

# Looking Beyond Parent Labels

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Kyle Kane

The phone rings first thing in the morning, just as she pulls up in front of the office. The independent educational consultant (IEC) looks at her cell phone and notes that it is “that” mom again. This is the third call this week. Now what could the problem possibly be? Her first reaction is annoyance, but then she takes a deep breath and thinks again as she answers the call.



Joan Wittan

As IECs, we have all had this experience. Clearly parents are a factor in our work, whatever our specialty area; however, for consultants who work with students with learning differences, parents can often be a handful. We have adopted colorful, descriptive labels for them. Here are a few you may recognize:



Sharona Sommer

- *Lawnmower parent*: Mows down anyone or anything that gets in the way of the student’s achievement, success, or happiness.
- *Fairy tale parent*: Sees only the good in the student rather than an honest appraisal of abilities, interests, or behaviors.

- *Google parent*: Has the answer for everything, never allowing the student the chance to discover, learn, or try things independently.
- *Tiffany parent*: Believes that gifts and money equal love to the point that the student has little concept of value or respect for incentives.
- *Secret agent parent*: Stalks the student on social media and the school grading system and struggles to allow the student to have privacy.

Although they are amusing, those labels reduce parents to stereotypes and are not entirely useful as we try to find ways to work with them. It is not our place to judge or criticize.

## Forged by Fire

The helicopter mom on the phone has probably battled for years to obtain an IEP for her child. That Google dad likely has repeatedly sought out the correct diagnosis for his complicated daughter. Those lawn mower parents have probably been chronically worried about their child’s ability to be independent and are trying their best to clear a path to college and a satisfying life for their child. The Tiffany parent no doubt feels pain every time his peers reject her child.

These parents have been forged in a fierce fire. Rearing complicated children, they often develop complicated parenting styles (well meaning though they may be) that sometimes can impede college readiness. Some parents of kids with academic, social, or emotional challenges can be overprotective, not allowing their children to become independent. Sometimes they are worried about further damaging a child’s self-esteem by speaking frankly about the diagnosis and its impact (in school and in life), thereby stunting any progress toward self-advocacy.

This transition to college is particularly fraught for parents of students with learning disabilities; the normal tensions that exist in many families are amplified. Co-occurring conditions such as anxiety or depression can worsen. Issues surrounding adoption, fear of abandonment, or embarrassment about having a learning disability can create obstacles and high anxiety for students as college looms near. Even parents who have been through the process with other children are not prepared for this different and more confusing experience.

## Beyond the Label

No matter what types of parents come through your door, however, they share the same goals as parents of neurotypical children: they want their child to be happy and independent and fear that he or she may not succeed. They put their hope and trust in us, so we must avoid labels and treat them respectfully, positively, and with fresh eyes. Seeing beyond the labels allows IECs to more effectively bring parents on board in the college planning and preparation process and guide the family to the best result. Ultimately, they know their child better than anyone and they want to be heard and validated. They’re tired of being judged and hope to find a professional who really understands their child.

But IECs also need to help parents realize that new parenting patterns and goals may be needed. Once trust is established, consultants can be transparent and honest when having the occasional challenging conversation about some of their assumptions or plans. We can gently guide them toward appropriate support versus enabling. Establishing new boundaries and expectations is a challenging process, but it will ultimately lead to more positive outcomes for students. Here are some tips for working with parents of students with learning differences.

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- **Ensure that parents understand the long view.** The process is about planning and preparing the student for college and life, not just offering help with getting good test scores or handing over a college list.
- **Help parents facilitate maturity and growth in their child through the orderly transition of power from parent to child.** Parents will want to start small, but help them make a plan so that the student is as self-reliant as possible. Money, medication management, travel to and from school, and other activities are required for independence. Offer parents a list of college readiness skills so that they can gauge their student's progress.
- **Introduce the idea that it is normal for students to have an inconsistent path to success.** We often see students take two steps forward, one step sideways, and one step back as they take on more responsibility for themselves. Encourage parents to resist the urge to jump in (Don't just do something, stand there!) to allow their child to strengthen problem-solving, help-seeking, and self-calming skills.
- **Encourage parents to engage other professionals, such as executive function coaches and writing tutors, to help students become college-ready.** Students can strengthen those skills with expert help before college. Plus, they often learn better from anyone who isn't mom or dad.
- **Introduce the possibility that some students may need an alternative timeline or a different approach to college planning.** Despite our best efforts, not all students—even those who are college-capable—are college-ready at the end of high school. Just because students can go to college doesn't always mean they should. College students must be able to function fairly

independently, and skills that they cannot perform without prompting are not mastered. It is better to offer alternatives, or stepping stones, to college to promote growth rather than to set a student up for failure. Suggesting a gap year (which could include working for a year or attending a domestic or international program) or a comprehensive transition program (that offers students training in life, employment, and academic skills) may be important first steps to a successful four-year college experience.

By abandoning the labels and understanding the struggles, IECs can begin to reduce challenges and enhance the cooperation of parents. We all want what is best for the student, although we may have different views about how to achieve it. By working together, we can empower students to become self-sufficient adults. Our shared goal is an independent, productive, and happy young adult even when the path is not always the traditional route. Be flexible, have a sense of humor, and keep your eyes on the long-term prize. 🏆

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