It is not always easy for parents to hear that their child has a disability. This makes it very complicated to be the person who is the first to tell them. Many times school principals and administrators have to carry out this difficult task. This study guide will review how to create a formal process that walks school administrators through the steps of how to explain a child’s disability to his or her parents.

Table of Contents:

Case Study..............................................................................................................2
Case Study- What Went Right.................................................................4
Quick Structural Tips to Remember..........................................................4
Quiz..................................................................................................................5
Frequently Asked Questions.................................................................6
Annotated Bibliography.....................................................................................8

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Case Study:

The principal, teachers, and other school staff noticed a definite change in Owen’s behavior over the past few months and in recent weeks his depressive attitude and actions were becoming more prevalent. One of Owen’s teachers met with Owen’s parents who confirmed the same struggles at home. With the parent’s permission, the school psychologist evaluated Owen using a variety of measurements. The outcome of the data collected was that Owen was depressed due to several traumatic events. The principal knew the next step needed to be telling Owen’s parents about the disorder. In a private conference room are Owen’s mother and father, the school principal, the school psychologist, and one of Owen’s teachers. The team has communicated in advance that the principal will facilitate the meeting, but that the school psychologist will review the evaluation and share the formal diagnosis or disability.

School Principal: Thank you for coming in today, Mr. Davidson. We have some very important information to talk about concerning your son, Owen. We are so happy to have Owen in our school – he is exceptionally bright, can be helpful and we notice he really enjoys art class. As you know, he was referred to our school psychologist for an evaluation because he’s been having trouble academically and personally. His grades are suffering, his class participation is lacking, and he’s been either not attending or otherwise very disengaged during his after school activities. His social skills have taken a turn as his teachers have noticed him pulling away from friends he is normally close to and sitting alone at lunch. Our school psychologist, Dr. Marr, would like to review the results of Owen’s evaluation with us.
**Dr. Marr:** These results from Owen’s evaluation may not be exactly what you are ready to hear. However, this news will explain where some of the behaviors Owen has been demonstrating are stemming from. After taking an extensive report is it clear that your son Owen can be diagnosed with depression. Depression is a common mental illness that affects how someone thinks, feels, or behaves. It causes sadness and loss of interest and may lead to further emotional and physical problems. However, depression can be countered with counseling, medication, and other treatment. We are all here today to support Owen and your entire family in taking the steps necessary to help Owen.

**Mr. Davidson:** This is pretty difficult news to hear. Owen just had out the board game monopoly with the babysitter last night. I thought depression only occurred in adults.

**Mrs. Davidson:** I can’t believe it either. But I guess I just brushed off Owen’s grumpiness lately as crazy hormones. I shouldn’t have done that. So where do we go from here?

**School Principal:** We certainly understand that this is a great deal of information to take in right now. We would like to give you some time to talk this news over with each other and possibly with Owen. We would be glad to meet with all three of you to explain anything further within the coming week if you are available. We have compiled a short list of materials that will help explain what depression is, what Owen is currently going through, and ways in which you can provide support. Please call any of us here is you have any questions after you leave and I call you soon about possibly planning a follow-up meeting to see how everything is going both at school and at home.
Case Study- What Went Right:

- Principal was prepared
- Other helpful school leaders were in attendance
- Setting was appropriate
- Dialogue was open and comfortable
- Both parents present
- “Warning shot” was implemented
- Positive comments and an overall positive outlook was displayed

Quick Structural Tips to Remember:

- Tell parents as soon as possible when a disability has been diagnosed or suspected
- Have parents bring a supporter such as a spouse, relative, or trusted friend to the meeting with them
- Use unifying language such as “we,” “together,” and “us”
- Hold the meeting in a private place, free of interruptions and onlookers
- Be sure to use first person language
**Quiz:**

1. What are the four main steps to follow when creating a formal procedure?
   a. 
   b. 
   c. 
   d. 

2. What does parent-friendly framework mean?

3. Provide an example of a “warning cost” statement.
Frequently Asked Questions:

Q: Are there any resources available to school leaders to help them prepare for the parent meeting?

A: There are many resources that can be found on the following websites.

- This website has a plethora of information on different disabilities so school leaders can be more informed on the topic they will be discussing with parents http://www.sbbh.pitt.edu/

- This website has multiple sources of information listed on how school leaders can help parents cope with the news http://www.educationworld.com/parents/special/

- What to look forward to possibly helping school leaders prepare for parent meetings in the future http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/08/15/01roleplay_ep.h31.html?tkn=WOZFe%2F5%2BZM9AUSQCgE6sJ8%2B%2FMDloI3Cb8w2F&print=1
Q: What are some strategies to give parents to help them cope?

