



## 12 Tips for Collaborating with Colleagues

Effective collaboration is critical to successful itinerant services.

As professionals, we recognize that positive relationships with colleagues can have a big impact on appropriate services for students who are deaf and hard of hearing. When collaboration works well, everyone benefits including the student. But when communication breaks down, stress levels rise, relationships collapse, and emotions take over. When this happens, no one benefits. Sadly, the loser in this case includes the student. Read on for collaboration tips.

**Good collaborations** happen when educators and other support staff understand the processes and outcomes desired by **each party**. In other words, knowing what goals and objectives each provider is expected to teach and *cooperating in that teaching* benefits the student. Does that mean you are expected to memorize all the goals and objectives each provider is practicing, plus your own, and work on them all in a 45-minute lesson? Of course not. Here's an example: when working with a student who has multiple physical challenges, one of the goals the physical therapist had for this student was *crossing the midline*. Knowing that, I was able to incorporate *crossing the midline* into my lesson with the student. Did I have to do anything extra? No. When working with the student on my goal of using a switch to request a preferred object, I placed the object to the student's left and prompted him to use the opposite arm to reach for it--therefore accomplishing my goal and practicing the physical therapy goal simultaneously.

Not every goal/objective is that easy to incorporate. Take the time to invest your creativity in how to incorporate goals across the IEP whenever possible.

## 12 Tips for Good Communication

### Effective collaborations are a result of effective communication

**Effective communication requires skill.** The term **communication** refers to spoken, signed, written, and non-verbal forms. You can learn to be an effective communicator, if you feel you are not one, yet; or you can practice the skill you have as a communicator using these 12 tips. Try putting one of them into practice **today**. These are the result of decades of trial and many errors on my part. I am still learning.

## 12 Tips - Effective collaborations are a result of effective communication

- 1. Consider with whom you are communicating.** The style of communication may need to be adjusted according to the recipients. For colleagues you know well, a more informal style whether written, spoken, or signed, is acceptable. For colleagues you do not know very well or at all, a more formal approach is best. *See the examples page.*
- 2. Avoid using accusatory language.** Questions that begin, "Are you...?" or "Have you....?" or "Will you....?" or "Did you..." are all accusatory. Wording a question this way will likely put the receiver of the message on the defensive especially if the person with whom you are communicating is someone you do not know well. This may cause a gap in the collaboration relationship, or worse, no reply to your question. Consider this question with accusatory language: "Have you been using the FM system daily?" compared to "How has the FM system been working for you and the student?" *See the examples page.*
- 3. Be aware of your body language.** When talking with colleagues in person or on video, your body language sends subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) messages whether you are aware of it or not. Such as standing with your arms folded or at your sides, looking at or away from your communication partner, nodding or shaking your head, looking at your watch, etc. These non-verbal cues contribute to the conversation positively or negatively even if you don't know it.
- 4. Live in the *No Judgement Zone*.** As much as we are all tempted to judge others, do your best not to do this. Remember that you don't want to be judged for every mistake *you* make, do you? Take a moment to consider what another colleague's class/day/week is like before you spout off that judgmental email or make that negative remark to your supervisor. I would have saved myself tons of misery if I had remembered this earlier in my career. Try replacing that judgmental remark with, "This xxx accommodation is really needed for this student. How can I help you make it happen?"
- 5. Make your email communication clear, specific, and short.** Get to the point quickly. Long emails are not likely to be read, they are more likely to be scanned or skimmed (if at all) and then forgotten.
- 6. Communicate often and regularly.** Especially if you have a student and teacher on your roster whom you see only a few times a semester or year. Reminding them regularly that you are 'there' will keep you connected with them. Try sending a Zoom or Loom recorded message instead of an email!
- 7. Be nice, but stand your ground.** You have expertise. You have knowledge. You know who to ask if there is a problem you can't solve. Your input is valuable and important. When appropriate, make sure you are included in decisions that affect your students and/or your instruction. On the flip side, make sure *you* are including the colleagues on your student's team when input is needed.

## When communication breaks down

**Despite all our efforts to communicate regularly, effectively, and without judgment, breakdowns still occur.** Some breakdowns are mere misunderstandings, but some are more serious. No matter the degree of seriousness, communication breakdowns are stressful and frustrating. These are a few ideas I've put into practice after many painstaking failures.

