Maureen *Nice. So speaking of parents' involvement and their rights and how they show up at school, I know that parents of children with special needs often feel like they have to be more involved in their child's education than the average parent. And of course, you're talking about that. That makes sense. Um, you know, their child's more vulnerable. They have to know the adults in the school more, they go to the meetings. Um, they may have to be physically present more often or just more in communication with the teacher, the administrators, counselors. So how can parents sort of appropriately monitor and protect their children in this circumstance, but also still provide a sense of freedom and normalcy for their kids without sort of slipping into that danger zone of like, you know, helicopter parenting.*

Mérourdjie And it's a fine balance, right? Especially when your child is struggling, you're going to want to do anything you can to make sure that they're successful. Um, but I think the most important thing is to develop a good relationship with the school personnel, develop a good relationship with your child's teacher, with the case manager and the administrators.

Um, I know that when you're fighting for your child's right, it doesn't always seem to come across to parents, but most school personnel are doing the best they can and want the best and want the best for each of their students. Um,

with a good relationship will also come better communication. So parents can feel safe to go to the school personnel and then their school personnel and school staff can feel motivated to collaborate with parents in providing support for the student, right.

So developing a relationship with the case manager again, is a good way for parents to receive feedback and provide insight. Um, because as we talked about, the case manager, their role is to ensure that special education services and support are being put in place.

Maureen *And let's talk about what, what are some things parents can do when they aren't happy with the way school is handling something? So let's talk a little bit about what parents can do if they aren't happy with the way things are going.*

Mérourdjie Yeah, so this can definitely be a tough place for parents to be right. Um, in these cases, again, um, knowledge is power and the more educated parents can be regarding their rights, the more they can advocate for their students.

Um, often parents become frustrated because they feel like the school should provide more support or services. Um, I think it's important to remember that the school's primary goal is to educate children and unfortunately resources can be limited at times, but I think it's important to keep that in mind. Um, so services will focus on how to help the student achieve their educational goals. And school will often not be able to provide hours of specialized therapies or treatments for the students.

Um, but at the end of the day, if parents disagree with an ARD committee's decision, they can always choose to end their ARD in a disagree. So at the end of the ARD meeting, the parents will be given a chance to, um, state or check whether or not they agree or disagree with the committee's decision. If they do not agree, then they check the disagree box and that is called a disagree ARD. So what this means is that now they will have, each parties will have 10 days to either, um, think through it or come up with, um, additional evidence or whatever it is that they need to do.

They have 10 days before they reconvene. So hopefully at that time, the parent and school can come to an agreement. Parents have the right to bring, um, a special education advocate or an attorney, um, to the ARD if they see fit. Um, if they just cannot come to an agreement, parents in school can attend what they call a mediation.

And at that time, both parties sit down with a third, impartial party to discuss the disagreement and try to come to a solution. If that doesn't work, the school or the parent can file what they call a due process complaint, which can lead to due process hearing. It is typically in the best interest of the school and the family not to let it get that far, but sometimes it just, it does get there. And, um, again, I think it's important for parents to know that they have the right to do all of these things.

Maureen *Okay. And that that's all super helpful, and short of that. So like you said, we hope it doesn't get that far. What advice do you have sort of for the smaller sort of roadblocks along the way that that can prevent it from getting all the way to that?*

Mérourdjie Right. So, um, it would be to call an ARD meeting and sit down with the committee and really try to work through whatever's going on. Um, really, um, create an open communication, create a space where hopefully both sides can be heard and respected. Um, when parents feel like their children's rights are not are being violated, I think it's normal for them to become...

Maureen *Right, right.*

Mérourdjie ... to become angry or to become agitated. Um, but the more we can have a conversation where both parties feel calm and are ready to listen. I think, um, the more benefit we can have for the kiddo at the end.

Maureen *I like what you said before, about how, um, the school's... school has your child's best interests at heart. You know, they're really trying to, to educate yours, your child as well. And so I know, sometimes it feels like you're on opposing sides in these, in these sort of discussions. And it's really important to keep in mind that you're on the same side and you're both fighting for the same thing.*

Mérourdjie Right. And it's a team. And it makes sense that the parent would feel often on the defensive side, because this is your one and only, right. Versus for the school or the IEP team, it could be one of hundreds of children. Um, so I think it's really important for both sides to understand that for the parent and for the school to understand this is their child and their child's future so the parent is going to want what's best. And also for parents to understand that, like I said, the school's job is to educate the child and to, um, help them succeed the best they can academically and socially emotionally in the classroom. So sometimes, um, parents may want, um, a specific therapy where the child gets pulled out for hours at a time, or may one-on-one aid and would that help the child function better? Probably. Yes. But does that child absolutely need that service in order to make educational gain? Often the answer is no. And that can get sticky.

Maureen *Yeah, I definitely, I definitely understand that. While we're talking about this, it's making me think. What if, what about the kids whose children go to private or charter schools? What are some of their, how does this work in those settings?*

Mérourdjie Yeah, that's a good question. And it kinda, it gets really sticky there. Right. And it can get even more confusing. So, um, I'll talk about private first and then I'll talk about, um, charter and magnet schools. So for private schools, really, um, the private schools are choice and they are really not obligated to provide any services.

