As a SENDCo the external agencies you interact with are wide ranging - it could be Educational Psychologists, Paediatricians, Charities, Social Workers – the possibilities are endless and, depending upon the other duties in your specific setting, varied. How do you interact with these organisations effectively? Well, here are my top tips to help you deal confidently with anything they throw at you.

1. Have all pupil and school information in one place.

Those referral forms – where do I start? You are lucky if you have managed to get through completing one without having a toilet break at least once! I found the secret to completing these quickly lies in your school data management system. At my school we use a computer programme that allows you to access pupil and parent details, attainment and progress data and attendance information all in one place.

Not ground-breaking I know, but believe me this has significantly reduced the time spent filling out forms compared to our old system, which required me to access a key to get into the key cupboard from where I could unlock the filing cabinet containing pupil records, then access our pupil data system to look up attainment and progress – you get my point? Also, if it is a form where you know that you are likely to make future referrals, complete the school details and your details and save – thus having a part pre-populated form for subsequent referrals.

1. Write supporting letters for parent/carers

Many external providers receive referrals from parents themselves, particularly medical professionals and it can be useful to show your support for your pupil and their family through writing a letter. I have experienced real success in speeding up the whole screening process for many pupils, particularly those displaying mental health needs, through an initial supporting letter to the family GP.

Indeed, some of the most powerful experiences I have had in my role as SENDCo are where I have attended paediatrician appointments with the pupil and their family – this shows a real sense of the ‘team of people’ working around the child collaboratively and has always resulted in quick positive outcomes for the children concerned.

1. Understand the constraints

The initial referral in to an external provider is, in effect, a ‘sifting’ process – those with the greatest need should be prioritised. However, services are hugely stretched. In my local area, waiting times for mental health support, speech and language therapy and paediatrician appointments to name but a few are long, very long. Remember, this isn’t that particular professional’s fault and that they are under huge constraints and pressure to meet targets.

Unfortunately, we as SENDCos are often the ‘sounding board’ for parents and it is easy to become frustrated ourselves with the process. Be persistent when pursuing referrals, ensure you have told the external agency what you as a school have already tried and persuade them as to why your particular case should be a priority.

1. What else can you do?

Another option is to become part of the decision-making process yourself – some external agencies welcome school based practitioners to sit on their panels and form part of the decision making or referral ‘sifting’ process. Now, this unfortunately does not entitle you to bypass the referral system, but it does mean that you know exactly how the process works and can put in place all you need to, ensuring a successful referral.

Building a rapport with the external providers can be beneficial – I have termly meetings with our local Educational Psychology team where we discuss referrals prior to submission. This is important as they can advise if a referral is appropriate and they know what work is coming their way, also they get to know you a little and you know who to speak to if you have concerns about the process. I always try to send through an agenda prior to these meetings detailing the pupils to discuss and their areas of need – they report that this is rare, but very useful in their planning and allocation for referrals, furthermore it keeps those professionals ‘onside’.

Some of these suggestions such as attending appointments or sending through agendas prior to meetings are, as with everything in a teacher’s day, time dependent and I appreciate that many SENDCos do not receive the non-teaching time required to fulfill the demands of the job, however hopefully these tips will help reduce the burden and stress that can sometimes ensue when you hear those words, “I think we need a referral …”

Other key top tips –

* Be persistent: If you don’t get a response, contact again and again.
* Keep any names and telephone numbers for future reference, I suggest a dedicated address book – if you speak to somebody, establish who it is you are speaking to and if possible obtain their direct telephone number (enabling you to bypass the switchboard operator or triage system the next time you call). It’s also helpful to find out the name of their boss and any admin staff. Update your book at least once a year.
* Ensure you provide as much detail as possible when making the initial referral; the more details you give, the clearer the picture the practitioners allocating the cases have.
* Print out and keep paper copies of referrals, writing the date it was submitted. Contact external agency for confirmation of receipt if this is not received after two weeks.
* Keep contacts on side. Many visiting professionals do not get the chance to visit their base throughout a day, hopping from one school to the next. Offer a drink and snacks, or even arrange a working lunch provided by school. It often means you will get a bit of extra time from them, or they will be more willing to put a little extra effort in on your behalf.