- 8. Avoid playing the victim.** We want our students to develop the skills and confidence to speak up when they need something, right? Take a page from your teaching playbook and use it yourself. Speak up. Ask thoughtful questions. Schedule a quick visit. Offer solutions.
- 9. Tackle breakdowns immediately.** Don't wait until you are so frustrated and stressed that you lash out, or worse, let the frustration fester until the relationship between you and your colleague is beyond repair.
- 10. Go to the source first.** Many teachers are people-pleasers to a fault. The thought of confronting a colleague with complaints, or feelings of frustration puts our stomachs in a knot. However, most of the time, I'm relieved beyond words after having talked through my feelings with the colleague in question. Many times I've made a 'mountain out of a mole hill.'
- 11. Know the chain of command.** You've tackled the breakdown from the beginning, you've scheduled a chat, you've relayed your feelings, but the communication breakdown persists. It may be time to involve the next 'higher-up' in the chain of command as a mediator. It may be time to get the parent involved (if not involved already).
- 12. Do not publicize your frustration!** Asking questions without names, specifics, etc. to a closed group of colleagues in order to seek advice is fine. But avoid ranting in public places such as the teachers' lounge, or on social media. Not only is it likely to backfire, it's likely to get you into trouble and give the impression that you are not a professional who can be trusted.

### Examples

#### *Accusatory:*

Do you have the accommodations page?

Have you been using the FM system?

Did you send in the information I asked for last week?

#### *Non-accusatory*

An accommodations page went out in September. I'm following up to make sure it got to you and ask if you have any questions. Feel free to email, call, text...etc.

How has the FM system been working? Can I answer any questions? In what classes is it most beneficial? Are there any issues I need to aware of?

I'm following up on the xxx information that's needed for the IEP meeting. Your information is valuable. Please let me know if you have any questions. I would like to have xxx information by xxx if possible. Thank you.

Have you documented any issues with xxx?

I sent a documentation sheet for xxx (student). Has it been helpful? The purpose is to collect data on xxx. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns. Thank you.

### Noticing the Differences

The phrasing in the 'accusatory' examples presupposes that the person you're talking with, emailing, texting, etc. is in the **wrong** and you are in the right. By emphasizing the person and not the issue may put your colleague on the defensive limiting the exchange of information. (Have **you** done...?)

The 'non-accusatory' examples highlight the **issue**, not the person. (How has the **FM system** been working...?) This may allow a more free exchange of ideas, concerns, problems, etc.

#### Some situations that may require a more formal approach to communication are:

- 1) when communicating with someone who has more authority than you;
- 2) when communicating with someone you don't know, yet; and
- 3) when communicating about an issue of seriousness.

#### A more informal approach may be used when:

- 1) communicating with colleagues who are your 'equals';
- 2) when communicating with colleagues who are also friends; and
- 3) when communicating about issues that are not serious.

### Examples: Formal v. Informal Communication

Hello Mrs. Williams,

Glad to meet you yesterday. Thank you for taking the time to visit with me. As we discussed, I'll be seeing two students in your class, each for 45 minutes per week. Please let me know some times/days that will work for pull-out instruction by Friday so I can complete my schedule. I appreciate your help.

Sincerely,

Brenda Smith

---

Hello Courtney,

So great to talk with you yesterday. Thank you for taking the time to visit with me. As we discussed, I'll be seeing two students in your class, each for 45 minutes per week. When you have your class schedule worked out, please let me know some days/times for pull-out instruction.

Thanks,

Brenda

Try incorporating some of these techniques when communicating with your colleagues. Good communication can result in better collaboration; better collaboration can result in a more successful outcome for you and your students.

**Sources:**

Bullard, C. & Luckner, J. (2003). *The itinerant teacher's handbook*. Hillsborough, Oregon: Butte Publications.

Wezowski, K. (2018). *Without saying a word*. New York, New York: Amacom.

For more information:

Role Comparisons BUNDLE: <https://teachertoolstakeout.com/1240-planning-to-meet-student-needs>

Collaborative Relationships: <https://teachertoolstakeout.com/0427-interpretation-assessment>

Collaboration, Consultation, and Teamwork: <https://teachertoolstakeout.com/0429-interpretation-assessment>