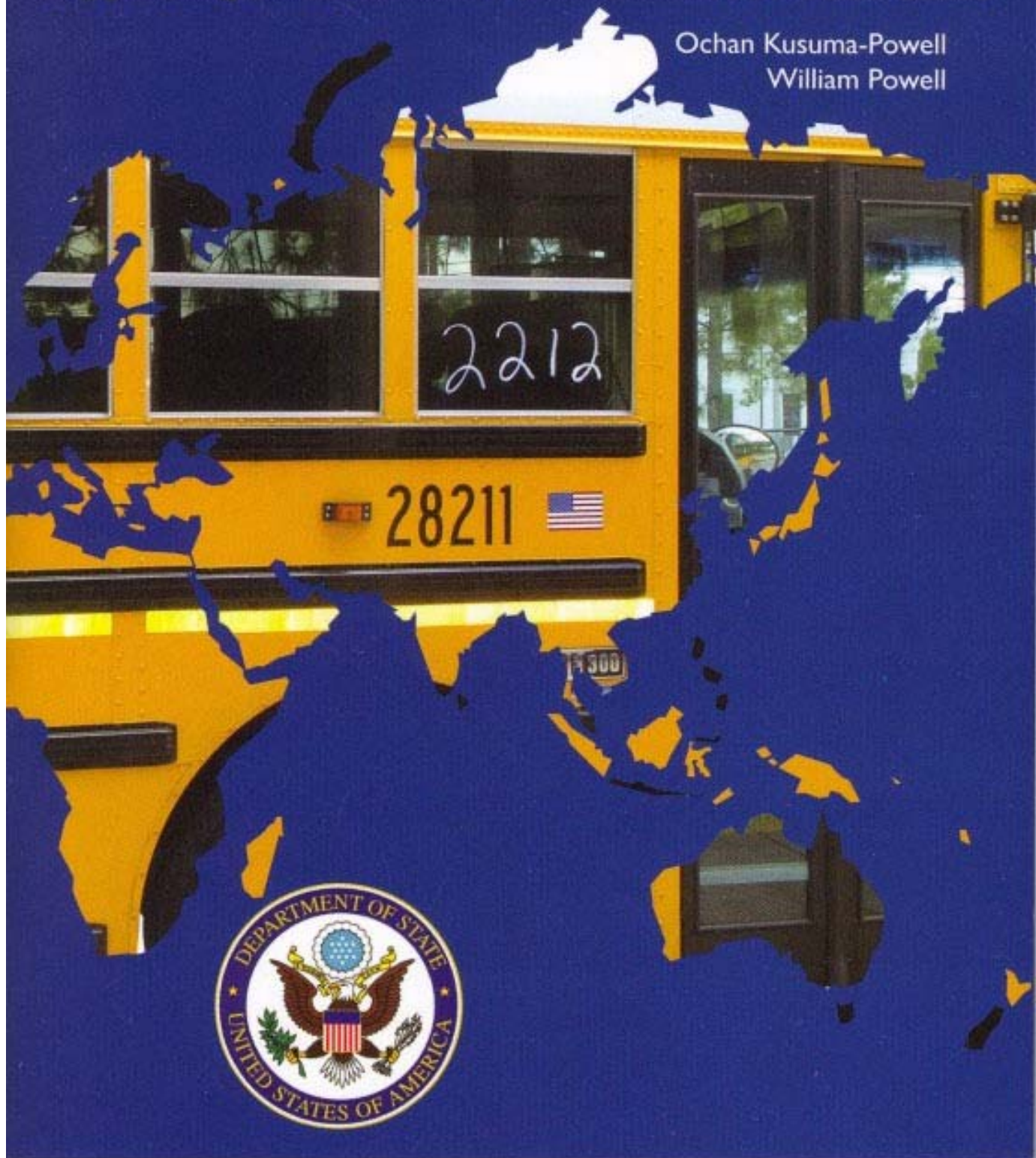


# Parent Advocacy In International Schools: Supporting Differentiated Instruction For Your Child

Ochan Kusuma-Powell  
William Powell

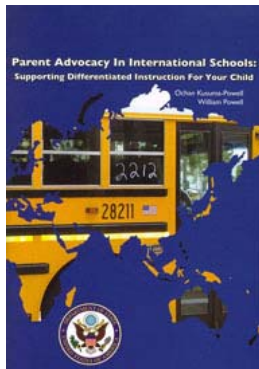




# PARENT ADVOCACY IN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS:

## SUPPORTING DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION FOR YOUR CHILD

Ochan Kusuma-Powell  
William Powell



June 2008

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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Ochan Kusuma-Powell and William Powell  
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## **Introduction**

“What is an international school?”

“How will it be different from the school my children are leaving?”

“Will my child fit back into the school system when we return home?”

“How can I help my child adjust to the new setting, and how can I ensure that my child has the best possible learning opportunities?”

“If my child has special learning needs, what can I do to make sure those needs are sensitively addressed in the new school?”

If you are a parent who is about to move to another job location in a new country, these may well be some of the questions you are wondering about in reference to your child’s next school. Even if you are a veteran international traveler whose children have attended an international school for some time, you may still have questions about how you can best advocate for your child in that setting.

This monograph is written for you, the parents of international school students.

## What Is An International School?

When our 2nd grade daughter was asked to write about herself, she said, 'My mommy is from Sri Lanka, my daddy is from America and I was born in Saudi Arabia. So I am Sri Lankan, American and Saudi Arabian,' to which her teacher responded, 'Now I know exactly where you are from!' These are invaluable experiences that teach our children tolerance for what is different."

Naszreen Gibson, Parent  
International School of Kuala Lumpur

Since their early beginnings in the middle of the last century, international schools have been created to serve the children of expatriate families in countries around the world. In the last few years, they have grown dramatically in number and can now be found in most major cities around the world. International schools vary in their governance and financial structures. While many are parent-owned and governed and are not for profit, recent years have also seen many more proprietary (for profit) international schools.

