

You

Don't

Know

Jack

The Teacher
Letter



by M. Jeffry Spahr, MBA, JD



FOR YEARS we approached each new school year with renewed hopes and rejuvenated expectations. Certainly, we thought, this would be the year when everything clicked and our son Jack would take off like a rocket through the academic stratosphere. The trials and tribulations of the last year would be lost like so many discarded booster stages. Soon we would be in orbit and on autopilot, soaring ever onward.

Suddenly, our radio would crackle to life and we would faintly hear, “Houston, we have a problem.”

What brought us crashing back to earth was the harsh realization that getting the school team to know our son’s strengths and weaknesses had taken the entire previous year. Through emails and meetings, we’d had to educate them about our son and let them experience for themselves what did, and did not, work with him.

Each autumn we faced a new crew that we would have to educate all over again. I felt like Sisyphus of Greek mythology—the man who was fated to continuously roll an immense boulder uphill only to have it roll back down as he neared the top. When I went to orientation to meet my son’s new teachers, all I could think was, “*You don’t know Jack.*”

Here’s the problem, particularly if you deal with public schools: As your son or daughter progresses through the grades he or she will be taught by an ever-changing team of teachers. Just when one teacher seemed to understand your child and got the hang of teaching him or her, you moved on to a new teacher or team.

I also realized that just because a person was a teacher did not mean that they would understand the net effect of an executive function deficit or some other hindrance any more than I did. They might be the greatest math, science, or whatever teacher in the world, but they might still have the same blank look as I did when staring at a neuropsychological evaluation assessment report. I realized that where the rubber met the road it did not matter what a challenge was called—what mattered was how it impacted my son’s ability to learn.

So, I decided that I would draft a “you don’t know Jack” letter to be given to each of my son’s new teachers.

Contents of my teacher letter

My “you don’t know Jack” letter would contain a brief description of my son’s diagnoses (in layman’s terms as much as possible), so that the staff could understand what challenges my son was facing. I found this a very important step, because most teachers would never see any of the neuropsych reports or testing results with which we had become all too familiar. While the teachers might see his IEP and in which disability category he was classified, that would do nothing to let them know what to expect (or not expect) from him. Therefore, I concentrated on describing his challenges rather than providing a laundry list of labels.

Jack was diagnosed with ADHD combined type as well as autism spectrum disorder (ASD). He also had severe memory difficulties and significant executive function impairment. I did not feel it was satisfactory



to just throw these words down on the paper. I wanted to bring to life what they meant to my son—and consequently what they should mean to his teachers.

For example, I explained the impact of his ADHD, and its interplay with his ASD and other diagnoses, as follows:

The bottom line is that Jack is hampered by a number of competing disorders and disabilities, any one of which would be a severe impediment to learning. However, taken together, the whole package is much greater than the sum of its parts.



As far as his ADHD goes, I broke it down like this:

For example, his ADHD (combined type) alone makes it difficult for him to filter out stray incoming information and makes it difficult for him to attain focus and then retain it (the ‘inattentive’ portion of his ADHD). In addition, he is significantly hyperactive at times and this further interferes with his ability to stay focused (often feeling the need to ‘self-stim’) [the ‘hyperactive’ portion of his ADHD]. Finally, he is exceedingly impulsive—another major impediment to his ability to concentrate.

After mentioning in the letter that my son’s working memory, short-term memory, and long-term memory were impaired—as was his ability to process, store, and retrieve information. I felt that it would be helpful to the teachers to understand what this might mean in a practical sense. Accordingly, I explained what they might expect as follows:

Thus, even if he were attuned to a task, he would soon reach a point where he might forget the instructions or a passage in the text or lose his way along a math problem. This then runs full steam into this tenuous grip on his focus and jars it loose.

Another challenging area for Jack was his writing skills. While many of his typical peers would draft flowing manuscripts of descriptive prose, my son would only be able to produce brief spurts of handwriting containing few words.

Was he lazy? No, it was just difficult for him to write. It was very challenging for Jack to create the sentences and plan out the paragraphs in his head. So, I relayed this information on to the teachers as follows:

In addition, his writing is so laborious that it takes down whatever chance he has of responding as others might. Because it is such a chore to write, he responds in only clipped and shortened responses. Full sentences are an exception. Punctuation is a foreign concept. In addition, due to the length of time it takes, his planned response that was present when he began answering the question is often missing by the end. His deficits in executive functioning make it difficult for him to plan out an answer and stick to it.

Balancing with strengths

I also was sure to mix in all of Jack’s positive attributes, so that the teachers could play to his strengths. I told them that he had “boundless enthusiasm for things that interest him” and was “fascinated with all things involving technology, mechanical things, and novel things.” I suggested that he have wide access to assistive technologies. He was much more proficient at writing on an iPad or a laptop, for example, than when struggling to manipulate a pencil.

I also told them that Jack loved to contribute and to help out. He liked to be selected to be the one to perform some special task. I told them that when it came time to pass out paper or supplies, my son would benefit from being selected to do this. Not only would it increase his self-esteem, but it would get him out of his chair and moving—a boon to any student with ADHD. I also told them that if he was a bit too fidgety or losing his concentration, they could have him carry a note to the principal’s office and back. (He would not have to know that the note only said “hi” or that it was only intended to get him moving.)

And how did the teacher letter work out? Well, it still was (and continues to be) a challenge to teach Jack. After one team meeting, however, the lead teacher told me he found the Jack 101 handbook really helpful. He thanked me for putting it together and said that he often reread it. So, did the team “know Jack”? Well, maybe not every bit, but certainly a bit better. 🍎

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