

Standing Up for Her Son's Education

By: Martine A. Thomas, Program Manager



Imagine that your son is living with autism, a serious neurological disorder requiring focused learning techniques that can be unique to each child. Now, imagine that you cannot advocate for his educational rights because you lack the English language skills to communicate his learning needs to his teachers.

Shiei Kuida, a Japan native who has been living in the United State since 1993, did not imagine this story. She lived it.

“Chris is a visual learner,” the 48-year old mother of two said of her 10-year-old son. He reads and communicates with pictures. He did some visual activities at school, but he needed more.” During teacher/parent meetings, Shiei would listen as her son’s teachers and a behavioral therapist discussed her son’s performance, but she could not participate in the conversation, nor could she advocate for her son’s learning needs because she did not speak English. She became frustrated and felt powerless.

“I needed to learn how to speak English so I could stand up for my son,” Shiei explained. “If I knew what activities they wanted Chris to do in class,” she added, “we could review the activities with pictures, and he wouldn’t have tantrums.”

Tired of being frustrated, Shiei called English At Large and was matched with volunteer tutor Meredith Clark. The first item they tackled was the psychological report.

“Meredith helped me read and understand the psychologist’s reports by picking out words that I didn’t know and talking about them,” said Shiei. “We wrote what I wanted to say in meetings, and she taught me how to write effective emails requesting information or giving directions. Because I was able to express myself in English there were no miscommunications.”

“I admire Shiei’s persistence with dealing with her son’s teachers,” said Meredith, who has been an educator for over 20 years. “The situation was hard for her, but she never gave up. She was motivated to learn for her son.”

Due to her one-to-one tutoring sessions, Shiei is now able to communicate daily with her son’s teachers through emails and is confident when she speaks English during parent/teacher meetings.

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Shiei is not only satisfied with her new skills, but she is also content with her son’s new attitude.

“Before I could speak English, Chris would come home, throw himself on the floor, cry, and tell me he wanted a new school. Now that I can communicate his needs to his teachers, he comes home happy,” she said with smile.