International schools operate as independent bodies; no two are the same. They vary in size, program and curricular offerings. Some are very small with fewer than 100 students, while others have student populations of over 3,000. In some locations, we have also seen a dramatic increase in the number of host country students attending international schools. Some international schools embrace an American curriculum, along with Advanced Placement programs, others the British National Curriculum, and still others a blend of several curricula, often adopting the programs of the International Baccalaureate Organization<sup>1</sup>.

International schools also vary in the degree to which they can offer support for students with special needs; parents will find that no two support programs are identical. In fact, the support programs between the elementary, middle and high school sections within a school may also vary. There is also

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<sup>1</sup> The IBO offers programs of international education to a number of schools worldwide. Their programs serve three different levels of students at the primary, middle and high school levels.

a difference in the availability of counseling and other psychological support services within the local community. If you have a child with special learning needs, it is important for you to find out about the program on offer, the admissions requirements and availability of other support services in the community *before* you arrive.

Despite the differences between international schools, there are also many similarities to be found. International school communities are often close, warm and welcoming environments in which it is often easy to make friends. Bound by the common experience of being expatriates (literally, those ‘outside of the community of one’s father’) people find relationships easy to develop. International schools and their teachers also welcome parent involvement and participation in school activities.

Parents will find a focus on academic work tempered by sports and the arts. Many international schools are now adopting a standards-based curricular framework and schools are endeavoring to keep their faculty up-to-date in terms of professional development and best practice. Parents can ask whether the school has been accredited, and by which agency. Accreditation is one of the indicators that a school has taken its own development and progress seriously, and that there is a plan for continued improvement.

It is important to understand how the particular international school your child is in operates. Being in an international setting might be very different from what you experienced before.

Parent Alumna,  
International School of Kuala Lumpur



## **How Do We Define Optimal Learning Conditions For Each Child?**

All students learn best when their own particular styles and needs are honored in the instructional process. Many children benefit from visual cues to support them in the learning process, whereas others require kinesthetic (movement) activities or “hands-on” work in order to learn. Still others exhibit a preference to learn by hearing. In addition to these many styles, learning can be influenced by time of day, the age of the child, gender and culture. Other influences include physiology, previous educational history and family history.

Learning is optimized when teachers pay attention to the diversity of these influences in the planning and teaching process. This is called differentiated instruction.

I was very lucky to have the support and openness of teachers who were willing to explore unconventional approaches of teaching at each stage of my schooling, which helped me to build on and advance to my higher education.

The ones who impacted me the most were the ones who accepted my learning disability and acknowledged my potential, allowing me to learn skills, how to dialogue on how to reach my goals . . . the teaching was focused on using my strengths and learning strategies to help me survive in high school . . . I learned progressively the confidence to get support for my special needs from anyone without feeling emotionally incompetent. I learned to not be ashamed of my disability. I needed a scribe for my exam, so I had a scribe to help me write. It did not matter who the scribe was, I was getting my writing done. (The same with reading), what mattered to me was that I was told orally what I needed to read and this allowed me to know what I needed to be successful. All of this prepared me to be able to go to university as I then had the skills and self-esteem to tell what my needs were to be successful in university.

2003 Alumna,  
International School of Kuala Lumpur

## What Do Parents Need To Know About Differentiation?

Differentiation is a deliberate and purposeful approach to instructional design and delivery. Teachers who differentiate instruction are sensitive to student learning styles and conscious that every child brings a different history to the class. These teachers try to provide multiple points of access to the curriculum so that learning can be maximized for all. They plan thoughtfully and teach in adaptive and proactive ways that take into account student readiness, interests, learning styles and specific needs. Teachers may differentiate the instructional process used or the product required of the student, or even the assessment assigned. The purpose is to make all students feel invited to learn. All students are provided with meaningful and respectful work and are challenged at an appropriate level.

*Ben's mother described him as a child who was perpetually "in motion." From a very early age, Ben loved cars, trucks and trains, anything with wheels that could move fast! Ben would take his fleet of vehicles from one room to another, taking them on "long trips."*

*After observing Ben during the first few weeks of Kindergarten, Mrs. Porter, Ben's teacher, recognized his need for movement. She introduced letters of the alphabet to Ben using large puzzle pieces which he could assemble on the floor. Instead of scolding Ben for not being able to sit still, Mrs. Porter used his style preference to help him learn.*

Differentiation is not the same as providing an individualized program of learning for each child. Instead, teachers may look at clusters of students having similar styles, and prepare tasks that appeal to that particular style. Parents can be instrumental in helping teachers learn about their child's strengths, interests and needs.

Although differentiation may not fully support the needs of all students with learning differences, quite often the teacher's purposeful accommodation for student needs will help students to achieve success within the regular classroom. Many international schools are actively pursuing

professional development for their teachers to help them learn to differentiate instruction.

Some parents may wonder whether teaching to student strengths and learning styles may handicap them as adults. After all, when students arrive in the real world of work, they will have to do things that they may not be good at and may not like. Other parents may worry that ‘providing all students with meaningful and respectful work’ may simply be a euphemism for ‘dumbing down’ the curriculum.

We have not found these to be the case. When student learning styles and strengths are considered in the planning process, teachers consciously search for ways in which to make learning more accessible and inviting to students. They also deliberately design learning opportunities in which other strengths might be developed. We continue this practice as adults, when we choose to work in areas that we enjoy or in which we have a natural talent.

One of the most widespread misconceptions about education is that effective learning needs to be arduous. Abundant research has shown the contrary to be the case. Students learn more effectively and efficiently when they engage in an enjoyable task or activity. Academic rigor, the key to a high quality curriculum, does not need to be onerous.

Our son, who was reading above grade level in 2nd grade, had a teacher who challenged him by having a basket of books available in the classroom with books ranging from Grade 4 – 6 reading levels. Our son and two other children were never bored because the selection was changed weekly.