Um, really a lot of private schools will accommodate a 504 plan. So again, remember 504 plans are things that can be implemented within the regular education setting. It's things that the teachers can do to support. Um, it can be, you know, Timmy needs or, or, uh, tasks in a more quiet room to not be distracted. So things that can help a child greatly if they're struggling, but it's not really an individualized, um, plan that's going to change the way that, um, the child is learning. It's just going to help accommodate, um, their learning style. So like again, so a lot of, excuse me, a lot of private schools will accommodate 504 plans.

So it would be um having a conversation with the school, um, and asking for that.

Maureen *And they accommodate in an official capacity, like it's written out...?*

Mérourdjie And again, it just depends on the private school. They don't have to, most schools that I know of will, the child will have a 504 plan. There will be a 504 meeting. Um, typically there's a school counselor there. The school counselor will be in charge of that again, but it's not a requirement.

Maureen *Okay. And what about charter schools?*

Mérourdjie So charter schools, um, there's a, um, there's a misnomer, um, with charter schools. And I know that exists because I had multiple parents come to me and, and say that the charter school told them that they don't have the services. Um, charter schools are public schools, they receive federal funding. So if a charter school or a magnet school is receiving federal funding and state funding for children's education, they are required by law to provide special education services to the same degree that a normal public school would. What happens is often that is that the charter school may not have the personnel on staff to provide the services, which means that they're contracting out, um, with psychologists or, um, school psychologists in order to, um, or diagnose educational diagnosticians in order to, um, provide those services, but your child, your child in a charter school has the same right as a child in a public school, if that charter school was receiving federal dollars, which they are.

Maureen *Yeah. Okay. Great. So one thing that I don't think we talk enough about is what, how we bring children into these conversations. So when a child has special needs and needs special accommodations, how, how do you talk to your kids about that? What, what advice do you have on that?*

Mérourdjie That's a really good question, Maureen. And I think of course, um, the way that you're going to talk to your child about this is going to be developmentally appropriate. The conversation that you're going to have with your elementary school kiddo is going to look different than, and, um, what you're going to talk to with an older child. But as a child gets older, parents should have open

communication with them regarding their diagnosis, their special education eligibility, what it means and the ways in which they are being supported in school.

As early as junior high or middle schools, um, kids do start attending ARD meetings in order to understand their plans and their goals. Um, there should be a discussion about transition beginning around the age of 13, but no longer, no later than 16 years of age per IDA. So this includes a discussion in the ARD meeting about their future plans, um, what they need to do to achieve that goal, transition goals are put in place as part of their IEPs. And then during their junior or senior year, a transition specialist will begin to attend the ARD meetings to help parents and students coordinate post-secondary goals.

Maureen *Oh, wow. Okay. Yeah.*

Méroudjie So there's a system put in place, um, for that. And again, like everything else, if that's not happening, then you can request, um, if you feel it's appropriate for your kiddo in junior high to start attending the ARDs, then ask that they start doing so. Sometime it may, um, be more appropriate to wait till high school, but again, no later than 16 years of age, that transition plan needs to be put in place.

Maureen *Nice. So outside of the meetings, what advice do you have for parents to just sort of have an open conversation with their kids about their special needs and about sort of any accommodations that are happening?*

Méroudjie Oh, yeah, that's a really good one. Um, I think sometimes parents, um, get nervous discussing with their children, their disability, because they don't want them to feel different or they don't want them to feel like something is wrong with them. Um, but like everything else, the more - knowledge is power, right? The more information they have, um, the better they are equipped to navigate through their world. So a conversation could sound like, you know, we, um, we, we all struggle with things. Some things come easier to some people than others. Some people are good at some things and not so good at others. Do you know how for you, it's really hard to sit still and to focus and you know how you have to take medication to help you stay on task? Well, we also do things at school to help support you. So mom and dad, or grandma, whoever the caregiver is, goes to these meetings once a year with your teachers and your principal and we talk about how to best support you, because everybody cares so much about you and every once everybody wants the best for you and everybody wants you to be the best student that you can be. So during those meetings, we talk about what are the different ways that your teachers can, um, can support you. And then they also give me ideas on how to support you at home. And when you're older, you can start coming to those meetings too if you're curious about what they're talking about, you can start coming to the meeting and then you can feel like you can have a voice and share with the committee because mom may know some things that you might be struggling with, but maybe I don't know, understand everything. Then you can have a

voice as you get older and share with them how things are going, how things are not going.

And then after you have a conversation like that, and maybe that would sound like that with an elementary school student. And then you open the floor and say, do you have any questions? Does that make sense? Um, you know, how do you feel knowing that we talk about these kinds of things and let the child express kind of what's going on. Cause more than likely they know that, um, you know, that they are receiving maybe some special accommodation or maybe that the way that the teacher does things with them is different than the way they do things with other kids. And it can get confusing, not knowing why that's happening. So I think your conversation from very early on can help support that.

