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Lorain County's Voice on Mental Illness
Devoted to the concerns of families, friends and persons affected by mental illness.

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NAMI Ohio 2004 Conference Workshop Recap:

Special-Needs Kids and School

by Anne C. Paine

The relationship between parents of special-needs kids and the teachers who educate those children can be cooperative or adversarial. How can parents help create a positive environment in which their children get the services they need?

Three panelists focused on this question during the "Special-Needs Kids and School" workshop at the 2004 NAMI Ohio Annual Conference in May. All three emphasized the importance of preventing the parent-teacher relationship from degenerating into one of threats and accusations.

Susan Mikolic, a registered nurse, former member of the NAMI board of trustees, and mother of two children, has spent 11 years dealing with the effects of her own children's illnesses at school. The owner of Stepping Stones, a consulting service that focuses on helping families promote the academic success of children with brain disorders, Mikolic gave suggestions based both on her personal and professional experience.

"People in schools want to do the best for our kids, but they don't understand these illnesses" because they're invisible, she said. Her advice: be proactive and be positive. Her pointers:

- Educate each of your child's teachers. Write to teachers and counselors about your child's strengths and needs.
- Never accept seeing a large individualized education plan (IEP) for the first time at a meeting. Ask to review the draft IEP five days prior to the scheduled meeting, so you can review it carefully and thoughtfully. Cancel the meeting if your request isn't met. This will let the IEP team know you are a serious member of the IEP team.
- Point out to teachers that your child's mental illnesses can be made worse by stress.
- Although independent neuropsychological evaluations can cost up to \$1,500, they're worth the financial investment.
- If alternative settings may be necessary for your child at some point, investigate options beforehand, so you're prepared to make an informed decision rather than a snap judgment under stress.

- Stay on top of things for your child, even when situations are stable. Don't be lulled into complacency.
- Try to stay positive even when things aren't working out the way you'd like. Instead of being confrontational, explain difficulties and ask how they can be resolved. Making demands causes people to become defensive and less cooperative. Seek collaborative approaches.

- Always thank teachers for their efforts. (Mikolic favors delivering chocolate chip cookies.)

Carolyn Collins, executive consultant to the Ohio School Counselor Association and a former guidance counselor in the Akron school district, explained the counselor's role: "to know each child, to know each child's level of functioning, and to advocate for the child and parents with the school staff." She advised parents to contact counselors with problems.

"Schools want parents' knowledgeable participation. They want good communication. Assume that the school wants the best for your child" and work from there, she urged.

Pam Gulley, a clinical psychologist, school psychologist, and director of mental health services for Greene County, Ohio, stressed the importance of loving your child. "Remember that you are a parent first, and love your kid more than anybody else," she said.

"Next, remember that teachers are people too. Working with your child can be stressful for teachers, and you need to acknowledge that," Gulley said. "Work hard at your relationship with the teachers so that your kid can have the best possible experience in school."

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