Naszreen Gibson, Parent  
International School of Kuala Lumpur

Differentiation, when implemented properly, does not “dumb down” the curriculum because in all cases, the learning goals (what the students need to learn, understand or do) are the same for all students. These goals are drawn from the school’s curricular documents, increasingly based on accepted

standards and grade level benchmarks. Thus, the learning 'destination' is the same for all students. How they arrive at that destination might be different. In addition, the criteria by which the learning is assessed is also the same for all students. In other words, the learning outcomes and the standards by which teachers evaluate student achievement remain constant for all students. However, the learning activities, processes, and products can be very different. The only exception to this is if the student is on an Individual Education Plan (IEP) – in this case the goals and assessment criteria might be adjusted on a case by case basis.

Differentiation is good teaching.

## **What Are the Components Of Effective Parent Advocacy In International Schools?**

Several years ago at Jakarta International School, a task force of teachers and administrators came together to discuss why some children with average to above average intelligence were unsuccessful at school, whereas others, who according to test scores were below average in intelligence, were finding academic success. After much discussion and analysis, the members of the task force came to the conclusion that parent support for the student as well as for the school was paramount in determining whether students would succeed or not. This realization helped the task force understand that positive relationships between home and school were vital to student learning. In fact, the home-school partnership was seen to be the single most important variable in predicting a child's success in school.

We see several components to effective parent advocacy for students in international schools. These include:

1. Cultivating Effective Parent-School Relationships
2. Knowing Our Children as Learners
3. Parent Self-Knowledge
4. Developing Effective Communication Skills
5. Conflict Management Skills
6. Parent Organization, Planning, & Follow-Through
  - a. Before Admission to the New School
  - b. After Admission
  - c. On Returning "Home"
7. Developing a Future Vision

## I. Cultivating Effective Parent-School Relationships

*Georgina hurried to make it to the parent conference on time. She had been called in by the Middle School Counselor to meet with Jonathan's teachers, and she had a feeling the meeting wasn't going to be good. When Georgina had asked why she was being called into school, Jonathan had shrugged and grunted an unintelligible response. It didn't augur well.*

*When she arrived at the Middle School Office, Georgina was shown into the conference room. To her surprise, all of Jonathan's teachers were assembled, and one by one, they counted off assignments that hadn't been turned in and listed behavioral incidents in which Jonathan had "mouthed off" at his teachers. Apparently, he was slacking off, developing a bad attitude about work and school, and . . .*

*Georgina didn't hear much else. From being slightly irritated with her son, she suddenly became the mother lioness, protecting her cub. "Wait just a minute!" she cried, "Do you mean this has been going on for awhile and this is the first I've heard about it?! Don't call me in at the end of the marking period when everything has been set and there's nothing else to be done but to complain about my son!"*

*Georgina could hardly catch her breath while the rest of the group sat in silence, stunned by her sudden outburst. "Oh no, and you call yourselves professionals?! I wondered about the school when we moved here."*

Not surprisingly, the relationship between Georgina and the school took months of concerted effort to repair. Not only was Georgina having to deal with her own relocation stress, she was watching her once lively, happy son become more and more quiet in his struggle to adjust to the new country and school. On the school's part, there had not been sufficient preparation for the meeting. Parents can often feel overwhelmed by the sheer number of bodies that are sometimes assembled in a room to talk about a child, particularly if there are problems to be discussed. In addition, the teachers' frustration with Jonathan prevented them from empathizing about what it might mean for a parent to hear one after another dismal account about how her child was under-performing at school. Strong home-school relationships are supportive of the learning of all children. Building such a relationship

requires emotional intelligence and sensitivity on the part of both teachers and parents. When a child is experiencing difficulty of any kind at school, a strong partnership between home and school is critically important.

Words that capture the nature of a successful relationship between teacher and parent are: partnership, openness, mutuality, collegiality, respect, listening, follow-through and trust-building.

Carol Tegenfeldt, Parent  
International School of Yangon

There are many aspects to cultivating strong, effective relationships with the school.

**Get to know your child's teacher(s)** – In this digital age, initial contacts are easily made through e-mail. Otherwise, dropping into school to introduce yourself to your child's teacher at the beginning of the school year will help the teacher to put a face to a name as he or she also tries to get to know each student in the class. Too often, parents (and teachers) will wait until there is a problem before making contact. Clearly these are not the optimal circumstances for building a trusting relationship.

**Identify an individual within the school** (teacher, counselor, principal) with whom you are comfortable, and who will serve as a liaison in times of need. Even when your child does well in school and does not need additional support, knowing that there are adults at the school with a personal interest in your child's welfare will allow you to feel more comfortable with your child's educational program.

A degree of openness is important on both the part of the parents and the teacher. If 'Johnny is a little devil' in class, there may be other issues going on both at home and socially, which can impact the child's ability to learn. Being up front and honest about what's happening in the child's life is important as a child can behave in very dissimilar ways in the two different environments, home and school.

Philippa Morrison, Parent Alumna  
International School of Kuala Lumpur

**Be proactive and find out what is going on in your child's**

**class** – Communicate with the teacher if there is an area of the curriculum which matches your strengths, professional knowledge, hobbies, interests and cultural background. Don't be shy to offer your areas of expertise to enhance the student's learning – as a presenter or collaborator with small groups or individuals.

**Maintain regular contact with the school** – Teachers are very

busy individuals, and they will appreciate a note of contact from you, the parent. Don't wait until there is a problem to contact the teacher. Like everyone else, teachers thrive on positive feedback. If something is working well in the classroom, let the teacher know. Developing this relationship will also encourage the teacher to get in touch with you immediately, should your child's performance drop. If your child has any special learning needs, greater frequency of contact may be required.

**Be 'up front' and honest about your child's history** – If your

child has issues with learning, don't hide information or past difficulties. Parents sometimes hope that a child's learning problem will disappear with a fresh start in a new location. They don't want to prejudice the new environment by bringing up old histories. This almost never works in the child's favor. Time is wasted as the new teacher is left to discover for him or herself that there is a learning problem, instead of the teacher immediately being cued to recognize specifically how the child's learning might be supported.



The best of my kids' teachers genuinely perceived me as a supporter and partner in the education process. The atmosphere between us was full of collegiality, rather than defensiveness. When I talked about my child's learning issues, I did so without a specific demand of how they would use the information. They listened, and shortly thereafter, evidence would surface that what I had said was being taken into account in my child's classroom or homework experience, without me specifically having to follow up. That gained my trust.

