

CHARTING the life course



# Charting the Life Course

7 Steps to becoming a confident advocate for your child at school

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## Life Course Framework

-  Life is a journey.  
*Our lives are not static, they change every day.*
-  It's all about vision.  
*Anything is possible, with the right vision.*
-  Everything is connected.  
*What you do today affects your life in the future.*
-  Our overall compass is "quality of life"

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## Which life stages are we talking about?

Today's topic brings us to the intersection of.

- Daily Life +
- Early Childhood
- School Age
- Transition



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# 7 Steps to becoming a confident advocate for your child at school

Danielle Underwood

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## So this is our family

Mom of 3 boys, ages 9, 11 and 14.



The fellas

- My oldest, Jake,
- was diagnosed with his disability during early childhood,
  - received services through First Steps,
  - attended developmental preschool, and
  - continued through our public school system.

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## More about US...



Jake

We've lived in two states, and experienced working with two school districts in planning 11 years of special education services for him.

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A few years ago...

- Behavioral issues related to Jake's disability were causing growing tension between school and home.
- We were at a crossroads, and needed a change in how issues were being handled.
- We went to a string of meetings at school, each with 7-10 representatives of the district with fancy titles and educational degrees.
- The "experts" had all the "answers."
- I felt powerless.

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The truth was...

- As the parent, I needed to be heard.
- I had a body of knowledge that none of them possessed.

I knew Jake inside and out, backwards and forwards.

- And I had a motivation to advocate for his best interest that no one else had.

He was more precious than life itself to me.



But to be heard, I needed confidence.

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I needed a title, too.

Danielle Underwood, CEO  
Jake, Inc.

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Why, "CEO"?

Job Duties

(now it's your turn to think, "Could this be me?")

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Job duties of the CEO

Planning

You set long-term direction for the "organization," including developing future leadership to become the next CEO with chief decision-making power.

- Ideally your child, him or herself, will become their own CEO.
- Other possibilities include siblings or another dedicated family member.

The process of handing the reigns over is best done as a gradual process, with the new CEO taking greater and greater responsibility along the way.

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Job duties of the "CEO"

Management

- Set the organization's (in this case, your family's) values, encourage good efforts and reward successes, big and small.
- Find the right people to help make the long-term vision you're planning for become reality.
- Prudently manage the organization's resources of time and money

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Job duties of the CEO

Marketing & PR

- Serve as the spokesperson for the organization.
- Present the organization with a strong, positive image – points out strengths and successes.
- Advocate for the organization, its needs and goals.
- Act as a liaison between the organization and the community, building relationships where they will help the organization to reach its goals.

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Job duties of the CEO

Program Effectiveness

- Oversees the design, delivery and quality of programs and services.
- Keeps up with new information that will help the organization succeed.

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Me, "CEO"?

Overwhelmed?

Don't be.

Chances are, you're already doing most of these things.

The question is: **how can you do it better?**

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Me, "CEO"?

Own it.

You are the CEO.

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The 7 Steps to Owning It

#1) Learn your stuff.

Your first and continuing mission:

- Your child's strengths and weaknesses
- Your child's disability
- Your rights under special education law
- Ideas for supports and accommodations that may help your child

(resources at the end of this webinar)

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The 7 Steps to Owning It

Why?

Those with knowledge earn respect. It gives you a quiet power.

How?

- Read – focus your valuable time and energy on reputable sources.
- Other families, especially those within your own school and district.
- Missouri Family to Family can help you find both of these. We're here to help!

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The 7 Steps

#2) Dress the part.

The biggest hurdle for many parents working on a school team is gaining the respect they deserve.

At a school meeting, DON'T:



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The 7 Steps

DO:

Remember your role as CEO.

Dress like you're going to a business meeting.  
(but not necessarily in a suit and tie or a dress and heels)

Rule of thumb:

Look at how your school's principal dresses and reflect him or her in what you choose to wear.

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The 7 Steps

Dressing like the CEO you are, will:

- change the way you feel about yourself;
- communicate, without saying a word, the level of significance you personally give to your child's educational planning; and
- show the level of professionalism you expect from the rest of the team.

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The 7 Steps

#3) Give respect.

The professionals working at your child's school worked hard to earn the qualifications to do the job they're doing. They deserve respect.

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The 7 Steps

Think of these professionals similar to how you think about your doctor:

- Smart
- Educated
- Knows more than you do about some subjects

But there are a lot of things he or she doesn't know, too. For example, you may have a condition the doctor is less familiar with, maybe you know about new cutting edge research the doctor hasn't read yet.

