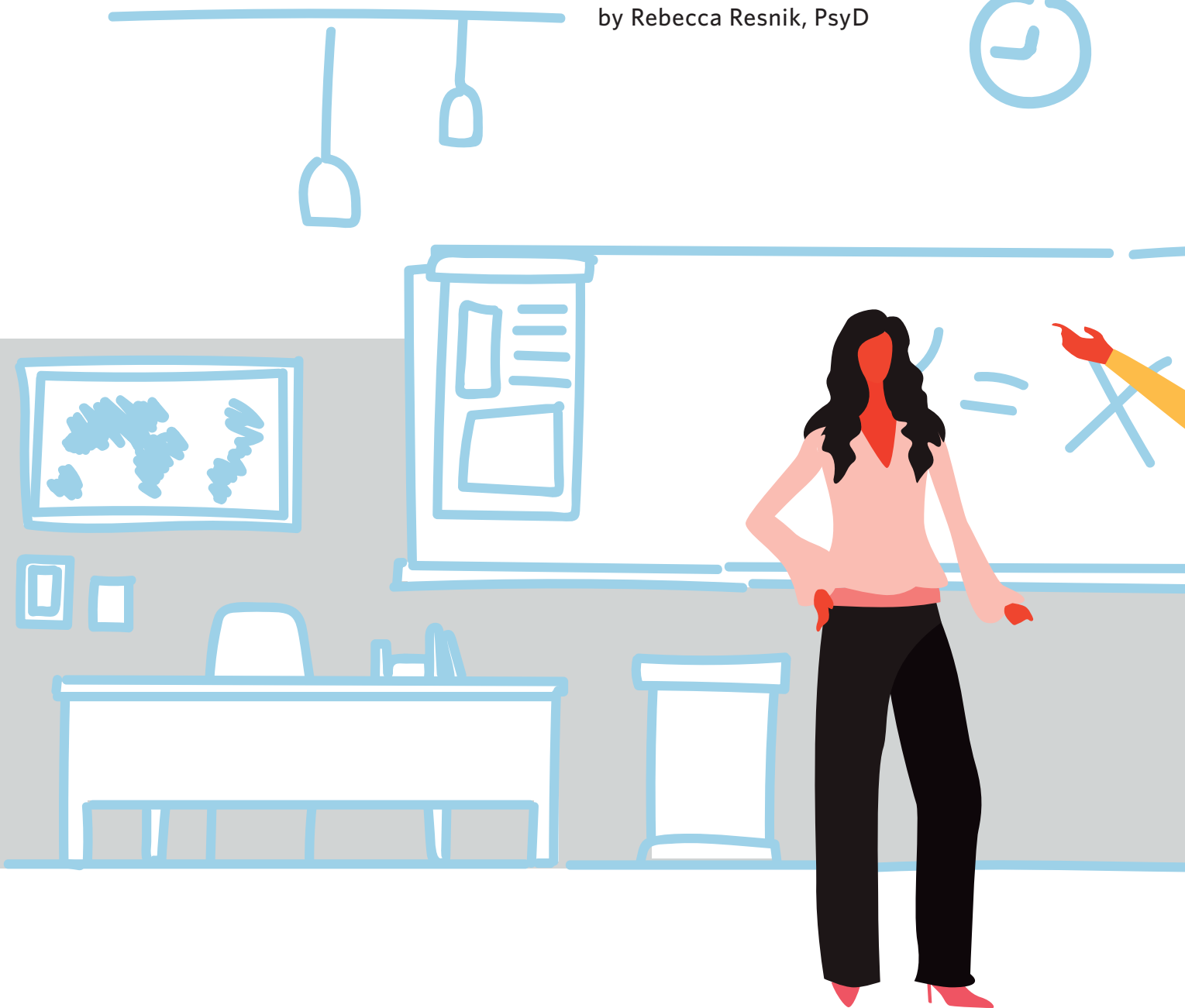


# Fearless Advocacy

**Pro Tips for School Team Meetings**

by Rebecca Resnik, PsyD



**F**OR MOST PARENTS, school team meetings provoke dread, anxiety, and frustration—especially when you're still new at this. Some of us charge into the meeting like the mighty lioness defending her cubs. Others feel more like the baby rabbit staring helplessly into the headlights of a speeding car. Having been on both sides of the table as both a licensed psychologist and a special educator, I've written this article to include some practical tips for becoming a "fearless advocate." Becoming fearless means learning to master your own emotions and those of the other people around the table!