Where these things worked best, the teacher and I developed mutual reliance and respect, and especially in his early years, my son flourished in direct correlation with the degree of success of my relationship with his teacher.

Carol Tegenfeldt  
International School of Yangon Parent

**Ask your child about what is going on in class**, and make positive expressions of interest in what s/he is doing at school. The dinner table is a great time to explore with your child what may have interested, surprised, excited, puzzled, confused . . . him or her about school that day. These expressions of interest are directly correlated to the teacher's motivation and your student's achievement and may also serve to raise your child's self-esteem.

**When concerns arise**, as they sometimes do, make an appointment to see the teacher. The first line of communication should be with the teacher with whom your child has experienced difficulty. Speaking to the principal first will only delay resolution. In addition, be sensitive to the closeness of the expatriate community and make the appointment for the meeting in school. Don't discuss issues at the supermarket! Not only is it unfair to the teacher (who must also live in the community), there may be other parents nearby who become unwilling witnesses to your exchange.

**Parents sometimes worry if they do complain** or confront a teacher about a concern, that the teacher will victimize their child. We hope that no teacher would engage in such unprofessional behavior. We suspect that such parental concern comes from the notion that at the end of parent/teacher conferences the relationship may be adversarial. In such a situation, everyone loses. It may be that the desired outcome for the conference is not the resolution of the complaint, but rather creating the relationship in which such a resolution may become possible. We encourage parents to develop effective communication skills and positive confrontation skills.

**Volunteer at the school!** There are many school initiatives that parents can contribute their energies to, and in this way enjoy being a part of the life of the school. The physical presence of parents in the school sends very important symbolic messages to both students and teachers: What happens here is important. We care about you and appreciate your work.

I found out that the way to stay in touch with my children's school life was to be involved at school.

Naszreen Gibson, Parent  
International School of Kuala Lumpur

Several years ago, researchers in the Chicago Public School System (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) found that when relational trust existed between adults in the schoolhouse, each party was more likely to actively strive to improve student learning. We would extend that to the relationship between parents and school. Both parties must be aware of the importance of their relationship and work to preserve and protect it. For example, parents can recognize and appreciate that teachers and the school are also making efforts to work with each child. Effective parent advocacy reflects trust in the relationship between parent and school.

Trust is what is needed.

Claire Dickson, Parent  
International School of Prague

## 2. Knowing Our Children as Learners

It is important for parents to appreciate fully their own child's strengths and weaknesses.

Philippa Morrison, Parent Alumna  
International School of Kuala Lumpur

It sounds like a truism to say we have to know our own children but in this case, we advise parents to get to know their children as learners. Under what conditions does he or she do his/her best work? What are your child's strengths and weaknesses? What learning profile emerges when you see your child at work? What kind of a learner is he, and what does she need in order to learn well?

*Rajiv complained to his mother that he couldn't see in class. His mother asked if it would help for her to speak to Mrs. Robson about seating Rajiv closer to the front of the class.*

*"No," said Rajiv, "that's not what I mean! I'm already sitting at the front of the class but when Mrs. Robson puts things up on the overhead projector, I can't copy them down so fast. I need for her to leave the overhead projector on longer."*

Part of coming to know our children as learners includes developing realistic perceptions of their strengths and weaknesses, and helping them also to learn their strengths. Some of the actions parents might take to know their children as learners include:

**Observations** – What does your child say about school? How is s/he settling in? How long does it take for him to complete homework, and how much assistance is needed? What kind of help is needed for homework to get done, and in what areas? How are your child's friendships developing?

My son, a senior, is extremely social in his orientation – schoolwork is a poor second. His statistics teacher knows this and actually HONORS my son's social side instead of devaluing it, as some other teachers have. In offering extra help to my son, the teacher has made it clear he is willing to provide extra help at a time that doesn't cut into my son's social life! He also keeps the help short and targets it exactly where he thinks it will make the most impact, so my son can have more time to spend doing what he does best. As a result, my son is willing to go for extra help from this teacher, when he has often not been willing with other teachers. Help is being provided in a way that makes it easy for my son to accept it and doesn't make him feel devalued.

Carol Tegenfeldt  
International School of Yangon Parent

**Unmask success** – sometimes it is difficult for children to see their own achievements. (On occasion this is also true for parents and teachers – we get so consumed with everyday living that we fail to see the forest for the trees.) Make progress visible, and celebrate it. Compare your child only to him/herself. One indicator of success might be how much progress s/he has made in any given area since the beginning of the year. Saving student work in an annual portfolio is a particularly effective way of unmasking success. There are few things that motivate students as much as being able to see the progress that they have had over a specific period of time.

**Special needs** – If your child has a special learning need (ESL, LD, ADHD, etc.) become knowledgeable about it. Try to stay current with the latest research on your child's learning issues and share this research with teachers and with the counselor. It is also important to become knowledgeable about the support services available within the school and in the broader community.

As parents, it is important to find ways to come to terms with the child's specific challenge as best as possible. In this respect, the school, the teachers, and counselors can provide very valuable support but they are not the only source of support.

Learning about the challenges of your child generates a lot of anxiety, often a sense of helplessness and fear, even a sense of failure. To compensate for these emotions, and in the eagerness to be proactive and resolve the challenge for the child, the parents in the early stage can unconsciously transfer their needs for success at parenting, or their anxiety, as an extra burden on the child's shoulders.

Parent Alumna,  
International School of Kuala Lumpur

### 3. Parent Self-Knowledge

Another area that contributes to effective parent advocacy is self-knowledge. What makes us anxious as parents? What are our sources of stress? How are our goals and expectations for our children tied up in defining who we are?

