

ARISE Podcast 092 Education Advocacy

Host: Tania Anderson, ARISE CEO

Guest: Courtney Bennett, Fourth Grade Teacher, Mom with child in Education Advocacy program.

Time: 0:06

Tania Anderson

Welcome to the ARISE podcast. I'm Tania Anderson, CEO at ARISE, and it's my pleasure to have with me today. Courtney Bennett, who is a fourth-grade teacher and also the mom of two kids with disabilities, and we're going to talk about your experience. Welcome Courtney.

Time: 0:24

Courtney Bennett

Time: 0:24

Hi. Nice to meet you.

Time: 0:25

Tania Anderson

Time: 0:25

So, you and I, we talked chatted a little bit before we started this. We're both moms of kids with disabilities, and my daughter's a bit older than your kids, but it's a journey, so we're just going to talk about that journey a little bit. Can you tell me a little bit about your kids?

Time: 0:43

Courtney Bennett

Time: 0:43

Yeah, absolutely. So, I have two kiddos at home. One is six years old, and he is entering first grade this year. And my daughter is three years old, and she is going to be entering preschool this year. Both of them are wonderful, full of energy and life and enjoy learning and playing and just being kids. But you know, along the way, I noticed being a teacher that I noticed some delays right off the bat, and so I started out with contacting early intervention for them to get them the supports that they needed, specifically in speech and occupational therapy. So they've both received support through earlier intervention, and that has carried over into the school age.

Tania Anderson

Time: 1:25

Great. And before we talked too much about the whole transition to school, I was wondering, you have a specific background as a teacher that, as you said, helped you identify the delays. Did you have any difficulty in terms of interacting with either their early intervention system or your pediatrician, in terms of them also recognizing the need for some support?

Courtney Bennett

Time: 1:51

Yeah, a little bit. So, I've been teaching for 14 years, and you know, I've been in many situations where I've been either in a co-taught classroom, in the inclusive setting, whether it be co-teaching or consult. And so, I just, and I'm an elementary teacher, so I, you know, noticed some of these things right off the bat with my kids. And when speaking with the pediatrician, they didn't really have concerns. They're like, oh no, that, you know, he or she has time. I'm not worried yet, but I was worried, and so I just made those phone calls myself to early intervention and said, you know, I would love to have an evaluation done. And you know, both times with both of my children, when early intervention has come into the home to do the evaluation, they also noticed those delays and said, we're going to get services started.

Tania Anderson

Time: 2:38

And that story is very interesting. I had a very similar experience with my daughter, who is now 19. So, this was a while ago. And I the reason I wanted to make sure we talked about this is I think it's so important for parents to really trust their gut. When

you know your kid better than anyone, and just trust your gut. If you think something is off, ask the question, and if you don't get the answer, you think is really thorough, ask the question again and advocate.

Courtney Bennett

Time: 3:08

Absolutely. I mean, I, you know, my sister has children that are right around the same ages as my kids, and with one of her children, she's like, you know, I really think that they need speech therapy. And I was like, I think so too, you know. And I think you need to go through early intervention. And again, it was that situation where the pediatrician wasn't really concerned, and she pushed and pushed, and she got no the first time around, and then the second time she did get services. So, I agree with you. I think that as parents, you know your own children. You know them best, more than anybody else, and so when you have those concerns that you have to voice them, we have to be the advocates for them, because they can't advocate for themselves at that young of an age.

Tania Anderson

Time: 3:50

And to your point about being a self-advocate, I agree. When they're three and six, it's young. However, they're going to watch you model what advocacy looks like and what collaboration looks like, because they're going to mature into that and become their own advocates, right?

Courtney Bennett

Time: 4:09

Absolutely.

Time: 4:10

Tania Anderson

Time: 4:11

So given your experience as a classroom teacher, how do you think that informs how you how you parent your children with disabilities?

Courtney Bennett

Time: 4:22

It's interesting, you know, to have the teacher hat and then have the parent hat. As a teacher, I've really pushed to advocate for all of my students in my classroom. And over the years, you know, have learned, you know, that students are really unique and individuals, and to focus on their individual needs. And in doing so as a parent, right away, you know, I look at my own children and say, Okay, what do they need? And that's kind of the question that I always ask whether I'm in the teaching position or the parent position, like, What Does my child need in this moment? How can I support them? And so, teaching has really helped me to recognize that I need to pay close attention to what my children need, because sometimes they can't verbalize it or tell you what they need in that moment. So, I use that background in teaching and just years of experience to help prepare me as a parent.

