

PARENT PORTFOLIO NOTEBOOK

Turning Life Experience into Credentials

Instructions

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Congratulations on your interest in the Parent Portfolio Notebook!

Increasingly parents and other family members are being asked to shape and create better systems of services for their children with disabilities. However, we currently do not have a system to evaluate the qualifications of parents to (1) serve on Governing Boards, Advisory Boards, Task Forces, workgroups and other policymaking bodies or (2) apply for paid positions in the disability service system, school districts, and other related fields. This Parent Portfolio Notebook has been designed by parents and their professional partners to assist you in describing your qualifications by:

- ◆ recording and organizing your talents and skills, educational and training experiences
- ◆ providing a format to document your life experiences

As a parent or family member, your qualifications don't come from credentials and degrees. They come from your knowledge of your child, trying to get services for your child, attending individualized planning meetings, facilitating your child's involvement in the community, advocating for your child, teaching others about your child's disability, attending workshops, and your quest for knowledge. You are an expert. The Parent Portfolio Notebook will help you describe your expertise to others.

Your Parent Portfolio Notebook is a dynamic record keeping system. By keeping it current, you will be ready to take advantage of any opportunity you wish to pursue.

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INTRODUCTION

As a parent, you may say to yourself that you cannot have a resume or curriculum vitae because you are not a credentialed “professional.” That is NOT true. In the sociology literature, a “profession” is described as

“a self-regulating community which requires a real technical skill that:

- ✓ produces a result that you can see
- ✓ can be taught to someone else

That skill must be:

- ✓ difficult enough to require training
- ✓ reliable enough to produce consistent results

Being a parent to a child with a disability meets all of the criteria to be considered a professional. First of all, you belong to a community of other parents who face similar life experiences. Second, you have a real technical skill because it takes skill to raise all children and it sometimes takes special skills to raise a child with a disability. Third, these skills take training. No one would argue that being a good parent is something you’re born with. Even when you have good instincts, being an effective parent is difficult. We all need training to be effective parents to help and support our children to be everything that is possible and desirable for them. Fourth, we can get this training from other parents or professionals and we can teach other parents useful skills. Fifth, when we use our parenting skills, it leads to positive results for our children, ourselves as parents, and for our family. If we use these skills the right way, we can count on making a difference (reliability).

As a community of parents and family members who have children or family members with disabilities, we share the common desire to shape services which will help and support our children to be the best they can, to make the greatest contribution to society that is possible. Thus, we work hard to regulate ourselves. This means that we set standards for how parents should behave when advocating for their children, when shaping policies, or when they represent a group of kids or families, not just their own. When we work to make the world better, we are accountable for our behaviors and what we say, just like our legislators, teachers, principals, and administrators. If we want to shape the system, we begin to speak for not just our own child, but for lots of families who face similar obstacles.

When you want to make things better for everybody, you become a professional in your own right. That is why you should begin documenting your “professional” background. We hope this training packet will help you do this.

The Sections of your Parent Portfolio

Why are They Important?

When you are being considered for a job or a position on a policymaking body, the people who are selecting you will want to know what you will bring to their organization. The following is a brief description of each section of your Portfolio.

I. SPECIALIZED SKILLS

Every parent has areas where they have in-depth knowledge and/or experience. Many employers or organizations are looking for people who have special expertise. This section will help you highlight the areas where you have more information and experience than the average parent. Check off all the areas where you feel you have exceptional skills or knowledge.

If you are learning a new area, list these areas under “specialized skills in progress.” Under this section, list all the areas where you have a strong interest and are building your expertise. This helps a prospective employer or organization to know what you will have to offer them in the near future.

II. PARENT TO PARENT SUPPORT

There are many ways to become expert in parent to parent support.

Belonging to a parent support group is frequently the first place to start. Parent Support Groups meet on a consistent basis and focus on providing education and emotional support to members of the group. Common reasons for groups to form and/or exist are: common language (e.g., Spanish Speaking Down Syndrome Support Group); specific disability (Fragile X Association of So. Cal); education/information/advocacy (e.g., Self Advocates Empowered); emotional support (e.g., MLK NICU Parent Support Group); child’s age (e.g., Widney High School Transition Parent Support Group).