*Back home, Mary had always attended the parent conferences of all the Thompson children. But in this new country, at this new international school, Rick realized that both mothers as well as fathers were expected to attend their children's parent conferences! Rick resented being 'expected' to come, but because every experience in their new location was so different, he decided to go.*

*As he listened to the teachers talk about his children, Rick realized that what they had to say was positive and helpful. He examined his negative feelings about coming to parent-teacher conferences and realized they had more to do with his own childhood experiences of school and teachers – his parents had only been called in to school when there had been something negative to report.*

Self-knowledge allows us to distance ourselves from the emotional roller coaster ride that is often a part of parenthood. Becoming conscious of our response patterns and behaviors allows us to act with intention and purpose, rather than to react solely with emotion. This is particularly important if your child has a special learning need that will require accommodations and a supportive partnership between home and school. Self-knowledge is an important part of developing positive relationships with the school and will serve to support children in their learning.

Daniel Goleman (1986) suggests that emotional intelligence – the social intelligence that allows us to interact constructively with others – is based on three personal attributes. An emotionally intelligent person is self-monitoring, self-managing, and self-modifying. These are very effective qualities to bring to parent/teacher conferences.

Asking ourselves questions that provide us with opportunities to reflect on who we are helps us to define ourselves and make explicit what our core values might be. Some of these might include questions on:

**Core values** – What is most important to us as parents? As a family?

Are grades the 'end all' of education? Is a mistake something to avoid or something to learn from?

**World view** – How do we regard the world? Is our world view

positive? Optimistic? Having courage and hope are indispensable in raising children!

**Handling frustration and anger** – What are our typical response patterns, and how can we avoid negative and destructive aspects of frustration and anger?

**Handling setbacks** – How can we support our children in learning to “fail forward” – to treat failure as an opportunity and a challenge?

**Monitoring stress and anxiety levels** – How do we know that we are becoming upset or anxious? How can we reduce stress in ourselves? We recognize that high levels of stress and anxiety may not benefit ourselves or our children.

**Over-protectiveness** – We are naturally protective of our children. What is the difference between healthy protectiveness, and over-protectiveness that might prevent growth in our children?

**Persistence** – Sometimes being a parent and advocating for our children can be hard work! How can we develop the persistence that is necessary to help each child succeed?

**Roles and responsibilities** – What happens when we are not only parents, but also teachers or administrators who work in the school, or Board Members who have been elected to serve the school? How can we keep our roles and responsibilities separate?

I have been a school board member for two of the last three years and am Board Chair this year. I have been acutely aware of how that can shape teacher perceptions of me and I endeavor to separate the roles. There have been times, though, when as a Board member, I have consciously not advocated for my child in the same way as I would have, if I were just a parent at the school.

Tania Garry, Parent  
International School of Yangon

After being involved in the PTA and then elected to the School Board, I had difficulty separating my roles. I remember going to the Head of School, who advised, 'Make sure you differentiate and tell people which hat you're wearing!' Wonderful advice!

Naszreen Gibson, Parent  
International School of Kuala Lumpur

Many international schools provide opportunities for parents to form support groups. At these meetings, parents may find that they are not alone in facing many of the complex issues that arise in the course of raising children.

#### 4. Developing Effective Communication Skills

Relying on our existing language skills usually gets us through most daily situations in life. However, in the context of our children's education, greater precision helps us to ensure that we convey our intentions accurately. The language we use influences how our meaning is received by the other party; well-constructed phrasing framed in positive presuppositions will enhance our message, whereas poor word choice may negatively affect how the listener understands us.

I think that when I have been able to communicate effectively with a teacher, it has greatly assisted my child in his/her learning. E-mail has been a vital part of life since my children joined this school. I have also found that when able to meet face-to-face with a teacher, this has been productive. Regular meetings and parent conferences with the teachers have been an integral part of our children's education.

Philippa Morrison, Parent Alumna  
International School of Kuala Lumpur



What follows are a few suggestions on approaching the development of effective communication skills:

**Seek to understand before being understood.** For example, if teachers use unfamiliar jargon when describing your student or his behavior, ask for explanations. Paraphrase to make sure you understand what was said. Seek clarification on anything that seems vague or ambiguous.

**Develop skills in framing probing, mediational questions.** Questions that are open-ended help to deepen thinking, rather than questions that can be answered with a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’. For example, a teacher will react far more positively to the question, “Help me to understand, what instructional strategies did you use in this unit?” rather than, “Did you use any instructional strategies?” When a complex issue is being discussed, such questions help all parties to examine the facts more closely.

**Be precise in language use.** Be conscious that your use of metaphors may be very cultural, and not easily understood by others of a different nationality. For example, during a heavy downpour of rain, North Americans might say, “It’s raining cats and dogs.” Individuals from another language group may not be familiar with the metaphor and try to understand it literally. If you are concerned about whether you are clear in communicating an issue, rehearse it first with a friend. This may also help to boost self-confidence in speaking about difficult subjects. At the same time, be self-conscious that the language you use does not cast blame or belittle either your child or the school. In this same vein, avoid any hint of ridicule, humiliation or sarcasm. Using judgmental language serves the purpose of putting others on the defensive.

**When speaking to adults as well as children,** use encouragement as opposed to criticism. Focus on progress and achievement as opposed to deficits.

**Disagreements will arise from time to time.** Develop positive confrontational skills so that you can discuss the issues without being hijacked by the accompanying emotions. Please see the next section on developing conflict management skills.

**Before each meeting**, identify a goal and select the appropriate language. Rehearse, if necessary. Brooks & Goldstein (2001) advise us to ask ourselves two questions before meeting with teachers: “What do I hope to accomplish in this meeting?” and “How can we say things so that our child’s teacher will be most responsive to listening to our message and working closely with us?” The first question prompts us to identify a goal, and the second to select the appropriate language and rehearse it before going in.

Garmston & Wellman (1999) have identified seven ‘norms of collaboration’ a toolkit that is useful as we develop effective communication and conflict management skills:

- 1. Pausing** – providing time before answering or asking a question allows ‘think’ time that supports discussion and dialogue between parties. The message of the pause is that we are thinking together. Neither one of us needs to have the ‘answer’ before the conference.
- 2. Paraphrasing** – a paraphrase conveys to the other party that you have listened and understood what was said. Paraphrasing isn’t the same as simple repetition – it is taking the essence of what was said and rephrasing it for greater clarity. Paraphrasing is the heart of effective communication.
- 3. Probing** – asking a follow-up question indicates sustained interest in the dialogue and helps to sharpen one’s own and other’s thinking.
- 4. Putting ideas on the table** – this is everyone’s responsibility. Sometimes, individuals are shy to say, “Here is an idea . . .” or, “As I was thinking of . . .” Participation and contribution by all members of a group provides rich ideas for dialogue.
- 5. Paying attention to self and others** – Not only what we say, but

also how we say it is important for us to pay attention to – we want to make sure that the message doesn't get lost in the delivery! We must also attend to how we and others respond to what is being said.

