

Public speaking for parents



Introduction

As a parent of a disabled child, you may be asked from time to time to talk to other parents or professionals about your experiences; this could be your experience of caring for your child or your experience of forming, or being part of, a support group. There are situations where your talk will literally be an informal chat. There may be other occasions when you are invited to give a more formal speech or presentation, at an event such as a carers' conference, for example. Public speaking can be a very intimidating experience, especially if it is not something you have to do on a regular basis. This guide aims to cover some of the basics behind preparing and delivering a presentation or speech and hopefully go some way in calming the nerves of even the most uneasy speaker.

(Please note that for the purpose of this guide, there is no distinction between the terms 'speech' and 'presentation' and both words will be used interchangeably.)

The fear of public speaking

What are people scared of when it comes to speaking in public? Some common concerns are:

- forgetting what you are talking about because your mind has gone blank
- 'drying up' and being unable to get the words out
- audience members getting up and walking out
- heckling from the audience
- being unable to answer a question from the audience

Whenever a person speaks in front of an audience, there is a risk that any of the above could happen. Your body's reaction when you face risk (or think you face risk) is to pump the chemical adrenalin into your blood stream to enable you to respond effectively to the risk i.e. to fight it or flee from it. The side effects of this adrenalin rush are the classic symptoms of nerves e.g. butterflies in the stomach, sweaty palms, shaking limbs, shallow breathing and a dry throat.

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However, strangely enough, nerves are not necessarily a bad thing. They can make you come across more naturally to the audience and enable you to 'think on your feet' quicker and inject extra energy into your actions. The trick is finding the right balance so you do not become overly anxious but control your nerves and consequently become more confident.

Preparing your speech

Good preparation is essential. There are very few people who can hurriedly decide what they are going to say 10 minutes before giving a speech and then deliver it well. You may have been in the audience where it has been obvious that the speaker has done exactly that and the chances are you remember that speech for all the wrong reasons! Knowing you have prepared fully will not only help your nerves, but will enable you to give a clear, effective, informative presentation.

The first step before you begin writing anything down is to think about the 3 W's: **why**, **who** and **where**. Ask yourself:

Why am I giving this speech?

Why is the event you are speaking at taking place? Why have you been asked to speak? Is it to give a parent's personal perspective on a particular issue, to inform people about your support group or to offer encouragement and advice to other parents wishing to form their own group? What do you want the audience to get out of your speech?

Who am I giving the speech to?

Try to find out as much as you can about your audience in advance. A speech that is specifically tailored to an audience will hold their interest. Ask how many people are going to be there. Are they going to be parents, professionals or a mixture of both? What level of knowledge are they likely to have? This will all determine the tone and content of your speech.

Where am I giving the speech?

These are more practical matters, but obviously you need to know where you'll be speaking and at what time. Plan your journey and make travel arrangements in advance so you'll have no last minute panics on the way there. Find out how long you will be expected to speak for; it is very important that you are clear about this from the onset. Are you the only speaker or will there be several? How will you be introduced? What size will the room be? If you would like to use a visual aid such as overhead transparencies or a video, can the venue accommodate this?

Once you have considered all these things, you can then start to think about what you actually want to say and begin to write your speech.

Writing your speech

An effective way to structure a speech is:

1. Tell the audience what you are going to tell them (the introduction)
2. Tell them (the main section of the speech)
3. Tell the audience what you just told them (the conclusion)

Sticking to this structure makes writing and delivering a speech a lot simpler for the speaker and makes listening to the speech easy for the audience.

The introduction

Your aim in the first thirty seconds of your speech is to grab the audience's attention and engage their interest. You might raise a thought provoking question, recite a relevant quotation or tell them an interesting fact or statistic. Give the audience a reason for listening. Once you have seized their attention, tell the audience the sequence of your presentation and then lead into the main section of your speech.