List here all the parent support groups you have belonged to. When you become a member of a parent support group, it can tell the organization that you are interested in learning from others and that you want to also support others who might have similar experiences as yours. The give-and-take of parent to parent support tells people that you want to go outside of your own home, to reach out to others. The length of time you stay with a group also tells the reader about your level of commitment to share your personal experience with others and join a larger network of parents and families. This is an important characteristic when you are interested in shaping systems of service.

The next level of parent to parent support is to become an officer of a group. This is not for every parent. For some parents, it is a natural thing to do. If you have been a leader

of a parent support group, indicate that on your portfolio.

Formal training in Parent to Parent Support: Some parents want to become peer support parents. They want to be helpful to new parents; they want to share what they've learned. Just because you are a parent of a child with a disability does not mean you know how to support other parents. Just like every "service," there are guidelines for parents supporting other parents. Knowing these guidelines will help you to be a resource to other parents and stay within safe boundaries. To be a good peer support parent, it is important to get training. Parent to parent support training is a formalized educational experience and may take from 4 hrs to 4 days to complete. It should include: active listening techniques, definition of the philosophy of providing emotional support and provide awareness of your own attitudes, values, and skill development that enables you to provide non judgmental support. List any trainings you have attended related to parent to parent support.

Providing Parent to Parent Support: After you have received training, you are ready to be a support person. Parent to Parent Support is feeling-focused emotional support that is driven by the parent reaching out to a peer for support. Parent to Parent support can be done face to face, through mail (electronic or surface) and on the phone. The match is dictated by the parent receiving support and may be geographical, language, situation or disability based. Describe here what you have done to support other parents.

III. TRAINING/EDUCATION

While life experience is very important, getting information from "experts" in the field is also important for you to be a solid contribution member of an organization. Life experience is valuable but we have to have accurate knowledge and information as well. Your attendance at workshops, seminars, lectures, etc., will tell an organization that you are interested in learning from experts in the field, that you have accurate knowledge, that you are motivated to know a lot about a topic. Where you get your information can also tell the reader a little bit about what you know. Keep track of all the workshops you attend when you attend them. If you don't write them down as you go along, you'll forget some of the information. Keeping track of the training you have received will tell the reader you are organized and know that this is important.

IV. ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIPS

One good way to stay current on latest research findings related to your child's disability and appropriate services is to belong to a professional organization (frequently called Associations). Associations are "formal" groups which meet to share information about a specific area of practice or interest and to promote best practice standards. There are many associations which are based on a professional's discipline. For example, the American Psychological Association or the California Nurses Association. Many of these are restricted to people who have credentials in these areas.

However, many associations welcome professionals, parents, consumers, service providers, administrators, legislators, and others. These associations are frequently interested in some topic area or a specific group affected by disabilities. For example, the Autism Society of America, the Fragile X Association of Southern California, the California Association for the Severely Handicapped, the Down Syndrome Association, or Fiesta Educativa.

Parents who want to make the system better for all children with disabilities (including their own), should eventually belong to an Association--sometimes two or three. Associations are different than “groups” because they typically have by-laws, membership criteria, and officers who are typically elected. As a member of an association, you typically have to apply and may have to pay a small membership fee (dues). You then attend meetings which are held by the Association and frequently vote on important issues the Association might be trying to push. The benefits of belonging to a formal association is that your voice becomes louder because you speak through a recognized organized body. You also learn a lot about how to influence policy and research because you become a member of an “army” of people who have a similar interest as you. And we all know that people listen to an army better than they listen to one soldier.

In the section called “Association Memberships,” you should list the organizations and groups you belong to, when your membership started and ended (if you no longer belong), and what your role is or was in the Association. You don’t have to be an officer for this section to be important. Just being a member of one or two Associations tells the reader that you know how to belong to an organized group and move the system using more formal methods of influence. Don’t worry if you have minimal entries here. It’s just something to keep in mind as you get more comfortable in the system and want to join more organized efforts for change.

