

## Transcript: Managing Parent-Teacher Relationships

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[Lawrence Barns]: You're listening to Talk LD, a podcast of LD at School. Our aim is to engage you, our audience in a lively conversation aimed at educators as we talk about the issues facing students with learning disabilities in your classroom. I'm your host Laurence Barns. Join me as we Talk LD.

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[Lawrence Barns]: Welcome to our latest Talk LD where this morning we're gonna look at managing the parent teacher relationship. My guest Kelli Cote has actually been on both sides of that fence and sometimes we know the most difficult relationship can be the one with the school. The parent often has so many feelings of stress and anxiety that, that whole commination can cause so many issues. Kelli is someone that's been on both sides as I say as a parent of a wonderful young man with LD, one of two children and Matthew's just finished his third year at Trent. So Kelli has some experience of navigating through this and it's my pleasure, Kelli, to welcome you to Talk LD this morning. As an educator and obviously you were already an educator when Matthew was born and diagnosed a little later how prepared were you for this role of building a relationship with the school given that it was your profession and now you're a parent of a child living with an LD?

[Kelli Cote]: Oh, that's an interesting question. I think I actually knew that Matthew was a learning disability long before it was diagnosed at the school level. I would go in and work with the teachers saying that things weren't right. Things were always fine, oh he's fine. But I could see little things based on my experience as an educator that weren't fine. I knew that something wasn't right. It wasn't till grade 4 where one of Matthew's teachers that I had been persisting with--and he was great, but I think he knew that because I was an educator too he was a little bit apprehensive about working with me. But he did start to see some things. That Matthew could spell the word "because" three different ways in one paragraph. Or he could spell the word "there" five different ways and it never made any sense but he said when he always asked him questions he knew all the answers but his spelling was not right. So I wasn't as shocked as I thought I would be, however it changed the dynamic of the parent-teacher relationship and how I had to navigate that to be positive so that Matthew felt that he was engaged at school and so that the impact of my questioning didn't have any residual effects on Matthew.

[Lawrence Barns]: Did you find, Kelli, that sometimes the reaction to you changed once people realised you were an educator as opposed to just being Matthew's parent with a concern?



[Kelli Cote]: Yeah, I think they were a little bit more afraid of me. I think because I was in the field I think they felt a little bit undermined sometimes when I would ask questions. Which was not ever my intention, but having an understanding of what it meant to have a learning disability because I've spent many years in special ed looking at those pieces and having worked with so many children in the educational field that had learning disabilities I knew what I didn't want for my son, and I knew that I had to empower him to insure that he had his accommodations in place because he was such a gifted student in so many ways and my fear was that he would stop liking school because school was always going to be really tough for him. It was gonna be really hard for him to always show people how well he could do and not be marginalised along the way.

[Lawrence Barns]: So one of my greatest regrets as a parent is what I refer to--I'm doing air quotes now--the "homework battle."

[Kelli Cote]: Oh, I know.

[Lawrence Barns]: It was probably, Kelli, it's the point as a parent where honestly I don't regret much 'cause a lot of it was you learn and sometimes you make errors because you don't have knowledge and I'm kind of forgiving of myself on that but on the homework battle I really think I was an emotional ogre to my boy sometimes just trying to beat him through you've got to get this homework done. You've got to do all of those things. Did being a teacher with a special ed background change that experience for you or was it very similar in every LD student is gonna produce those same issues for their parents?

[Kelli Cote]: I always say to people you don't get a second chance to be a parent so you can't beat yourself up. There's no rulebook, but I think my perspective in working with Matthew helped shape my perspective on working with parents. School was hard for Matthew and so he worked all day to try to do the best he could, and homework was always a challenge. So at one point I used to pay him to do his homework. Especially we were going on a trip one time and I paid him 25 cents, which doesn't seem like a lot at this time but he only got that if we didn't argue. And if he did 30 minutes without arguing than he got a quarter and that was his spending money for our trip. And for me it was just 30 minutes, I didn't care whether he got it all done but that was 30 minutes of uninterrupted time and both boys we had a real routine. As soon as you came home we did the 30 minutes, that was it. It was put away. There was never any homework on weekends. I didn't believe in it. I wouldn't give it to kids that I taught, or parents. I would say there's no homework on March Break, there's no homework at Christmas. That's family time, that's down time. Matthew would often come home highly escalated about the amount and volume of homework, and it wasn't the teacher's intention to make him feel that way, but that's the way he perceived information. And so often I would call to the school and say okay, this is what he's doing. He's having a meltdown. Walk me through. And often it' was Matthew's misperception of what he heard and he heard the end product and he needed help sort of chunking. And so if we could work with him, okay so tonight you're doing this and tomorrow night you're doing this, and the next night you're doing that it helped him out. Even in university right now he has a big calendar up on his wall that he has now learned how to take those 15-page papers and chunk down the work that he needs to do.