The main body of the speech

This will be longest part of your speech (80-90% of the total) and needs a logical structure which the audience will follow easily and therefore listen to. Sticking to just 3 main points reduces the chances of the audience switching off or becoming distracted. A good question to ask yourself before you write the main body of your speech is 'what 3 things would I like this audience to know above all others?' These are things that should form the main points of your speech. Once you have decided on them, expand on the 3 key points with examples and stories which support each one and ensure they flow in a logical order.

The conclusion

As you close your speech, you should summarise your key points and refer back to the audience's reason for listening. Your conclusion needs to make just as big an impact as your introduction. If possible, leave the audience with a final thought or sentiment that they will take away and think about.

A note about talking about your own personal experiences

Parent speakers offering their perspective and sharing personal experiences are often the most valuable, thought-provoking and moving elements of conferences and other information events. However, if you are asked to give a talk about your own personal experience, take the time to think about exactly how much you want to share with a room of strangers. Consider how the details of what you are sharing might affect you as you speak. Set boundaries for yourself and make sure you feel comfortable with everything you are talking about.

Preparing your notes

Once you have decided exactly what you want to say, you then need to put your speech into a finished format you can use on the day. How you do this depends entirely on what makes you feel comfortable and secure: there is no right or wrong method. Three possible options are:

1. Reading from a full manuscript of your speech

Pros	Cons
You won't forget any points as your whole speech will be written out for you in full	Reading from a set script with enthusiasm and varying tone in your voice is harder to do than you would expect - there is a tendency to sound stilted
It's very reassuring having the whole speech in front of you	It is quite a formal method of presenting and you may not come across naturally
	It's easy to bury your head in your paper and lose all eye contact with the audience

If you adopt this approach:

- make sure the text you are reading from is in a large enough print for you to read it easily
- ensure your voice does not sound monotonous and retain some contact with the audience by adding symbols to your script to remind yourself when to pause, change the tone of your voice, look up at the audience etc.

2. Working from notes on a speech card (see the back of this guide for an example speech card)

Pros	Cons
Your language will be more natural and spontaneous because you will not be reading aloud from a manuscript	If your concentration lapses, it can take longer to find your place in your notes
It is easier to maintain eye contact with the audience as you will be glancing at your notes, not looking down continuously in order to read a manuscript	

If you adopt this approach:

- again, make sure the text is big enough for you to read
- index cards are the ideal size to make notes on
- if you are using more than one card, number them and affix with a treasury tag to prevent them falling out of sequence
- use your own shorthand, symbols or colour coding to act as triggers for key phrases and points

3. Memorising your speech in full

Pros	Cons
You have full interaction with the audience with no notes acting as a barrier	There's always a risk you forget your speech in part or completely
	If you lose your train of thought, there are no notes to help you find your place and return to your point

If you adopt this approach:

- make sure you have sufficient time available beforehand to fully memorise your speech

Visual aids

As a rule, people like to look at things and visual aids can be a very useful tool in helping to illustrate a complicated point. Not only do they aid understanding but they can make your main points more memorable and help the audience to retain their concentration. Also, not everyone absorbs information by listening and using visual aids is useful for people who take in more information by reading or looking.

Examples of visual aids are:

- overhead transparencies
- charts and posters
- flip charts
- videos
- photographic slides
- computer projection slides

However, using visual aids does break up the flow of a presentation and it isn't always appropriate to use them i.e. in more informal settings. What you say and how you say it is more powerful than using the latest gadget. When considering using visual aids, ask yourself the following 3 questions:

1. Are visual aids appropriate for the talk I am giving?
2. Do I feel comfortable with the technical element involved in using some visual aids?
3. Are the visual aids I would like to use available at the venue?

Never rely solely on equipment like overhead projectors, videos and slide projectors - modern technology sometimes fails! Always have a back-up if appropriate, or make sure you are in a position to carry on without a visual aid should it stop working.

Rehearsal

Obviously rehearsal is a big part of the preparation you need to do before the day of your speech. The more you rehearse, the more comfortable you will feel.

Always practise your speech out loud and time yourself to ensure your talk fits the time slot you have been given. Try to rehearse to an audience, even if it is just to one other person. This way you will be able to get feedback about the length, content and tone of your speech.

