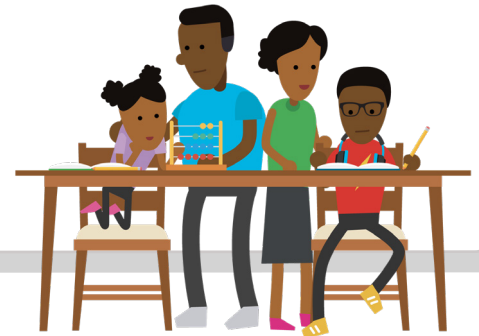


Understanding the Parent Journey

This communications guidance stems from our research on how parents of children with learning differences understand and navigate public education to find support for their children's learning and development. The research was supported by the Oak Foundation.

Top Messages: When speaking to parents of children with learning differences, focus on the benefits of early identification; communicate regularly, in plain language, and through trusted sources, such as pediatricians and para-educators; address children's academic and social-emotional needs; ensure families are aware of the full range of services and accommodations available to their child and how they can help their child at home.



Evaluation & Diagnosis

Offer Reassurance: Parents need support to confront barriers like fear and anxiety that can prevent them from identifying and accepting their child's learning difference. Parents wrestle with many worries, including how a diagnosis will impact their child's ability to succeed in school and in life, whether it will make their child stressed and anxious or affect their child's happiness and emotional well-being, and whether their child will be bullied or labeled as "different" than other children. Make space for early conversations with families to allay such concerns.

Rely on Trusted Sources: Early communication from trusted sources like pediatricians and teachers can lead to earlier intervention by parents. Only 20 percent of parents say it's very easy to figure out where and how to get a diagnosis and just half are confident about how to help their child.

Speak to the Benefits: Many parents, especially those who have not yet had their child diagnosed, are unaware of how an evaluation could help their child, including access to academic help, individualized instruction or tutoring, and mental health services. Better communications could help close the knowledge gap on the benefits those with a diagnosis receive and enable families to better advocate for their child.

Effective Communications

Avoid Jargon: Parents say using smaller words and laymen’s terms would help them better understand their child’s evaluation and learning differences. Don’t just hand out test results. Explain what they mean for the child’s learning and development and how the school will partner to determine next steps.

Address Social-Emotional and Academic Needs: Six-in-10 parents report their child with learning differences experiences anxiety or depression. Parents’ top concerns are equally about academics and their children’s emotional wellbeing. Yet parents are less assured about discussing social-emotional issues with schools.

Amp Up Communications: More regular and comprehensive communication about services can help parents get the support their child needs. Parents who say their school communicates at least monthly are twice as likely to rate their school as “excellent” in helping with learning differences. Parents communicating with para-educators regularly are particularly happy.

Access to School Supports

Raise Expectations & Extend Supports: Families whose children receive more services are more satisfied with their school. Schools need to ensure that comprehensive services are available and communicate more clearly to families about how they can access them. This also means improving teacher professional development and increasing access to trained para-professionals, who are a primary point of contact and a trusted resource for families.

Lean into Ways that Schools Could Help: Parents want more information about how they can help their child at home; guidance about age-appropriate academic, social, and emotional milestones; training to better advocate for their child; stronger connections between pediatricians and schools and to mental health providers to support a more holistic approach to children’s needs; and access to parent-support groups.

Families who have a child with a diagnosis prefer the terms “Learning Differences” or “Disability,” while those without a diagnosis prefer “Learning Challenges.”