Tania Anderson

Time: 5:16

And I think you said something in that last answer about as a gen-ed teacher, and because you're a general education teacher, you pay close attention to all your students and their strengths and weaknesses and that's something that's true of all kids and all people. We all have strengths and weaknesses, and it's kind of society that says, Okay, you're on this line, you have a disability, you're on this other line, you don't.

Courtney Bennett

Time: 5:41

Right, and it is. It's really challenging. You know, with an education, I they, you know that quantitative data is what is so important to, you know, the state, if you will. They, they look at numbers. And sometimes a child is more than just a number. It's not always reflective in a test score what their needs might be. And so, I find sometimes when students get to fourth grade, the students that are really struggling and maybe below academically, it could be, you know, a true learning disability. There could be an outside piece that's impacting them, and you just have to really get to know your students and see like, you know, what is causing them to struggle or be challenged in a certain area, and how can you support them. Sometimes that leads to a child, even in fourth grade, needing an IEP or a 504 and sometimes it's just certain strategies that you need to use, and, you know, accommodations to make in the classroom the general ed setting, that will help support them moving forward. So yeah, I do think it's really important just to really look at the individual child and what they specifically need, and not as a whole.

Tania Anderson

Time: 6:43

And an IEP is an individualized education plan. So that's a specific special education plan that details what a child needs for supports in the classroom.

Courtney Bennett

Time: 6:53

Right. So the IEP is typically given to a child who has a learning disability, and so their education is going to be impacted academically without that plan, whereas the 504 that I mentioned is more if a student is having could still have a disability, but maybe not have the academic needs, it's just that they need certain accommodations and modifications made in their daily educational routine in order to make sure they are successful academically, so they can still be successful and on grade level if they have those certain accommodations made.

Tania Anderson

Time: 7:27

Right. And I'm trying to think of an example of someone with a 504 plan. It might be a health condition. Maybe there's a child who has type one diabetes and needs frequent breaks for snacks or whatever, so that they can stay on point.

Courtney Bennett

Time: 7:41

Right. Absolutely. So they may be going to the nurse more frequently throughout the day, and if you're recognizing that and making sure that, you know, whatever is missed when they're leaving the classroom, they're able to get that information, then they can still, you know, reach the academic potential, even though they may have to miss, you know, more periods of the day or something.

Tania Anderson

Time: 7:58

So, as I think we covered, you're a general education teacher, and you've always taught in inclusive classroom settings. Is that right?

Courtney Bennett

Time: 8:07

It changes year to year. So some years I am in an inclusive setting, and some years I am not, and just a general ed classroom. But I have found that with education, we find that students have more and more needs each year. So even though I may not be in a co-teach classroom with a special education teacher, I am sometimes in a classroom with students who have, you know, a 504 plan, or who are ENL, which is English as their second language. Those kind of situations. So yes, I would say all around it is an inclusive setting.

Tania Anderson

Time: 8:40

And you know, here at ARISE, we're all about We're an independent living center. We're completely about including people in the community and in every way possible, and I'm interested in your experience as the general education teacher, about what you see as the inclusive classroom making your job more challenging. And I put that word in quotes because I don't mean it as any sort of negative way. But also that's piece of it, and also the piece of the benefits you see from kids with disabilities and so called typical kids learning side by side.

Courtney Bennett

Time: 9:18

Yeah, I think that inclusive settings are extremely important. And you know, all education classrooms, and I think that whether a student is typical or has a disability, they're going to coexist in society together as adults. And it's important for, you know, all of those different types of learners to be in one setting together, because that's just life. That's what's you know, how it's going to be when they're not in a classroom setting. And I think that you know, students really benefit from, you know, being with others that aren't the same as them. You know, they learned kindness and love and empathy and how to support each other and collaborate with each other and communicate with each other and that's a big part of my classroom too, is really building community for students. And doesn't matter what type of learning you are, everyone is welcome, and should, you know, be together in the classroom. So, I think that inclusive classrooms are incredibly important. I think that sometimes it's hard and it's challenging, because, like I said, all of these students have different needs.

Everyone needs something different at all points in the day, and it's just learning how to balance all of that in the classroom setting.

Tania Anderson

Time: 10:33

So how do you balance all of that? And I'm just taking the whole IEP, 504 labels out of this, because every kid is at a different place in their development, even when it's so called typical development. Like you said, they've got different challenges in their lives, different styles. How do you as a teacher in this room of what 30 people,

Courtney Bennett

Time: 10:57

24 this year,

Time: 10:57

Tania Anderson

Time: 10:57

24 okay, that I gave you a few more that needed in this classroom of 24 people. How do you how do you stay in tune with all of those juggling demands?

