

Working with Schools

determining if extra help is needed by Jeffrey Katz, Ph.D.

It's January and the school year is almost halfway over. For many students, it is now time to re-energize for the push to the end of the year. In some families, parents may have growing concerns about their children's progress. Teachers who worried about a student's performance before the holidays may have been hoping that things will be back on track in the new year. If you are concerned about your child, do not wait too long to take action. The end of the school year will be coming up, and this is the time of the year to see what will help.

Difficulties in school could involve specific problems with reading, writing, or mathematics. Sometimes academics seem okay, but the child is having trouble with organization, focusing, completing work, and/or behavior. There are other concerns a parent might have, such as how their children get along with others or maybe difficulties with speech and language. Whatever your concern, you should know that the school is responsible for your

child in all areas of their functioning. You should expect that the school wants to help. In fact, the school is required by law to seek out children who may need help.

If your child has been struggling in school, you probably have already had a number of conversations with the teacher. If your child is struggling at this time of the year, the next step to take is to request a meeting with the school that includes the teacher and other school personnel. Sometimes the school will suggest a Student Support Team meeting. This is not a "formal" meeting in the sense that the school is bound by any educational regulations. It may be a good first step, though, if at the meeting the school agrees to try some specific interventions to help. The interventions should be ones that are implemented at school, rather than "ideas" for you to try at home. Be sure to schedule a follow-up meeting in three to four weeks' time to review the results of the interventions. If your child is doing well at that time, thank the school

and encourage them to keep up the good work.

If you still do not believe your child is doing well, then it is time to seek a comprehensive evaluation through a more formal path. The formal path begins with a request for a meeting to consider your child for special educational services. This is usually called a Child Study Team meeting. Do not be concerned that you are committing yourself to placing your child in special education. As a parent, you always have the right to agree or not to agree to services from the school. The request is the legal step needed to start the process of obtaining a comprehensive evaluation to consider your concerns and to determine the following: how your child is doing in the school environment, whether your child is achieving to his ability, and what factors may be interfering with your child's progress or functioning in school. One more note: schools sometimes say that they cannot do anything if the student is making good grades; however, this is not an accurate interpretation of the educational regulations, so don't let this stop you.

I believe that schools and teachers want the best for each student. There are times, though, when they do not understand a particular child and his or her learning needs. As a parent, you need to know that there are steps you can

take to ensure your child does well. The process can be daunting and maybe even overwhelming at times, but if you educate yourself about your rights at school, you can be successful. Each school district has a Parent Resource Center, whose job is to help parents understand how to work through the system. Call them if you have questions and to request a copy of the regulations as they apply to seeking evaluations. If you feel that you are not able to make any headway with the school, you can seek the services of an educational advocate or mental health professional who is familiar with working with the schools. In any case, this is the time of year to make a difference if your child is struggling. ●

Dr. Jeffrey Katz is a clinical psychologist who practices in Va. Beach. Dr. Katz works with children, adolescents, adults, and their families. He specializes in the evaluation and treatment of Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder and learning and behavioral problems. He is on the national board of Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD).



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