Also, only you know how you feel on the inside. Your ability to give information about your symptoms is vital to the doctor being able to give a correct diagnosis and plan for treatment. You must work as a team to reach better health.

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The 7 Steps

Also, special education can be a draining job, which may put a lot of demands on their time and energy.

But they will make your child's education a priority if you help them.

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The 7 Steps

#4) Give praise.



- Notice when they do something good for your child. Then thank them - spoken, written, or emailed.
- Every now and then, show appreciation:
  - On special days and holidays
  - Treats and small gifts, bought or homemade

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The 7 Steps

#5) Build alliances.

- Positive relationships built outside of team meetings are grease for the wheels in any sticky situation.
- To know the territory, spend time there!
- The more involved you are at your child's school, the more you learn how to navigate the landscape of relationships between the principal, teachers, support staff and parents.
- Help out when and where the school needs it to be seen as a valuable contributor.

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The 7 Steps

#6) When it's time to meet, have a plan.

- The beauty of an agenda.
- Identify your top 2-3 critical issues.

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The 7 Steps

#7) Keep emotions in check.

- Emotions, once heated, tend to flow over to everyone else in a room.
- Negative emotional energy is the enemy of collaboration.
- Smart parents treat the team as a problem solving committee.

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The 7 Steps

Helpful hints

- Never go alone –
  - bring your best allies – a spouse, a friend or supporter with knowledge about special ed services and law, disability, and/or your child (e.g., case manager)
- Take notes
- State things positively
- Make sure you eat beforehand and get adequate rest – treat each team meeting as important

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The 7 Steps

You are CEO of your child's life (for now), but not ruler of the IEP team. Remember, the team should be a gathering of equals.

You are important.  
 They are important.  
 But most of all, your child is important.

Always steer the conversation back to what is best for your child in the context of his or her whole life, present and future!

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Conclusion

- Hopefully this presentation has given you:
  - A better understanding of your own importance, responsibilities and role as CEO of YourChild, Inc.
  - Insight into how to foster positive working relationships with members of your school team (and other important people in your child's life)
  - A roadmap to greater confidence!

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You don't have to look like this to be CEO...



Conclusion

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You might look more like this...



Conclusion

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### Conclusion

Be proud of who you are as the most important advocate for your child...

and

decide today which steps you can take to become a more powerful and effective CEO tomorrow!

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### Resources

- MPACT (ptiMpact.org)  
Missouri's Parent & Training Information Center



- Wrightslaw.com  
Nationally trusted special education resource



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### Charting the Life Course

A Guide for Individuals, Families, and Professionals



#### Charting the Life Course: A Guide for Individuals, Families, and Professionals

Throughout our lives, we face questions and search for answers that will help us on our journey to a full and meaningful life. This is true for everyone, especially when you or someone you care about experiences a disability or special healthcare need.

Charting the Life Course is a tool to assist you in creating a vision for the future. It is designed to help you think about the questions to ask as well as the choices and options to consider as you "plot a course" to a full and meaningful life. It is intended to be a starting point no matter where you are in your life journey.

We hope the life course approach helps you realize that even when your child is very young and as far as the eyes and

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Missouri's Parent & Training Information Center  
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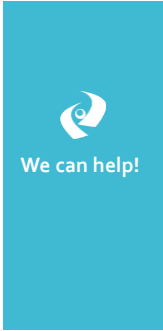
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**Call us when you**

- receive a diagnosis or medical information you don't understand
- have a burning question and aren't sure where to start looking for answers
- want to think through options for supports, services, or funding that fit your family
- you feel like nobody understands what you are going through
- when you feel overwhelmed or stressed out and need to vent

We can help! We are only a phone call, email, or click away!

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Please take the time to fill out your evaluation of this webinar and tell us what you thought!

[surveymonkey.com/s/ffzfceo](http://surveymonkey.com/s/ffzfceo)

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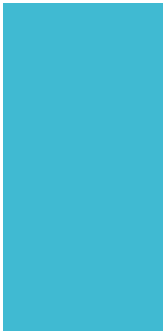
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## Special Thanks

MODHSS Special Health Care Needs  
Missouri Developmental Disabilities Council  
DMH Regional Offices & Family Support  
Coordinators

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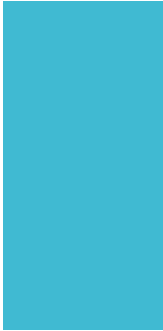
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**For more information**

Contact

Missouri Family to Family

800-444-0821

[mofamilytofamily.org](http://mofamilytofamily.org)



UMKC-Institute for Human Development

[www.ihd.umkc.edu](http://www.ihd.umkc.edu)

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