Time: 11:08

Courtney Bennett

Time: 11:09

Well, it's not the easiest thing. I mean, teachers definitely play a juggling act. They wear a lot of hats. You know, you're a mom, you're a teacher, you're a parent, you sometimes are a counselor. You're whatever that child needs in the moment. I think, you know, especially since we start school in a couple of weeks, I there's a lot of planning and preparation for it. So, you know, knowing as much as you can about the students coming in before they come in is important. So any student who has an IEP, a 504, some kind of plan, I typically am looking at that ahead of time to get to know them. But then you know that first month of school is really crucial to getting to know your students. So, it's not so much the academic drive and you know, focus, it's more building your community, setting procedures and routines in the classroom, getting to know those kids and doing it individually. So, I do a lot of community builder activities, a lot of writing, reflection, asking my students, what do you what do you want to me to know about you so that I can really get to know them and just really establishing the rapport with individual students. So having those one-on-one conversations, you know, learning about their hobbies, their interests, their families, to make them feel

comfortable in a part of my classroom, and then from there on, it's day to day, so you don't know what you're going to walk into each day. Some days are go really smoothly and some days are rough, and that's just part of teaching. But you know, my goal is to really, you know, after the first month of school for me, I could sit down with any parent and talk to them about their child and really know who their child is and what their needs are. So that's, that's a goal for myself that I set every year at the start of the year, and I, you know, feel comfortable saying that I feel pretty successful with that, especially by the end of the school year. I know the children in my class and their needs really well.

Tania Anderson

Time: 13:00

That's a really important investment that you're making. I appreciate you doing that, and I'd like to talk a little bit about the relationship between parents and teachers. And your son is going to be moving into first grade this year, so it's my opinion that any parent teacher relationship should be looked at as a partnership and a collaboration, and that's even more crucial when your child has a disability, because you've got just extra things to take care of. Sometimes the school district may not be as responsive as we want, as quickly as we want, so things can get emotional intense, if we're not careful, because these are our kids, we want the best for them. As you are navigating the system as a parent of children with disabilities, how do you navigate that system, knowing on the other side the challenges that teachers are dealing with every day.

Courtney Bennett

Time: 14:02

Yeah, it's interesting, because before having children, I just had the teacher perspective. I didn't really know. I mean, obviously parents would address concerns or, you know, things that were going on at home. But I didn't have that perspective, because I wasn't a parent yet, and I really saw more of the teacher side of things. And now having children of my own, it makes me even more aware of how important that parent teacher connection is. I think it starts with communication, and as a teacher, you know, taking that first step and opening your door up to parents and saying, I'm here. I you know, I'm here to advocate for your child, but I'm also here, you know, to listen, and if you have concerns, to share them with me. And I think that last year, I had such a successful school year with my son, because of his teachers. They were wonderful. And I any concerns that I had and I could bring to them, they would they were very responsive, and we work together to figure out what was going to be the best, you know, solution to whatever, maybe the challenge that I was facing with my son, and it just really helped to ease my anxieties as a parent knowing that he was in great hands at school. So I think that that parent teacher connection is critical. And if you don't have



it, it makes it a challenging year for the teacher or the parent, depending on you know, which side might be lacking with communication.

Tania Anderson

Time: 15:29

Right. And communication is a really broad term, so, and there's so many different ways to communicate. What are some of the concrete ways that you have found to be successful, either as a parent or as a teacher, to keep that communication going.

Courtney Bennett

Time: 15:45

Yeah, so right at the start of the year, actually, in about a week from now, after the kids get their you know, teacher placements, I send out a welcome letter which introduces myself to the families. I address the fourth graders coming in, saying how excited I am to meet them and learn about them. I tell them a little bit about myself, and give the parents some information that they need. And then as the year goes on, I typically am in contact weekly with parents, whether it be me just sending home information of, you know, this is the upcoming curriculum that we're covering, or, you know, pictures of their children, of activities they're doing. I typically communicate with parents. We we use the app Parent Square, but there are a lot of apps. There's parent square, there's remind. Some teachers just choose to do email, which works too. So I am always in communication with parents and offer up, and you know, right at the beginning of the year, curriculum night, saying I'm available. So if you need me. You can reach me by email or phone or through the app. So you know, throughout the year, some parents, I'm in constant communication. Sometimes it's daily, depending on that child and what they need. Other parents, you know, they're just getting my updates, but they're not always in touch with me. So it really does come down to the individual family, but just as a teacher, making yourself available to parents is important just because you're with their child all day and they're, you know, off at work or wherever, and they're not in that setting. So, the only way you can really, you know, let a family know how their child is doing is through that communication piece. So, I also offer a lot of opportunities for parents to come into the classroom to see what we're doing, whether it be for a holiday or, you know, a guest reader, things like that, or activities that we're doing. You know, in fourth grade, we make long houses and, you know, salt maps and things like that, and we invite parents in to help with those projects, so that they can be a part of their child's learning too. So having that throughout the year, you know, for parents to be able to access their child's education in another way besides a report card that's coming home, I think is really important.