Maureen *And you said knowledge is power. I would imagine even explaining some of the details. Like here's what it will look like for you. You will be pulled out this amount of times, or someone's going to come in, just giving them a little bit of the context around what the plan lays out for them would, I assume would help them feel a little more grounded.*

Méroudjie Yes. I think that would be really important so that they don't, they're not caught off guard. Um, it's not confusing why this person is coming to pull them out and they also can know and can be an advocate for themselves. Um, of course you would talk to your child about how to, um, maybe bring some of these things respectfully as they get older, but maybe Ms. Jones might forget that when you take a test, you have the right to, um, go into different rooms so it, where it's more quiet. So that could be a really respectful way for the child to reminder. Oh, Ms. Smith, can I, you know, can I step off and go take my test in the quiet room or, um, oh, and I didn't finish this task. I need extra time. Um, so again, it just all starts with conversations, um, and clear is kind, as Brené Brown said. So when we can be clear, um, with the school, we can be clear with parents. We can be clear with kids. Then we are showing kindness towards all of these individuals.

Maureen *Nice. I love that. So we're, we're wrapping up here and I'm just wondering if you can give us your, sort of your final advice. If you had, you know, two minutes with a parent and they were struggling through this, what would you tell them?*

Méroudjie So as a parent, you are your child's biggest advocate. So know your rights and become educated, understand your child's disability as well as their strengths. If you don't understand, ask questions.

Um, I would also recommend that parents keep copies of all of their child's documentation, ARD meetings, evaluation, progress report, all of that. Um, stay involved as much as you can and remain informed about how the school is supporting your child. There's a lot of different ways to do that. I know parents are busy working, um, sometime managing their own, um, struggles,

so it can be hard to then try to stay on top of everything, and it can feel to it sometimes if I'm not at the school 24-7, nothing gets done. So that's when we go back to that communications piece and really connecting with the people who are involved. So develop a positive relationship with the school. Um, get to know the members of the IEP team in order to create the best system of communication between both parties.

So the same way I often remind school personnel that parents want the best for their child, and that they're doing the best they can, I also want to remind parents that your child's teachers, administrator and everyone in the school has the best of intentions and for the most part are doing the best that they can.

So have some patience, have some grace while still standing up for your rights and that of your child. Um, I recommend parents go in assuming that we're all working on one team and working towards the same goal. Um, our school staff are often working in a system that is not set up for success, and we need to invest more in education and educating our children and a way that parent can be advocate for their children, um, at any stage of the education process is through advocacy.

Um, unfortunately the recommended ratio of school psychologists per student is 1 to 5-700 and our national average is 1 to 1400. And I believe that we can do better for our kids. With these numbers, the demands become impossible to manage and then laws get created, but the support isn't there.

So you end up overtaxing an already taxed system, frustrating parents who start to believe that a well-meaning school system and the adults in it don't care about their children. Which is not true. And finally, we end up with children who suffer because their needs are not being met. Um, our education is very broken and I think it's time that we fix it. And there are ways that we can do that.

Okay. So to end on a more positive note, while I do think that advocacy is important because we have a broken system, um, there are some things that parents can really do to make this an easier process for them and for their child. Um, I cannot emphasize enough relationships, relationships, relationships, across settings, relationship between the child and their teacher, relationship between school administration and the parent and between the parent and the ARD committee or the 504 committee or whoever is helping their child. And for parents to even voice to the school, we are on the same team. This is not an as versus them. I know that we are all working towards what is best for my child.

Maureen *Yeah. Uh, Meroudjie, thank you so much for all of this. I want to just ask you as we leave, if parents are listening and they need, they need more information, where, where would you direct them?*

Méroudjie Yes. Um, so there are, um, a lot of different sites that have information on advocacy. There are tons of books. If you go to Amazon and you just Google, um, special education, tons of things will come up. There are books specifically geared towards parents that can help you.

But I have a couple of resources, um, from the internet. So um SPEDTex. It provides special education information, um, and is a special education information center. So it provides us information on special education on, um, rights on how to advocate.

So there's also Disability Rights of Texas and it has information related to everything related to disabilities, including housing, medical, and education. And it can even provide referrals and sometimes, um, pro bono attorneys and advocates for parents to bring with them, to ARD meeting, if it gets to that.

Um, also there's Partner Resource Network provides resource for parents. And part of that is, um, Path, P A T H. And. It's under their website, but what they have is, um, there are federally funded parent training, um, and information center, servicing children and youth from zero to 26. And they have different representative for, um, different areas of the metroplex. So, and there, they also provide, they provide webinars. They provide trainings. And, um, events and again, their regional coordinators sometime can guide parents either through phone or in-person.

And the last one I want to mention is understood.org. Yeah. It's also a really good resource, um, for parents when they have questions. So there's information out there. There's way to educate yourself. A lot of these, um, website that I listed has have information both in Spanish and English. Um, and yeah, again, remember you are your child's biggest advocate. Knowledge is power. The more, you know, the more you can stand by your child through this, um, journey that can often be very difficult, but it doesn't have to be.

Maureen *Thank you so much. I learned a ton and I really appreciate you coming in today.*

Méroudjie You're welcome. It was my pleasure.

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