A: School leaders can inform parents about different coping strategies to help them reduce and manage their stress. Emotion-focused coping strategies such as thinking positively or praying, which can help them to lessen emotional stress. Problem-focused coping can be used when the stressors have the ability to be changed. (3) These types of strategies include seeking additional information about the disability and learning how to care for the child’s specific special needs. Let parents know that it is all right to use behavioral coping strategies such as crying. Also, inform parents of cognitive coping strategies such as minimizing the seriousness of information.

Q: How do school leaders talk to parents who just do not want to hear the bad news, such as how Mr. Davidson refused to accept the information and walked out of the room in the case study?

A: If this happens during the meeting the first thing school leaders must remember is to avoid feeling defensive or attacked. According to research, there are two steps that should be taken at this point (1). First is to allow the parents to vent their feelings. The second step is to listen if they are willing to speak and then try to discern where their unacceptance and misunderstandings stem from so that the school leaders can try to find a mutual definition that both parties agree with. Providing more detailed information or more examples of the child’s disability can do this. During these steps school leaders should remain calm and empathetic.
Annotated Bibliography:


Dr. Auger is an associate professor in the Department of Counseling and Student Personnel at Minnesota State University where he studies information that will aid mental health and school counselors. In this article he explains the impact that hearing difficult news can have on parents including different ways that parents may react. Parental responses may range from anger, to disbelief, to shock, or even tears and sadness. This is very important information for administrators to know before going into a meeting and explaining a disability to parents because it will allow them to be empathetic and to be prepared to counter that parental response. The main points from this article will boost my HelpDesk resource in terms of letting school leaders in on how to effectively respond to different parental reactions.


Dr. Bartolo is a senior lecturer in educational psychology and has authored many publications that focus on psychology within the school systems. For this reason he has the background and experience to be researching communication pathways between parents and administrators in the school setting. In this particular study Dr. Bartolo examines and then compares interactions.
between parents and school leaders during a diagnosis meeting to a
meeting with parents and medical workers in a hospital. He finds
many similarities, which demonstrate that they are the most
effective ways to communicate about a disability to parents. He
summed up these similarities into three major frameworks that
included a parent-friendly framework, a defocusing bad news
framework, and a hopeful-formulation framework. This similar
information will be very useful for school administrators to read in
my HelpDesk resource.

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The author, Jennifer Boyd, is a clinical nurse specialist in the
Division of Neurology at The Hospital for Sick Children. With this
background she has been though many instances where her, other
nurses, and doctors, have had to relay difficult information
concerning children’s disabilities to their parents. In this article
she explains what she has learned from previous experience and
suggests that there should be a general process to be followed in
such instances. Although this article pertains to a hospital setting
the idea of having an actual process in place is something that can
be adjusted and transferred into the school setting. The
administrators reading my HelpDesk resource will need to know
about this important option.

Dr. Harnett has published the national best practice guidelines entitled, “Informing Families of their Child’s Disability” so she is well versed in the study of communication between parents and professionals on topics such as children. In this study, Dr. Harnett along with two other refined researchers looked at different groups of families and professionals they had been in contact with when being told that their child had a learning disability. The interviews with the families and professionals go into depth asking about how each party felt after the interview and what they thought would have made the interview go better or run more smoothly. One main finding was that parents want to get positive yet realistic messages from professionals. I will be able to take this main discovery as well as others from their study and input them into my HelpDesk resource. It will be to display the correct forms for school leaders to take on in order to communicate effectively and efficiently to parents in the case of relaying news of their child’s disability.


All three authors can go into great depth about this topic as they each have backgrounds with much experience dealing with child psychology. Dr. Nissenbaum is a psychologist at the Developmental Disabilities Center in Kansas City, MO. Meanwhile, Dr. Tollefson and Dr. Reese both have multiple publications in
scholarly journals about professional practice in the field of psychology and dealing with student academic disabilities. Their study looks at families and professionals’ perceptions of their interpretive conference, which is the meeting where they learned their child had autism. The research comes from a series of interviews with 11 nonmedical professionals and 17 parents of children with autism. The study uncovered that parent’s previous knowledge and perceptions of a disability have an impact on how they will react upon hearing their child’s diagnosis. The study also has feedback about how parent’s felt in terms of wanting their child in the room with them when hearing the diagnosis, receiving numerical scores during the meeting, and getting a feeling of hope from the professionals. I will be able to put the outcomes from their research into the form of recommendations for ways to communicate with parents, which will be a section in HelpDesk resource.