Tania Anderson

Time: 17:49

Absolutely. And then on the flip side is the mom of a pretty young child, what communication works for you?

Courtney Bennett

Time: 17:57

So, this year, this past year, that they also use parent square in my son's district, so they pushed out a lot of information through there. But the teacher sent home in kindergarten a calendar, a monthly calendar, and it had all of those special dates on it. And for me, that helped so much, because, you know, when you're in the thick of it between work, and you know, your own children at home in the evening, it just helped to have that calendar. So that was something I really enjoyed that the teacher did for us this past year, is I just, I could just pick on the calendar, oh, tomorrow's, you know, they have to bring in this to school. And it was right there for me. So, I liked that form of communication that the teacher used.

Tania Anderson

Time: 18:33

Wonderful. And so, what advice would you give to a family with a child with a disability? Because sometimes I think this, the education system can be a little bit overwhelming. There's a lot of jargon. There's a lot of technical language there, especially if your child has a disability, a lot of extra test scores and evaluations that are very particular and hard to understand because you're not in it. What advice would you give to families trying to navigate that.

Courtney Bennett

Time: 19:08

So, you know, as a teacher, and having a lot of that background knowledge already, and going through the transition of my son going from early education into, you know, the school age level, I knew what the jargon was and wasn't getting where I needed to be with him, as far as the services that he needed to have. And I just, you know, reflect on the fact that I've been sitting in these meetings for 10 years, over 10 years as a teacher, and it's very intimidating to be honest as a parent, and now getting that parent perspective, okay, this is, this is a little nerve wracking when you go into these meetings. And if you don't have that background of you know what all that jargon means, it can be even more overwhelming for a parent. So that's where I actually

turned to ARISE, and used an advocate to come support me, and my support with the advocate was more to take my emotions out of it, because I was, you know,

Tania Anderson

Time: 20:05

It's your baby!

Time: 20:05

Courtney Bennett

Time: 20:06

It's my baby, and I knew what he needed, and I knew he wasn't going to get it unless I kept pushing. But it can become very overwhelming. So, I think for families who don't even have any of that knowledge of what do the test scores mean, and you know, what are they actually saying when they're sharing all of that information in a meeting? An advocate is so wonderful to have because they have all of that background knowledge that someone who is not in education would need to know in order to be able to best support their child. So, and I think sometimes educational advocacy is not always at the forefront, like, it's not like the districts are always saying, like, oh, well, you can go get yourself an advocate. And so, I think that the one thing I can say to families, if they're feeling that sense of being overwhelmed or, you know, lacking the knowledge that they need to really be the best advocate for their child, then educational advocacy is, you know, where they should turn to because it is a wonderful resource. It's free and it's available to our community to use, and I just don't know that it is used enough, not because people don't want to. It's just they might not know about it.

Tania Anderson

Time: 21:13

Well, thank you for that plug.

Time: 21:14

Courtney Bennett Yeah, no, it's not a plug. It's totally honest. I mean.

Time: 21:17

Tania Anderson

Time: 21:19

Testimonial then, I appreciate it.

Courtney Bennett

Time: 21:19

Yeah, and it's that here that was amazing for me so.

Tania Anderson

Time: 21:23

We do have a staff of education advocates that they're all fabulous, and yeah, they know the system, and like you said, they can look at things from a different perspective, because it's not their kid. And even when you know all the jargon and all of the systems when it's your kid, there's an emotional piece that makes it really hard. So ARISEinc.org. Is our website where people can connect with education advocacy, and I really appreciate you sharing your story about that. I'm glad I was successful.

Courtney Bennett

Time: 21:53

Yeah, I just felt like when I went into those meetings, they I mean, it went over many months, and it was just back and forth. And I felt like I kept saying and kept pushing for what my child needed, but it wasn't being heard. And, you know, when Beth came in and sat in the meeting, I was able to just sit back a little bit, and she kind of took the forefront and said the things that needed to be said without any emotion to it. You know, it was just very matter of fact. And, and that is, I think, you know, our teaming up, our partnership, is really what got my child the services that he needed.

Tania Anderson

Time: 22:26

I'm glad that was successful. And you know what we had talked about before, is that our advocates are very invested in making sure there's a partnership going forward, that we're all pulling in the same direction. I wish you the best within your school year, with your son's, school year. And please keep us in tune with how things are going. Thanks for your time today.

Courtney Bennett

Time: 22:50

Yeah, thank you for having me.

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