



DO's AND DON'T's WHEN DEALING WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS

* **Make an Appointment** -- Don't make the mistake of just "showing up" at a legislator's office. Just like your doctor, they often plan their day to the minute, and usually don't have time for "walk-ins." Making an appointment ahead of time shows respect for the legislator, and it also conveys the message that the issue you'd like to discuss deserves his/her complete attention.

* **Be on Time** -- This one is just common courtesy. If you're late, the legislator may decide you're not coming and proceed to fill that time with an issue other than yours.

* **Be Positive, Polite, and Friendly** -- Even if you know the legislator has voted against issues like yours in the past, it's important to still present a friendly attitude. Who knows? With your skillful persuasion, he or she may decide to change their mind and support you!!

* **Be Prepared -- Know your Subject!** -- The legislator has agreed to meet with you, and expects to hear about your issue in ten words or less!! Well, maybe it won't be that drastic, but you will have to come in prepared to answer all kinds of questions posed to you about your issue. Try to front-load the information; you may have 15 minutes, or you may get 30. Since you never know, try to get in as many important points up front as possible. It's important to remember that it's okay if you're asked something you don't know the answer to. Tell the legislator you'll check on it and get the answer to him/her promptly.

* **Provide Reliable Data/Facts to Support Your Position** -- If the legislator decides to support your issue, he or she is going to need all the ammunition possible to persuade other legislators to join in. Make sure your facts are accurate; if the legislator uses your information and is later proven wrong on a certain point, he or she may not support you again.

* **Don't Use Excessive Technical Jargon** -- If you start talking to the legislator about IEPs, FAPE, or LRE, you'll more than likely lose them right then and there. Legislators would probably rather hear two doctors talking than two educators -- their conversation would probably be more understandable!! Use terms and phrases that any layperson can understand when discussing your issues.

* **Don't Be Intimidated -- Legislators are Human Too!** -- Since issues involving exceptional children can affect everyone, the legislator is likely to be interested in what you have to say. He or she may even have had some personal experiences with the special education system. Don't be afraid to share your experiences; using them presents you as a knowledgeable expert; one the legislator can call on later as a resource.

* **If the Official is Opposed to Your Position, Know What His or Her Concerns Are** -- He or she may only be opposed to one thing you discussed during your meeting, and not necessarily the entire issue. Find out exactly what his or her concerns are, and try to address them as best you can.

* **Don't Threaten or Berate the Official** -- The last thing you want to do is burn any bridges! If the official is hell-bent on opposing your issue, agree to disagree. You may find yourself on the same side the next time!!

* **Leave Behind a One-Page Summary** -- The official is unlikely to remember all the points you've made during your visit. Have a fact sheet prepared ahead of time, and leave it with the official along with your business card and telephone number.

* **Follow Up Visit with a Thank-You Letter** -- Again, this is common courtesy. The letter serves as a reminder to the official; not only of the issues you discussed, but also of your name and organization.

* **Work with the Official's Staff** -- It's important to become friendly with the staff; often it can be the legislative aide who is instrumental in getting the legislator to support your issue. Establishing a relationship with the staff can also be beneficial to you if you need to speak to the official at a future time. And don't forget to be nice to the receptionist and other support staff; that can help get you an appointment with the official, even if his/her time is short.