[Lawrence Barns]: Now one of the things I found in the parent-teacher dynamic, is was a lot more manageable at elementary school because obviously there I've got the classroom teachers, and luckily in Jake's case we had a principal as well who was very involved and very turned on to the best practice in special education which I know now in hindsight makes a huge difference. High school is a bit more of a challenge because suddenly you have subject teachers. They see the student in a very small pocket of the day, often they don't see the overall picture. How as a parent did you work with the teachers at high school and did that differ much in your approach at elementary?

[Kelli Cote]: Yeah it did and you're right, it was a much harder venue to navigate. There was a lot of times where I didn't get call-backs. I think there was an understanding at high school that they were already adults and should be independent but in fact they were still not and it was really about managing the assistive technology. That was very difficult at the high school level. Matthew wanted to be more independent so I had to try to respect that and maintain positive relationships with the teachers. They were really doing the best that they could given the skill sets they have. I have great administrators that I was able to kind of navigate and I would go through the back door so Matthew didn't necessarily know that I was conversing with the teachers in order to make sure that he had the accommodations that he had which I think helped because there was a certain point where he didn't want his mum navigating so it was a little bit of a learning curve for him and okay if I don't want you to do that how am gonna now be able to do that? And so by grade 11 and 12 he was asking for his own accommodations and I was taking a step back, but if I knew that he couldn't manage or I knew that it wasn't getting done then I would go in behind the back door for him.

[Lawrence Barns]: And it's an interesting this idea of--and I'm gonna call it a backup track--that actually you're encouraging your student to build their advocacy skills which of course through high school they're doing and I think again the experience is often our kids--our kids in this case living with a learning disability--are often a little less mature than their peers, right? For various reasons but often because parents to keep them on track have to hold I think a lot tighter a lot longer. But the idea of this kind of backup communication which I think also could apply equally for the teachers and the parent but not necessarily doing it in a way that the student is seeing it firsthand I think is really interesting because there is that time, and I think it's kind of that grade 10, grade 11 in my experience where they start to go "dad, I don't want you coming up the school. Dad, I don't want you talking to the resource teacher. Dad, please don't do this anymore" right? So—

[Kelli Cote]: You're embarrassing me, dad.

[Lawrence Barns]: Right, and that's it. And of course we want them to have those self-advocacy skills. So that's a really interesting tip there, Kelli. So if we look generally at your experience with educators and the schools, how would you sum it up?

[Kelli Cote]: My experience has been--how would I sum it up? I would not say contentious. I would say that I have always had to be an advocate. I always need to know what works for Matthew. I need to know that I have to be his voice, that sometimes educators are apprehensive about talking to parents about that and I'm not so sure they need to be. And that



needs of students change as they grow. And so part of my experience tells me that some of that laundry list in my son's IEP about accommodations he's now a 21 year old man at university that probably uses a handful of accommodations that he has come to learn work for him. And so we have to listen to kids after they get their initial psych OED, they are developing and maturing, and as a parent I have to let that go. I have to let go. I have to learn to let him fly, but the school has to work with them to let them fly. So when there are accommodations that our psych assessment says that we need to put in place we need to work with those.

[Lawrence Barns]: There are just some teachers who get it.

[Kelli Cote]: Yep.

[Lawrence Barns]: Maybe some of that is education because let's be honest, I certainly feel teachers don't get enough special education education, especially in this inclusive model where more and more of these kids are in the standard classroom. We've taken more and more EAs away so I recognize that burden on teachers, but what does this relationship look like? And what can an educator do in your experience now as a parent? When a teacher got it how could you tell and how did that differ from when a teacher wasn't quite on your wavelength about Matthew's needs and your concerns?