Teams often get stuck when strong emotions come into play. Two factors trigger conflicts between team members—power differentials and different perspectives. Because the parent is asking for help, they are in a position of weakness. The school has the power to give or withhold services in their role as gatekeepers. Parents want the best possible services; schools have limited

resources to distribute. Everyone around the table is aware that, beneath the surface, there is risk. Parents fear their child will be harmed. School teams fear being unable to meet the needs of every child with scant resources (as well as potential lawsuits).

Special education law creates an idyllic picture of how parents and schools will work together as educational multidisciplinary teams (EMTs). The law states that everyone on that team, including parents, is equal. In reality, every person at the meeting has a different level of knowledge and authority. It is hardly a level playing field. The professionals always have the "home team advantage." Parents are the rookie "team players" who are learning the rules as they play. Because parents generally have the least knowledge of law, disability, research, and policy, they naturally feel powerless (and certainly outnumbered by the professionals). An EMT is a room full of professionals scrutinizing you and your child, and that's stressful!

Strong emotions during the meeting can be an advantage. Love for your child and a passion for justice can be channeled into results. Negative emotions like anxiety, embarrassment, anger, and sadness can flood our minds to the point where we cannot concentrate (or worse, lose control). Negative emotions can also serve as powerful motivators. They can help you to speak boldly, persist, or stand up for your child. The trick is to control your own emotions, and those of others, to keep everyone focused on what is best for the child. We can control the tone of the meeting with three powerful tools:

- Know what to expect.
- Stay mindful of emotions.
- Reclaim the narrative.



## Know what to expect

**PRO TIP:** Know who is going to attend and what type of meeting you're having.

Have you ever been caught off guard to find what you thought was going to be a conference includes ten people you've never met before? Ever been blindsided with new test results or surprising information about your child in the middle of the meeting (and having to digest the news on the spot in front of strangers)? Have you ever arrived at a meeting only to find there was a completely different agenda, and that everyone else had already agreed on what to do? If so, you're not alone! You have the legal right to review all of the information that will be presented before the meeting—never be afraid to exercise this right.

Surprises like these are preventable. You'll walk in fearless if you walk in prepared. Before you arrive, make sure you've had enough time to review all new testing, all incident reports, the meeting agenda, the draft IEP/504 Plan. Take time to anticipate what the professionals will say and rehearse your responses (or bring notes) so you can deliver them calmly. Mentally rehearse your worst-fears scenarios to avoid having a knee-jerk reaction during the meeting.

It can be hard to listen when you're stressed, but making sure you understand the school's position is key. Take care to check your understanding regularly. It is always okay to ask someone to rephrase their statement, give an example, or describe something in more detail. If you need a moment to breathe, ask a clarifying question using language such as, "I'd like to make sure I understand what you've said" and read back your notes. You may find that stress caused you to miss important details, you misunderstood a technical term, or that the team revises its position slightly after hearing how they sounded. Recognize too that EMT members may also feel stressed during a meeting. Showing that you've cared enough to listen and try to understand their perspective creates a lot of goodwill.

Always get the guest list in advance so you know who will attend. Identify and connect with your allies on the team in advance. Under the law, you can bring anyone you want to the meeting. Take care that the person you bring can help you stay calm and focused. If you decide to bring an advocate, make sure that person has earned proper credentials and can control their emotions. An abrasive advocate who tries to humiliate everyone around the table may feel like a powerful ally. Unfortunately, an aggressive advocate will only serve to destroy any goodwill or collaboration you could have with the team. Pick a collaborator, not a bully.

Remind yourself that parents hold the most powerful trump card—you can refuse to sign the IEP/504 Plan. If you are confused about special education law, consult a

professional with solid credentials or research trustworthy sources written by credentialed professionals (e.g., websites like Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center or Wright's Law).

## Knowledge is power

**PRO TIP:** Get a "very useful" evaluation.

Knowledge is power. School testing is designed to help the team determine eligibility, not diagnose disabilities. School psychologists have heavy caseloads. Testing may have been done by several people who each created their own report. School psychologists have a different job than clinical psychologists. They test to determine eligibility—which means whether or not the child qualifies for specific services and which services would be appropriate (which is not the same as the best possible services). School psychologists have extensive training in special education law and the continuum of special education services, and so play an important role in the EMT. Clinical psychologists and neuropsychologists have a different role. They conduct assessments to determine diagnosis as well as to inform interventions. Know that if you disagree with school testing results, you can obtain private testing or request an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE) paid for by the school system. Under the law, they have to provide you with information about how to submit your request for an IEE in writing if you qualify.