V. WORK (Paid and Unpaid)

“Work” refers to “providing a service.” Your work experience will tell a prospective employer/interviewer about the services you have provided to others outside of your family. We all know that raising a family is “work,” but this section is for those activities you have been involved in which help an agency, organization, or group meet its mission.

The section on paid work experience should include any job you have had where you received money for the work you did. list all your jobs, not just jobs in the disability field. This information tells the reader about your ability (and willingness) to work on someone else’s timetable, in someone else’s location, and your level of commitment to what you start. It also gives the reader a little bit of information about your skills.

The section on unpaid work experience is as important as paid work. Spend some time filling this section out. This type of activity is frequently called “volunteer” work, but we feel the term “volunteer” is overused for parents. Parents are always asked to volunteer for things, yet their contribution is just as valuable as paid staff. That is why we call this “work” just like formal paid employment. Information here will tell the reader about your ability to stay with something, where your interests lie, where your passions are (we tend to do unpaid service in areas that we think are very important and worthy of our “free” time), and also informs the reader about your ability and willingness to work on someone else’s agenda.

VI. ADVISORY/GOVERNING BOARDS/SUB-COMMITTEES

When parents are ready to shape better systems for lots of children with disabilities and their families, not just their own, they begin to sit on policymaking bodies. These are called advisory groups, task forces, governing boards, or committees. You may have been invited to help figure out a solution or identify a problem. This is valuable experience because it tells an organization that you already have some experience shaping policies, that you have experience sharing in a group, talking to professionals as well as other parents and family members. It frequently also tells the reader that you have some good communication skills.

VII. COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Legislative/Public Hearings: Testimony (group and one-on-one)

One way to improve systems for all of our children is to shape laws and regulations. Visits to local policymakers, one on one testimony, is an important place to start. You can also write letters and organize letter writing campaigns which make your voice heard. You should keep copies of letters you write and attach them to your resume. Increasingly, parents are asked to give testimony at public hearings for people who make laws. This is also an important experience to bring to an organization. Not only does it tell the organization that you communicate well and you have an important perspective that people value, it also tells the organization that you are interested in the big picture.

Presentations:

As you develop your knowledge and accumulate experience, you will have more and more to share with others. One way is to make presentations at conferences, to run workshops for other parents and professionals, etc. List here your involvement in teaching or training others. This tells the organization that you have some special skills. Not every parent is a good teacher/trainer.

Publications and other writing experience:

Another way to get information to others is by writing something that others can read. Whether it is a fact sheet, or a newsletter, or a publication in a journal, these attempts to reach large audiences is also an important skill and reflects another way in which you, as a parent, can make a difference. Organizations want to know this about you, if this is something you have done in the past, and are particularly good at.

VIII. EXPERIENCE REQUESTING FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Increasingly everyone needs to have some experience and skill in writing grants. Most parents don't write big grant applications, but the ability to make a case for why you should get funding to do something that is important is a very important skill which is of great interest to organizations. List here all your formal requests for funding and support to do something that you think is important.

IX. TRADITIONAL DEGREES/CERTIFICATES/CREDENTIALS

This Parent Portfolio is really for parents who want to make a big difference, but may not have the formal credentials to convince people they can. However, some parents actually had credentials before they became parents. For these parents, this section should be used to identify their formal education. A lot of parents also receive credentials or certificates after going through formal training. This is the section to identify these earned documents of achievement.

X. HONORS/AWARDS/LEADERSHIP

Receiving public recognition for exceptional work can be a reflection of what you have to offer an organization. This section tells the reader that others have seen you in a special light; that you somehow stand out from others.

HOWEVER....Not every parent who has done exceptional work has received an honor or award, so don't be uncomfortable if you don't have a lot for this section. Your leadership abilities will show in the other sections of the portfolio.

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