[Kelli Cote]: One of the best experiences Matthew and I had was when he was in grade 6, very young in the world of assistive technology. Not as seamless as it is right now. He set up Matthew's scanner and everything right in the classroom so that he wouldn't have to leave the classroom to go and get anything. Everything was done. I went into the school and talked with him and said the most important thing for me as Matthew's mother is that, that computer appears like his right arm. It is not Matthew's choice to use that computer. It is something that has to be intentionally done. And he made that happen for Matthew. And so from the get-go Matthew knew how important it was to use that assistive technology and because it was right in the classroom he didn't have to leave. When it's not working it's fighting to have things on your computer all the time. There was one particular subject where it was at a point where Matthew wanted to do a little bit of advocating for himself. He was failing the course. He had approached the teacher about the textbook and it was a yep, yep, yep we'll get it, we'll get it, we'll get it. So that was when I did one of my end runs. Well his mark on his course went from like a 38 to a 70 just because he had that stuff on his computer and he could access the accommodation that says that he needs. So that's when things work.

[Lawrence Barns]: Yes, it's very interesting. I remember our personal story is one of at the end of grade 5 Evan had a teacher where we just weren't getting it and we weren't connected and I think sometimes Kelli, I think it's always worth noting as individuals and human beings we don't always connect with everyone so of course a parent and teacher relationship at times just won't gel. The personality types just really don't match and it becomes difficult.

[Kelli Cote]: It's also really important for parents not to talk about their dislike of teachers in front of their children I think.

[Lawrence Barns]: Oh, that's a very good point.



[Kelli Cote]: We will have times in all of our lives where we don't get along with people. We have to navigate those relationships and be respectful but it's really important for kids to see that parents and teachers, we have the best interests. We might not have the same goals but those negative conversations I don't think are helpful in front of the children because it contaminates the classroom environment.

[Lawrence Barns]: I completely agree, and interesting as well I'll say two things. I actually believe very few teachers are trying to undermine a parent with their child. They have some constraints and sometimes a parent doesn't get it, and to go on from what you're saying, often the parent is getting the kid's view of life and what happens if you're not careful as a parent is you can react too strongly to that before you get the teacher's input on their side of the equation. Certainly—

[Lawrence Barns]: It's balance, right?

[Kelli Cote]: It is balance and I think one of the things we tell parents is just keep the dialogue open, but I would equally say to educators on the flipside of that when I'm calling you it doesn't mean I'm being difficult. It means I'm trying to find a solution. How can we work together for the best interest of everybody, right?

[Lawrence Barns]: Right, sometimes that backtrack you talked about, like the backup track? It doesn't hurt especially in this day and age where it's very easy to get in touch with people. Send the parent a quick email, hey I noticed this today. You may hear Jake was very upset. This is what actually happened, and then suddenly when the parent gets the child's feedback I have a perspective to it. Too often I didn't have any perspective so now I'm hearing it in isolation and thinking well that can't be right. What's happened, right?

[Kelli Cote]: I think the other piece we have to remember is we send both as a parent as an educator, we get the best kids possible. There's no good kids hidden anywhere. They're all with us and we have to work with every kid that we get.

[Lawrence Barns]: Right, let's talk about particularly for educators now and let's talk about the things that they should understand and that you'd like educators to know in dealing with the parents' side of this relationship, Kelli, with your educator hat on and assuming that each teacher is experiencing more and more kids and let's be honest it's special needs in a general sense between learning disabilities, autism, behavioural issues there is a gamut in that inclusive model that I'm gonna be very clear and up front and say I think it's difficult for a teacher to deal with all of those kids in a classroom environment as every parent would like it all of the time. I think that's almost an impossible equation and I want to get that on the table up front. But what can educators do to ease that relationship with parents? What tips, tricks, insights do you have to that one?

[Kelli Cote]: I think empathy, compassion, I think you have to understand that there's a grieving process sometimes with parents when we're finding out about identifications whether it's a learning disability or it's autism, and we're all in different places along that process. Trust. We as educators can break trust very easily and we need to establish a trusting relationship at all times



and I think going back to your point earlier about being open, when parents call it's not about necessarily complaining, and so we have to take that information in. They might send us one or two children and so they're gonna be strong advocates and we can't be afraid of that 'cause they really just want what's best for their kids. For teachers I think we could be very mindful in terms of providing a differentiated instruction model that it's not a one-size fits all and I know we're working very hard on that. Assessment practices can change. again it's not a one size fits all and how do we include people along the way because we can wrap the package up but we need to unpack it and see who's in our room. I think we need to be open, and I think we need to listen, and I think we need to be very careful about putting out own opinions on parents. I think we need to listen to what they're sending us and be responsive to their needs.

