

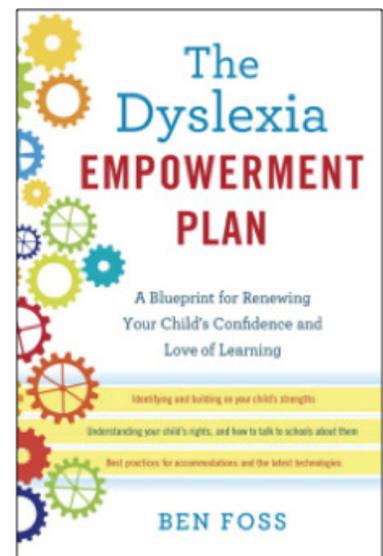
# Finding Allies and Building Relationships

## Where to Start

You will need to begin building a relationship with your child's teacher and school administrators. Ideally, you will begin this process before disclosing your concerns about your child's education, but doing it as early as possible is best regardless. There is a wide range of responses teachers and administrators can give you. They can do the minimum required by law, not giving you anything you fail to ask for and following the rules scrupulously even if it's not in your child's best interest, or they can be really strong advocates for your child if they understand that you are interested in becoming a long-term partner in your child's education or if there is a connection between you that goes beyond the classroom—you need to increase the odds in your favor by making and reaffirming every connection you can. In general, the anticipation of dealing with another person in the future is what drives people to build relationships.

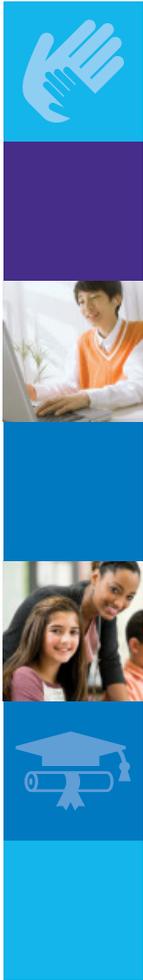
A good relationship can be the greatest incentive to productivity, so try to highlight the ways in which you'll be able to help them down the road. One great technique for navigating your child's school is to meet with teachers your child really likes. If your child likes somebody, odds are that she likes your child too. This might be a teacher from a previous school year, or someone outside of the core faculty, such as a teacher in the art or music department. In my case, my kindergarten teacher noticed that when the class was discussing opposites, I said that "was" was the opposite of "saw," and "dog" was the opposite of "god," because the order of the letters was inverted. Because the teacher liked me, she took the time to mention it to my mom, giving my parents an early indication that something might be up.

From the Book, *THE DYSLEXIA EMPOWERMENT PLAN* by Ben Foss.  
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LearningAlly





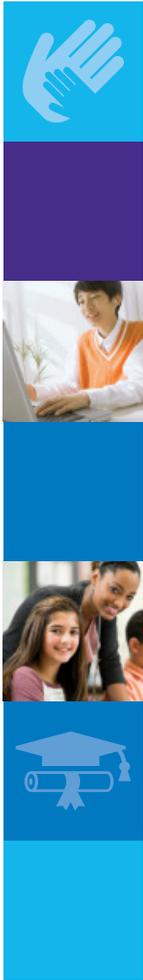
To build these relationships, always approach people with dignity and respect. This will spur them to respond to you in kind. The secretary who sits in the front office of a school is an incredibly important person. If and when your child gets in trouble, this will be the person he'll first meet with. Whenever I walk into an administrative office I strike up a genuine conversation with the people answering the phones or getting the coffee. Frequently, people view the office staff as just a step on the path toward a more powerful actor in that organization, such as the principal. However, because I put in the time to get to know them, I find that those folks are actually looking forward to talking with me. My phone calls get put through and they get me on the calendar when I need to make an appointment.

Advocates can also be found in the middle tier of an organization. The top people often don't have time to deal with your issues, but their immediate underlings can become wonderful allies. In a traditional school district, this midlevel but important person might be the district learning specialist (as opposed to the school principal or the district superintendent). Alternatively, it might be the head of the English department or the career counselor: people who have some influence but who will still take the time to meet with you.

### **When You Hit Road Blocks**

Also remember that not everyone will respond to your kindness. It's important to determine early on whether a person you need to cultivate is with you or against you. If it becomes clear after one or two conversations that someone is not particularly friendly to an enlightened concept of dyslexia and does not seem open to persuasion, it's best to just step around him or her. Eventually, may have to consider affirming you rights. You can learn more about that in ***Understanding Your Legal Rights***. In your initial interactions it's better to simply put a mental wall around them and see if there are other routes to your destination.

Key signs that someone may not be particularly supportive may be the use of phrases such as "Your child just doesn't seem to want to try hard" or "Your child is clearly intelligent but needs to stop goofing

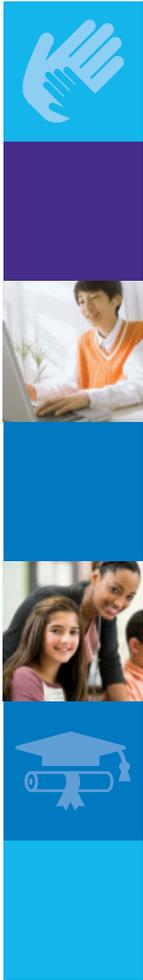


off.” Another signal that you’re dealing with someone who may not be a good ally is resistance to changing his teaching methods or including accommodations. This can be seen in statements such as “That’s going to take a lot more time. I’m not sure if we can fit that in” or in more direct ones such as “We really do try to maintain standards at this school, and if your son is not up to them, maybe you need to lower your expectations.”

## **Finding Other Families**

The final place to find allies is among other parents and kids in the school. It’s possible that the school will make an introduction to other parents, especially if you are in a private school focused on dyslexia. However, they may not do this because of confidentiality concerns (or because they do not want parents getting together to organize against the school), so you may need to work through the grapevine to see if you can identify the right target parents. A middle ground here involves asking the school to share your email address with parents with kids in special education generally, perhaps with a cover note from you explaining that you are mainly interested in finding a community, and see if people contact you back. Reaching out to the Decoding Dyslexia chapter in your state is a great starting place as well. You can look up this state-by-state group of parents online.

Any parent with a child in special education can be a good start—for example, the parent of a deaf child can tell you a lot about how the district and the school handle things— but parents of kids with nonobvious disabilities will have a more on- point description of what will happen. While you do not have to name your child at this stage, especially if he or she is uncomfortable with this—you could be interested for any number of reasons—it helps if you can say you have a child who might be seeking services, just to establish yourself on equal ground with the other parents. Before you take this step, you will need to work with your child so that she does not feel exposed. For example, if your child is still nervous about this issue, you do not want to make an announcement at a PTA meeting that you are looking for other parents who have student in SPED.



It's also useful to form a community between your child and other students with IEPs, in particular those who are receiving services you would like your child to have. If your child feels comfortable, ask them who their friends are in the special education classes and look for ways to build a relationship with that family. If your child is younger, this could be as easy as setting up a play date and gently raising the topic with the parents, introducing them to the dyslexia- as-identity model community. Overall, a good attitude and treating people with dignity and respect goes a long way in paving the path to strong long-term relationships with your school and your student's teachers.

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