

Help for Parents of Children with Special Needs

Closing the Gap, Disabilities • October/November 1999

Many minority parents who have children with disabilities find it difficult to ask for and find help. These parents may face language barriers or may not readily trust sources of support, according to Dixie Jordan, an American Indian advocate at the Minnesota-based Parent Advocacy Coalition for Educational Rights (PACER). PACER is a nonprofit organization that provides information and training services to parents of children with disabilities from birth to young adulthood. This includes training programs for parents, students, and schools, as well as technical assistance on the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

PACER runs an American Indian Parent Network project and a multicultural project that targets African Americans, Asians, and Hispanics/Latinos. Bilingual publications and workshops are available. Advocates for each minority group help parents become better informed, effective representatives for their children in early childhood, school-aged, and vocational settings. "This is important because cultural issues are among the biggest barriers for minorities with disabilities," Jordan said. "Communication barriers and cultural attitudes about disabilities and people in authoritative positions can all play a part in distancing minority groups from obtaining the help they need."

Jordan said she's noticed that some American Indians and Hispanics are taught to agree with individuals in power, so they may not be assertive when it comes to getting services. Some minorities who are not U.S. citizens are terrified to access services for fear of potential consequences, she said. Additionally, some multicultural communities aren't comfortable using the term "disabilities" when referring to their children. There are also times when minorities don't seek help from public agencies because of past experiences with discrimination.

Lucy Vitaliti agrees and adds that "gatekeepers" are an effective way to bridge cultural gaps. A former project director at the Rehabilitation Engineering Society of North America (RESNA), Vitaliti cites an example of one Hispanic man in the District of Columbia who served as the unofficial "Mayor" of his neighborhood. This man was in charge of the neighborhood in a sense, Vitaliti said. "If members of the community needed to know who to ask for help, they would go to him." Finding these people is key for human service professionals who want to reach these communities, Vitaliti added.

For more information on PACER and its programs, contact: (612) 827-2966 or (612) 827-7770 (TDD), or visit its Web site at: <http://www.pacer.org> ❖