[Lawrence Barns]: And I think you spoke at the beginning of this and I think it's such a key point for the educator is the biggest downfall for all of us in this, in managing the parent-teacher relationship is if the kid starts to hate school. Because the minute they're starting to hate the school process we're all going to find our lives much more difficult. And it is finding these kids' strengths, finding those little areas where they can have success is so important, but the other interesting thing when you talk about openness and again now I work in the field I see so much that I didn't know when I was a parent. So I was talking to a director of education not long ago who was showing me all of the different tests they do in school to see where kids are at from their reading ability and various things, and there's all sorts of screens and other things. As a parent I thought it was an IPRC and an IEP and that was it. There's all this other stuff often going on in the background and as a parent I'm gonna make a plea to educators to just you know what? Let us know what you're finding. If their reading ages are improving but they're still behind their peers I'd like to know that as a parent because I can then make an informed decision of potentially adding some extra tuition, right?

[Kelli Cote]: Correct.

[Lawrence Barns]: I know that potentially it can't always all be done in the school environment. There's not enough hours in the day, Kelli, right? But if I don't have that information I'm always gonna be looking to the educator and the school to solve my issue.

[Kelli Cote]: And so they need to be honest about that.

[Lawrence Barns]: Right.

[Kelli Cote]: Yeah, I think the other piece that we see a lot of the kids that are having difficulty is misbehaviour. Rather I would call it stress behaviour. So what's the root of their stress? So let's look deeper into that behaviour rather than just saying that it's a behaviour. Because behaviour is a way of communicating that something's not right, so how can we work together to find out what the root cause of that is and then how can we change our approach so that we can minimize some of the anxiety that kids are bringing to school these days?

[Lawrence Barns]: And I think that's such a true story because I remember, again in early days with Jake the teacher who sort of "diagnosed" him, again I'm using air quotes there folks, immediately said go to a doctor. He's got ADHD, give him Ritalin. Well that was about controlling



his behaviour in the classroom. It wasn't about understanding why those symptoms were there. Of course that wasn't what Jake had. He actually had dysgraphia and once we diagnosed that and once he got more success, but again you also talk about the frustration and I've just been to some great schools, Kelli, where they're really working on tech in a way that--now I remember, and probably for Matthew when you were pulling out that block of an old laptop it was like painting a target on your back. Now I walk into classrooms and I was in Huron Perth looking at a 21st Century classroom where every kid walks in, grabs an iPad or a Chromebook and now those kids that need it because they've got special education needs are no different than any other kid in the classroom. And tech's come so far but I think it's incumbent upon educators 'cause I still find some that are resistant to moving into this world. And they were talking about they had a kid who actually was teaching the rest of his class how to use augmented reality and he's got one of the most severe learning disabilities in that classroom. But that tech he'd used 'cause he uses it to deliver projects, right? So he'd used it first and now had become in his teacher's words a shining star on technology to the rest of the pupils. That kid was able to stand in front of us and present, and what's amazing is tech is enabling these kids to basically become star learners. Now just keeping up, not just hoping to grab the coat tails of their class, but showing their truth potential and I think every educator needs to understand that if you can be part of that process that's all the parent wants to see right?

[Kelli Cote]: Oh, absolutely.

[Lawrence Barns]: And that's what we're all aiming for is to see these kids at university, to see them doing what they have the potential to do.

[Kelli Cote]: Yeah, and I think the other piece that's really important is advocacy. So often our young learners get diagnosed in probably grade 4 when we see a little bit more of their written work and production. They need help understanding who they are as a learner both from the parents and the educators and how does that knowledge get shared with them over time? And how can they ask for the things that they need and have an educator who's responsive to them? Because the first time they're told no they're gonna be really reluctant to go and ask for that again. And partially the educators have to be up in terms of how do I construct my classroom so that it's already there because in my own experience when they leave high school and they're off at university they are the ones that have to understand what their learning profile is and what they need to ask for. And if we don't teach them that, then they won't have any skill sets to be successful outside of our system.

[Lawrence Barns]: That's right, and I think the other thing that's important as well for educators to really recognize is I was very lucky, Kelli, I was in a position where I could flip school boards from public to Catholic right? That's not always the case by the way folks. Sometimes you flip the opposite way, depends on the school board you're in. However for a lot of parents there's no real option. They don't have an option for private education. They are hooked into a school board and they may find they want to really kick up a lot of fuss move around in that school board but the chances are they're trying to find a solution in the school that the kid is in. Their peers are there, their friends are there, the guys they play hockey with, the girls that they hang out with at the mall. They don't necessarily want to move schools, and I think educators see when a parent is frustrated and trying to make things happen to the parent it's like well what else can I



do? So I think again it's important educators realise that parents sometimes are just like listen, I'm hooked into this solution. This is why I'm fighting for change in here 'cause I don't have another option.