**6. Presuming Positive Intentions** – When we assume that others in the group have positive intentions, we promote a healthy climate in which to dialogue. It prevents us from accidentally putting down other members of the group through the use of sarcasm. Presuming positive intentions is the foundation of trust and is critical in parent/teacher relationships.

**7. Pursuing a balance between advocacy and inquiry** – We recognize that parents and teachers may arrive at a meeting with their own points of view. Pursuing a balance between advocacy and inquiry means inquiring and exploring other perspectives before we advocate for our own. The purpose of inquiry is to gain greater understanding. The purpose of advocacy is to make decisions. Both ways of talking are necessary, but they are different. Generally, inquiry should come before advocacy.

When we think ahead of time about what we want to say, and then rehearse it, there is a better chance that we will achieve the clarity that is needed to resolve difficult issues.

## 5. Conflict Management Skills

Many years ago, scientists developed a model of the brain known as the “Triune Brain” (MacLean, 1990). This model was used to describe the interaction between different evolutionary parts of the brain. For example, the area around the brainstem controls bodily systems to do with survival, including respiration, digestion and circulation. The second layer of the brain, called the limbic system, is generally seen to house the centers of emotion

as well as those organs responsible for committing experiences and information to memory. The third and final part of the brain to evolve is called the neocortex; it is the outermost layer of the brain and makes all thinking and processing of information possible, and allows us to plan ahead.

Normally, we think through problems and try to solve issues in our neocortex. However, when we feel under threat, or when we are angry, quite often the emotional part of our brain takes over, and we react in ways that we might not in our more rational moments. Knowing what makes us upset or angry and knowing how we behave in tense situations helps us respond more thoughtfully when faced with what we might consider to be hostile. We are then more likely to manage conflict, rather than become embroiled in it.

*Anyone can become angry - that is easy, but to be angry with the right person at the right time, and for the right purpose and in the right way - that is not within everyone's power and that is not easy.*

*Aristotle*

This is not to say that all conflict is bad. In fact, conflict can be useful in helping us grow. Garmston and Wellman (1999) make an important distinction between conflict that is affective and conflict that is cognitive. Affective conflict is personal and engages the emotions, and can often descend into destructive, personalized attacks on the other party. It focuses our energy away from the real issues at hand. Cognitive conflict, on the other hand, is conflict about ideas, values and approaches, and is characterized by positive energy. This is healthy conflict that helps us to move forward. As we engage in conflict, we need to focus on issues rather than on personal emotional reactions. We need to keep the conflict in the cognitive domain.

This takes practice and rehearsal. Here are some guidelines when thinking about conflict:

**Presume positive intentions:** When we go into a conflict situation believing that the other party also has our child's best interest in mind,

and believing also that the other party has made the best decisions s/he could with the information at hand, it helps us to see each situation in a more generous light.

Whatever the issue and whether or not we agreed on a course of action, the primary focus in our discussions was my child's welfare and success. I felt there was no other agenda. I felt listened to. The teachers realized that we come from a different educational culture and explained things clearly . . . I cannot stress it enough, it worked because both parties (we and the teachers) just wanted for my daughter to be successful. Because I had trust and confidence in them and their relationship with my daughter, my husband and I could let the teachers get on with their work.

You don't have to agree with every proposal your child's teacher makes. What makes a difference is you know that things are suggested with good intent, that the success of your child is the prime focus.

Claire Dickson, Parent  
International School of Prague

**Listen with empathy** and paraphrase what you heard in order to be sure that you have understood. Incidentally, paraphrasing also helps the other party to recognize that you have heard what s/he has to say.

**Gather information.** Make sure you have all the details.

**Address the situation** with the individual with whom the problem arose – if it is your child's class teacher, address the teacher first. Always try to address issues at the lowest possible level.

**Frame questions** as opposed to accusations: "Please explain how this happened" is a much more open question stem than asking, "Why did you do that?"

**Attempt to separate issues from emotions** – Try to understand what is at the core of the issue and separate your own emotional response from it. This will allow you to see the situation more clearly.

**Avoid power struggles** – You can be assertive without being combative. Definitely avoid blaming the teacher, the school, or your own child (or for that matter, yourself). Blame extenuates and exacerbates problems.

**Focus on problem solving** and look for win-win situations where both parties can feel positively about the outcome of the problem

## 6. Parent Organization, Planning, & Follow-Through

We address this section of practical suggestions for parents in three parts: before arrival in your new country posting; once your child has been admitted to the international school, and on returning “home” to your country of origin.

Parents sometimes feel that applying to a new school can wait until arrival in the new location, but in our experience we have found this to be unwise. Moving to another country is one of the most stressful activities we can experience, and being organized ahead of time helps the process immensely. Parents and students who prepare for school admission in advance of arrival have a much easier time settling into their new environment and are less likely to be faced with unwelcome surprises, such as delayed admission due to incomplete documentation. The admissions process can be studied ahead of time, and documents gathered and organized so that the application for admission can be activated. International schools are increasingly requiring receipt of all documentation (e.g. three years of school records and other supporting documents) to begin the admissions process.

If your child has special needs, we cannot sufficiently underscore the importance of ensuring that psycho-educational evaluations and reports are current, that is, valid within three years. If the international school your

child is applying to is selective, you will need to find out ahead of time what the admissions requirements are and whether your child can meet those requirements.

### **a. Before Admission to the New School: Parent/Student Entry Plan**

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Sharing information about the new school helps your child to feel included in the decision-making process, empowering your child, knowing that s/he is being consulted, whatever their age.