**PRO TIP:** Take the time to read the Procedural Rights and Safeguards brochure.

If you are having trouble understanding your child's difficulties or need more information than the school's testing can provide, invest in a comprehensive evaluation conducted by a licensed psychologist. Most families wait too long before pursuing private testing (and legal advice). Having a data-driven plan based on solid test data is a huge advantage. A private psychologist can often conduct a more in-depth, personalized assessment.

Unlike school psychologists, private licensed psychologists, psychiatrists and developmental pediatricians will make a formal diagnosis. The private licensed psychologist works for you, not the school system. Private licensed psychologists are not constrained by their role as part of the school system, though take care to select a licensed psychologist who is well versed in special education law. Your psychologist should write the report so that it helps the EMT make informed decisions and helps you advocate successfully.

All private evaluations are not created equal. Take the time to check credentials, especially for the title "licensed psychologist" before you invest. A licensed psychologist

has completed doctoral level training in assessment, psychometrics, and cognitive development. They have been carefully vetted by supervising psychologists to ensure they are well qualified, then passed national and state licensing exams. Licensed psychologists must undergo approximately twenty hours a year of postdoctoral continuing education to learn about current research. The license also ensures that the state board of examiners holds the psychologist to a high set of ethical standards. Licensed providers will readily provide their license number so you can check that they are in good standing. Know that insurance may not cover much of testing unless you have your testing done in a hospital, where wait times can be months long.

Some psychologists also pursue advanced training in neuropsychology. Neuropsychological training means that the psychologist has extensive training in neuroscience and brain behavior relationships that they will have completed in a hospital or other medical setting. Unfortunately, not all professionals who offer “neuropsychological testing” have actually completed such training. Always check credentials before trusting someone to test your child.

A useful psychological evaluation includes: a clear diagnosis, specific special education recommendations, and describes your child’s strengths and weaknesses. A great psychological evaluation answers the WHY questions. Parents who understand their child’s diagnosis and how it impacts their school performance won’t be easily intimidated.

## Stay mindful of emotions

**PRO TIP:** Take your own “emotional pulse” (and that of others too).

Know that what you see at the meeting is only the tip of the iceberg. There are hierarchies, rivalries, alliances, stressors, and personality conflicts behind the scenes, too. Often, the professional’s decisions are influenced by what is going on “behind the curtain” that the parent does not know about. Stay alert. Pretend you’re watching a detective mystery movie or television drama with everyone around the table having a hidden agenda. If you’re getting overwhelmed, observe who agrees with whom, who gets interrupted, and who seems to be the main influencer. Once you identify who is the thought leader in the room, you’ll know who you have to convince.

Before the meeting, practice self-calming or self-distraction techniques:

- Focus on breathing very slow, deep breaths.
- Ask for a bathroom break.
- Ask for a moment take notes.
- Ask “how” and “what” questions to give yourself time to think.

## Reclaim the narrative

**PRO TIP:** Convert labels into problem-solving language.

Hearing your child insulted, misunderstood, criticized, or underestimated hurts, but it does not have to derail you. Anticipate your emotional responses to hot buttons like feeling blamed or pressured into something you don’t want (such as have your child move schools or take medication). Make a list of your hot buttons in advance so you can prepare your responses when you’re calm enough to think.

Labels and diagnoses are different. Professionals use diagnoses (e.g. dyslexia) to communicate about the child’s difficulties and suggest interventions. Labels (such as lazy, spoiled, troubled, unmotivated) come from ignorance. Labels shut down everyone’s thinking. Parents can help teams get “unstuck” by changing the narrative away from the “child is the problem” theme.

Problems at school are never just about the student. As Dr. Ross Greene says, educators must understand problems as a *mismatch between the demands of the classroom and the child’s skills*. Try to help the team understand *why* the behaviors are occurring—remember you are the best expert on your child. Don’t be afraid to remind the team about how your child feels. For example, if your child disrupts class because he’s embarrassed that he cannot read, that is critical for the team to know. Phrases like, “It is hard for him to...” or “She has difficulty with...” are helpful. Politely correct anyone who tries to label your child with a pejorative adjective. Practice converting a label into a concern. For example, change “He’s aggressive” to “He loses control when he’s frustrated.” Change “She’s unmotivated” to “She’s easily distracted.”

In the words of Edna Mode from *The Incredibles*, “Luck favors the prepared, darling!” Preparing to cope with strong emotions make all the difference in having a productive, positive meeting. 🗣️

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