[Kelli Cote]: And we don't know the frustration that the student is taking home. The frustration that we see when the parent comes in is probably because they're getting frustration at the other end where their child doesn't want to come to school, or everything is so hard and overwhelming that they're just fighting for their kid.

[Lawrence Barns]: Yeah, and I think the other thing as well for educators to recognize is--and I'm sure you've come across this a million times in your own experience--often the parent doesn't know the right questions to ask. So there's the other issue is help your parents understand there's LD at school out there for educator but equally now there's LD at home for parents. There's lots of other things. The Learning for All document from the Ministry. There's lots of ways to help educate your parent to better understand what they can do because often they're scared by this diagnosis. I certainly had no experience with an LD until my kid's diagnosed. So you're trying to learn from scratch and the parent is literally as anxious as the student a lot of the time.

[Kelli Cote]: Yeah, and you know the other piece is when you share assessments back to your point, they're overwhelmed. You're giving them all of this information, all of these acronyms that are very hard. I always say to parents go back, go home, think about it, write down some questions and we'll meet again. Don't be afraid to come back 'cause it's a lot of information to take in.

[Lawrence Barns]: Yeah, and please if you're gonna use acronyms I have a friend of mine who because of what I do now asked me to come and read their child's first IEP. One of her confusing points is in a number of sentences there were two letters, AT, that were capitalised and she was like why do they keep capitalizing at in this sentence, right? And I literally went yeah, no that means assistive technology. But she didn't know. And it's really amazing to me how we can overlook just very small items like that. One of the things we build on LD at Home as a result of my experience of those things is there's a glossary of terms of parents so that when they see acronyms they can go okay, I don't know. Go to LD@home.ca folks if you need to find out. But literally AT written all over a document when you've not explained it is not gonna help your parent to understand your plan for helping that child. I think the official term is access the curriculum, right?

[Kelli Cote]: Right.

[Lawrence Barns]: Things like modifications and accommodations again, Kelli, you and I know there's a real importance to know which of those is being used with your child, right?

[Kelli Cote]: There is, huge yeah.



[Lawrence Barns]: But again when you're a first parent you hear accommodations and modifications kind of sounds like the same thing right? So again it's the teacher can do such a massive role in just helping the parent to understand.

[Kelli Cote]: Yeah, and have those meetings to go through that. Don't just send the IEP home. Go through it. What's the understanding?

[Lawrence Barns]: And it's also important, it's a living document so when you make changes again let's make sure the parent's aware, right? If it's things like with Jake I think second draft of his IEP the teacher worked out if she just moved him to the front of the class she could keep a better eye on him, he was much more attentive and we got much better long-term results. So it goes in the IEP, but guess what? Initially he came home and went yeah, I don't like this. I've been moved to the front of the class so teacher can keep an eye on me. I guess I'm not doing very well. So even that misinterpreting of a move that was for his benefit as a parent I'm like what? And of course when I find out why it was fine, we dealt with it.

[Kelli Cote]: Correct, right.

[Lawrence Barns]: But you can make such little incremental change, but to that student going back into the parents' environment at home in their evening it can be completely misconstrued.

[Kelli Cote]: Oh, absolutely. Totally, and it's like Matthew coming home with an assignment that he thinks is due the next day and he's got like three weeks to work on it, right? How you communicate, how you break it down. Not just saying you're chunking it. What does that actually look like and sound like for a child with an LD?

[Lawrence Barns]: So as we get to the end here, Kelli, just to sum all this up, if we could try and ball this up for educators into I don't know, two or three key things that as a parent you want every educator to be aware of any thoughts what that would look like?

[Kelli Cote]: I would like all the educators to know or to think about that it's really hard work for children with a learning disability. That they get to places in different ways, and we have to respond to those different things. Work with parents because they often know a side of the student that you might not be seeing in the school and don't be afraid of the questions. They are questions to help you, and the parent, and the student work together for the success of the student. And don't forget empathy because--I'm gonna go back, children with LD, their brain works overtime and when they come home from school they're exhausted and so sometimes as parents we see different things than educators because they are exhausted and it's a lifelong journey for them. It doesn't end at the end of the school day.

[Lawrence Barns]: That's great, my guest today has been Kelli Cote, Kelli, thank you very much for your time and your insight. Folks, you've been listening to Talk LD and until the next time from Lawrence Barns signing off, goodbye.