If it is not possible to practise in front of an audience, it's still important to rehearse out loud to give yourself an idea of how your speech sounds out in the open. Written words for paper can sound very different when said aloud. Tape record yourself if you can, to give yourself an indication of timing and so you can hear what your speech will sound like to others.

Questions from the audience

Taking questions from the audience at the end of a presentation can be quite a daunting prospect; one reason for this is fear of the unknown. If you are going to answer questions, try to take some of the 'unknown' element away by thinking about what might commonly be asked. If you are rehearsing in front of a family member, colleague or friend, ask them to put questions to you (even if they already know the answer!) so you can practise formulating responses.

It is impossible to predict with certainty which questions you will be asked on the day, but the more questions you can think of in advance, the more at ease you will feel. Also, if you always make sure you speak about things you know extremely well, the more confident you can be about taking questions from the audience, as it is unlikely you will be asked something which completely baffles you. However, remember that it's ok to not know the answer to some questions and equally ok to tell that audience that you don't know and will try to find out.

If you feel more comfortable answering questions on a one-to-one basis, rather than in front of a full room of people, then tell the audience before you start speaking that you will be available to answer individual questions during the next break or at the end of the day.

Tips for controlling nerves on the day

If you have thoroughly prepared beforehand, you have reduced the number of things that could go wrong, so keep this in mind at all times. Remember that nerves are a completely normal, human reaction and they will make you come across more naturally. It's also worth bearing in mind that you might not be the only nervous person in the room. Some people find it incredibly never-wracking just sitting in an audience!

Above all, remember that nobody wants you to fail or catch you out and nobody knows more about your experiences or your group than you do. There will be at least one member of the audience who will admire and respect you just for getting up there in the first place.

Below are a couple of useful techniques to help you feel calmer before you start speaking.

Technique 1

Think about a time when you were completely relaxed and at ease, e.g., a walk through the countryside, a summer holiday, a celebratory meal with family and friends. Whatever your memory is, focus on it in the moments leading up to your speech. Think of how happy and relaxed you felt and concentrate on this; you should automatically feel calmer.

Technique 2

Before you stand up, imagine your speech being over. Think how relieved you will feel and the sense of achievement you will experience. Try to imagine the applause you will receive from the audience and focus on the fact that the applause is only minutes away.

What to do on the day

Before your speech:

- Ensure you are dressed appropriately but comfortably.
- Arrive at the venue in good time and familiarise yourself with the layout of the room.
- Make sure you know where the toilets and fire exits are.
- If you are using visual aids, check they are working before you start your speech.
- Have a glass of water close by.

During your speech

- Look at the audience and smile before you begin to speak.
- Remember to breathe - many people start holding their breath when they are anxious making the symptoms of nerves worse.
- Speak slowly and clearly and vary the tone of your voice. When you are nervous it's common to speak faster and faster, making it difficult for the audience to catch what you are saying. Take sips of water to literally force yourself to pause if you have to.
- If you find it uncomfortable making direct eye contact with members of the audience then cheat and focus on different points at the back of the room.
- Never try to guess what your audience is thinking as you speak; a person frowning in the front row may just look like that when they are concentrating.
- Watch your time.
- Try to end on a positive note and thank the audience for listening.

After your speech

- If you are taking questions and you don't know the answer remember it's acceptable to say so. Have a notepad or paper to hand to record the question and the details of the person asking, so you can get back to them.
- Be available at the end of the event or during a break to answer any further questions people may have.
- Congratulate yourself - you've done it!

Finally

It is possible for public speaking to be a very rewarding experience rather than a daunting one. Although it is helpful to review what worked well and what didn't, if your speech did not go entirely to plan do not be too hard on yourself. If your words inspired or educated just one person in the room then it has been worthwhile.

SPEECH CARD

Introduction

Headline: reason for listening

Plan: tell the audience the sequence of the presentation

Main body

Point 1

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Point 2

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Point 3

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Conclusion

1. Summary (summarise the main idea by referring back to the three main points)
2. Echo (revisit the headline)

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