

## ESSENTIAL DANCE STEPS for PARENTS\*

from **Parents and Professionals Partnering for Children With Disabilities: A Dance That Matters**

By Janice M. Fialka, Arlene K. Feldman and Karen C. Mikus

- **Go Slow.** It takes time to absorb new information, especially during the initial phases or transitions or changes with partners. Don't expect to understand every detail, every report, or every choice immediately. Give yourself time to feel, think, question and take in the new information. Don't do it alone. Seek out other parents, resources, organizations, family members, and friends. Let a trusted person know what you are going through and how they might support you...Asking for support is a healthy thing to do, and a way to become a stronger partner.
- **Trust yourself.** Don't dismiss or underestimate what you know about your child.
- **Communicate.** Share what you know—you don't have to use the same words as professionals. Find your own words to tell stories about your child...You can use photos...Words are only one way.
- **Be prepared.** To be ready for meetings, formal or informal, ask ahead of time what to expect, what to bring, and what you should be prepared to talk about. Ask for a brief overview of the meeting, including the length and who will be present. Bring a list of your thoughts, questions, and expectations you wish to address.
- **Ask.** Your questions are important. If you're not sure how to phrase a question, try this, "I'm not sure I understand what you said. Could you repeat it, or give me another example?"
- **Speak Out.** Express your opinions, thoughts, agreements and disagreements with respect. If you are hesitant, for whatever reason, to share your thoughts at a meeting, follow up after the meeting with a one-on-one conversation or phone call with one of the professionals. You bring the much-needed family perspective.
- **Take five.** If you feel anxious or frustrated during the conversation, it's OK to ask for a short break.
- **Aim high.** Keep your expectations high for your children. Resist the pull to limit their dreams.
- **Share your family's cultural values, traditions, and routines.** You have a lot to teach and share with professionals, not only about your child but also about your family and community.
- **Give feedback.** Let professionals know specifically what they did that was helpful, valuable, and appreciated.
- **Involve your child.** As your child grows, learn more about ways to include him or her in the meetings, planning, and discussions. A primary role of the parents is to support their children to understand their disability, to know what supports and interventions they need, and how to advocate for themselves.
- **Remember that your child is the same unique, wonderful, child she or he was before the assessment.**
- **Be kind to yourself.** Parenting is joyful and challenging. To sustain your energy for the long run, it's important to find ways to relax and step away from the parent role for awhile.

\*Excerpt from Chapter Three: *The Dance Manual: Essential Steps to Keep Dancing*, p.95.

For more information about Janice Fialka, visit <http://www.danceofpartnership.com>