Naszreen Gibson, Parent  
International School of Kuala Lumpur

**Find out about the school in your intended location:** does it have a support program? What special services are offered? What populations are served? Most international schools have websites from which admissions information and application forms are easily available.

Although this is not always the case, in some locations, more than one international school is available. In such cases, parents may wish to consider which school to choose, in relation to the following criteria:

**Philosophical approach and school mission** – inquiring about the vision of the school will facilitate your decision-making, as the school should ideally match your vision of what is best practice in education and the approach/learning environment in which you want your child educated

**Suitability for your child**, whether or not the school has appropriate facilities to meet your child's needs

**Curricular orientation and program**, including extra-curricular offerings

**Accreditation**

**Admissions requirements**

**Cost**

**Student population and mix of nationalities**

**Qualifications of faculty**

**Qualifications which your child may attain** by the end of his/her school experience, including high school diploma, AP and/or IB examinations, IGCSEs, etc.

Being well-informed allows parents to be more realistic about what the school can provide, to be more effectively proactive and anticipate ways in which to contribute and smooth out any difficulties; e.g. transitioning from one grade to another, or from Elementary School to Middle School.

Parent Alumna,  
International School of Kuala Lumpur

**Make contact with the new school before you arrive.** When you send a letter of inquiry to the school, ask who the contact person is for the specific section of the school (Elementary, Middle or High School) to which your child is applying. That person will be able to answer any specific questions that you may have about the academic program and extra-curricular offerings. Sharing this kind of information with your child ahead of time will allow your child to anticipate how s/he might be able to fit into the new school.

**Gather information about your child and the school** and community and organize it in a way that is easily accessible. Find out where in the city most students live. Frequently, international schools are community centers, and especially in adolescence, students will want easy access to the school in order to participate in after-school and extra-curricular activities. For younger children, a long bus or car ride makes for an unnecessarily long day and may prevent them from participating in after-school activities.

**Bring school records to the new school.** Copies of any required documentation should be sent to the school electronically ahead of time, and originals hand-carried. Especially if you are traveling from a country in which documents are difficult to obtain, hand-carrying originals when you travel should be placed high on the priority list.

**Along with school records,** ensure that psycho-educational evaluations are up-to-date.



**Ensure that any required medications can be available**

**locally.** If medications are not readily available in the location you are moving to, you will need to make provision to carry with you enough supplies to last until the next time you leave the country.

**Develop an entry plan with your child.** Review your child's strengths. How might these strengths be used in settling into the new environment? Into the new school? How might s/he make friends? What activities will s/he join? Having a plan before arriving in the new location will help your child feel more in control of his/her new life.

**b. After Admission**

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For many students, once admitted, the excitement of meeting new friends and teachers takes over and they settle in easily. However, some children can find the first few months in a new school to be quite difficult. Previous research suggests that it may take up to six months for children to adjust to their new surroundings. Keeping a close watch on your child will let you know how s/he is settling in once the euphoria of the new adventure wears off.

If your child has special needs, this settling in period may be especially important to observe. Your own contact with the school may need to be more frequent than for children without special needs.

Even if your child has been at the school for some time, here are some practical suggestions to support your child:

**Ask the school to identify teachers** whose instructional styles match your child's learning styles. Although it is not possible in every school, schools that are large enough may support a number of classes at different grades. There may be a teacher who teaches in a way that is more likely to help your child learn.

*Charlie had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder in first grade. Over the years, his mother Julie recognized a pattern that emerged about Charlie's learning. Certain supports had to be in place for Charlie to succeed in school. For example, he needed to be seated close to the teacher so that she could cue him with a nonverbal signal when it was important to pay attention. Charlie also needed his homework diary to be checked before leaving class each day. At home, Julie also supervised the packing of Charlie's school bag each evening before he went to bed, making sure that the homework he had struggled to complete made it to class the next day. If and when problems came up, Julie asked specifically that she be notified immediately so that she could be part of the problem-solving process.*

*Julie compiled a list of intervention strategies that Charlie needed to succeed in school and at the beginning of each year, would visit the new class teacher to explain about Charlie's attention problems and give the teacher the list of strategies that had helped Charlie succeed in previous years. Teachers were grateful that such a list was ready for them to use at the start of the year!*

*Julie was determined that Charlie would succeed in school, and she did everything she could to support him.*

**Share your child's interests and strengths** with his teachers.

When there are specific challenges, share those, too. Develop a list or inventory of previously used accommodations and strategies to give to your child's next teacher – this is much more efficient than having to reinvent the wheel each time your child starts a new grade.

**Follow-through on your obligations** – provide structured space and time for homework, and check your child's homework as needed.

If a tutor is required, you may be able to get a list from the counseling office.

With each new school year, I made myself available to my son's teachers with an open offer to help in ways they had identified that help was needed. Eventually, instead of waiting for me to come to the classroom to seek him/her out, the teacher would seek my input and involvement fairly regularly. I gained their trust and respect by always carrying through when I committed to do something for them.

Carol Tegenfeldt, Parent  
International School of Yangon

**Seek other forms of support for your child** (e.g. extra-curricular activities, Kumon math, scouting, sports). Opportunities for other activities will help your child develop interests, passions and strengths.

**If your child has special needs**, here are further suggestions.

- Make frequent appointments (every 4 – 6 weeks) to check on your child's progress and develop new ideas and strategies for developing student strengths.

As the parents of a special needs child, it is important to meet all the teachers, special needs teachers and counselors who are working with your child. At first it can be overwhelming, yet it is very rewarding as you gain a more intimate understanding of your child's life at school and grasp the learning difficulties your child demonstrates in the classroom. This allowed us to become more effective listeners when our child shared her daily experiences at school.

Parent Alumna,  
International School of Kuala Lumpur

- Follow-through on IEP checks, adaptations, accommodations – ask for additional help and discuss any current challenges that your child may have.
- Request testing if you think your child would benefit from it. The results may provide useful information for teachers.
- Establish mutually agreed upon goals for your child – determine these between parent, student & teacher.
- Take notes during parent conferences.
- When interventions are going to be implemented, ask how the effectiveness is going to be assessed, and what time frame will be used.
- Schedule next appointments.

Whenever you ask for a meeting with a teacher, inform the teacher in advance of the purpose of the meeting so that s/he can be more prepared.

Parent Alumna,  
International School of Kuala Lumpur

- Parent follow-through is a key to school/home partnership and student success.

### **c. Before Returning “Home”**

When individuals have lived abroad for many years as expatriates, the prospect of “going home” or returning to one’s country of origin can be as anxiety producing as the first overseas assignment. Among many concerns is “Will my child fit back into the school system at home?” Parents worry that having taken their children abroad, their return home may present its own difficulties.

Children who spend time growing up abroad are often referred to as “Third Culture Kids” (TCKs) or Global Nomads. They live outside the culture of their parents as well as outside the host country culture, hence the descriptor “Third Culture”. There is a significant body of research surrounding TCKs, and while it is focused on American children returning to the United States, many of the conclusions also correspond for non-American TCKs. We would refer you to the page of the U.S. Department of State website that focuses on Third Culture Kids: <http://www.state.gov/m/dghr/flo/c21995.htm>

So, the answer to the question “Will my child fit back into the school system at home?” is a complex one that encompasses a child’s social, emotional and cultural acclimatization, as well as his/her curricular and academic adjustment at school. The age of the child also determines the focus of parental concerns. For example, parents of elementary age children are often concerned about the curricular match between the international school and the school back home; whereas parents of Middle School students may be more concerned about how to help their child make social adjustments when returning home. Many of the suggestions in the earlier section, “*Before Admission to a New School*” will work well for parents preparing their children to return to a country of origin that may not be as familiar as their present setting. In addition, many international schools have transition programs that prepare children for their departure.

Many parents returning to their country of origin have noted that television advertisements have been a source of important information for their children's cultural adjustment: How do our contemporaries dress? What music do they listen to? What television shows are they watching? All of the answers to these questions – and others – provide social material for children as they adjust to their new surroundings.

For parents of college-age students who return “home,” perhaps for the first time to attend university, the concerns may be different. There are the logistical issues of day-to-day living (“Will my child be able to manage a bank account, shop for groceries and organize laundry as well as study?”) as well as settling into the cultural milieu of university life (“What does it mean to be ‘Dutch’/‘American’/‘Malaysian’/ or ‘English’? “What support networks will be available to my child if things don’t go well?”). International school graduates often comment on how living overseas has allowed them to develop a global perspective. This international outlook can make integrating back into more ‘provincial’ social groupings challenging.

Although not always possible, if parents can accompany their child to the university for that first orientation meeting, to help their child settle into the dormitory, this serves to assuage the fears and concerns of both parent as well as child. Being able to envision your child's surroundings at university, meeting some of the key personnel there, will be helpful as you communicate with your child across a distance.

For many international school students, “home” has ceased to be simply a geographic location – a piece of real estate. For these young people, “home” has become a much more sophisticated and meaningful concept. Home is family, friends, and loving relationships wherever they may take place.

## 7. Developing a Future Vision

‘School’ doesn’t last forever, and eventually, all children do grow up. What would success for your child look like? What are some realistic and meaningful goals? Identifying and seeking clarity about these goals – which will continue to change as our children grow up – helps us to plan how to achieve them.

**Develop a long term vision for your child** – start with the end in mind. Think about the ‘whole child’, not just academic development. For example, if your child lacks in self-confidence, how might we develop a healthy, appropriate self-confidence? Independence?

**Plan how to get there** – develop the steps to achieve the vision, and how you might assess whether the goal has been achieved.

Another teacher who had a crucial influence in my development as a dyslexic learner which echoed outside of the walls of school education is Mr. Carey, my high school history teacher. It was my 10th grade year. He was explaining to the class the importance of knowing how to organize an essay and learn to support an argument. He told us that in whatever job we might be or situation that might come we would need writing skills to explain ourselves in life. All I could think of that day while he was talking was, if I become a garbage collector, I don’t think I would need to write. I feared the idea of writing; it would just make me go into a panic. Over the three years that I had Mr. Carey as a teacher, he helped me understand the key values to know how to build a solid outline and then turn it into a written essay. Sitting down with me, he showed me how to make points in an outline, turn these key points into sentences and then paragraphs. Learning these skills allowed the fear to slowly fade away. I left high school feeling strong about my abilities to write a paper. I needed support but I knew I could write whatever I needed to write. This was a high turning point, for at university with these skills I grew even more as a writer. I know that after all the editing from someone for grammar and spelling, the rest is all my own. I am confident that I know how to express myself strongly in writing even though it is still my extreme weakness.

2003 Alumna,  
International School of Kuala Lumpur

## Parent Resources

<http://www.chadd.org/>

Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

<http://www.ldanatl.org/>

Learning Disabilities Association of America

<http://www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger/#education>

Asperger's Site

[http://www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger/karen\\_williams\\_guidelines.html](http://www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger/karen_williams_guidelines.html)

Guidelines for teachers

<http://www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger/geneva3.html>

Definition of Asperger's

[http://www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger/karen\\_williams\\_guidelines.html](http://www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger/karen_williams_guidelines.html)

University of Delaware site on Asperger's

<http://childparenting.about.com/cs/learningproblems/a/wisciii.htm>

This is a good site to help parents understand testing

A Newsweek article on Autism

<http://www.newsweek.com/id/85572>

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## **About The Authors**

*William Powell and Ochan Kusuma-Powell* have served as international school educators in the United States, Saudi Arabia, Tanzania, Indonesia, and most recently in Malaysia, where Bill was Head of School and Ochan taught Grade 8 Humanities. They have co-authored *Count Me In! Developing Inclusive International Schools* (2000) and *Making the Difference: Differentiation in International Schools* (2007) and frequently contribute educational articles for publication. Bill and Ochan are currently working on a project to support differentiated instruction in international schools, supported by a grant from the US Department of State. They are focusing their attention on teacher professional development, parent advocacy, school leadership and governance training and serve as consultants for Education Across Frontiers ([powell@eduxfrontiers.org](mailto:powell@eduxfrontiers.org)).

