

TATS eUpdate
Family Involvement

Communicating and Building Partnerships with Families

December 2007

Best Practice:

Family Partnerships Are Important

Partnerships with families are a positive force in ensuring optimal outcomes for young children with disabilities and are supported by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In order to develop these partnerships, professionals need the skills to communicate and work well with not only their peers in the community, but with families as well.

It is important for families and professionals to develop strong interpersonal relationships as a basis for collaboration. A study by Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, and Beegle (2004) looked at family/professional partnerships for collaboration in early intervention. The authors state that "...forging supportive relationships between parents and professionals appears to be at the heart of a collaborative partnership" (p. 168). The authors examined indicators of professional behavior which facilitated collaboration with families. They identified these six indicators as crucial for collaboration:

1. Communication
2. Commitment
3. Equality
4. Skills
5. Trust
6. Respect

These are similar to what Christenson and Sheridan (2001) have identified as important components of collaboration. Families and professionals each have an important role to play. Their roles do not replace each others' but rather compliment and reinforce each other as partners. The key to making collaboration work is the ability to build relationships. By emphasizing the relationship between two individuals, the need to define specific roles lessens. Building a strong relationship between two people and among members of a team maximizes the potential for collaborations to be strong and have a positive impact on the family/professional partnership. (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Klass, 2004)

Communicating with Families

In order to collaborate, teachers, administrators, staff and families need to understand each other and articulate their goals for the child. Communication plays a vital role in this. When we use strong communication skills, concern and understanding is conveyed

to the other person. It is a building block of collaborating and trust-building. Some important components of communication for collaboration include the following. (Banks, Santos, & Roof, 2003; Dunst, 2002; Jordan, 2001; Rush, Sheldon, & Hanft, 2003)

- Accepting the other person and his/her perspectives and differences. One person's frame of reference may interfere with the other person's understanding of someone else's communication message.
- Listening is the key to a positive conversation - listening effectively to truly hear the message and being able to ask clarifying questions ("how," "what," "tell me about," etc.) in a tone of acceptance that allows a full range of responses. Listening is an active endeavor. Gather additional information to clarify what the issue is. ("What other things are bothering you?" "I'm not sure I understand. Can you explain it again?" "Tell me what was said and then tell me what you believe.")
- Restating and allowing the other person to confirm or correct our perceptions. Validate the other person's perceptions. ("I understand your concern...", "I heard you say...")
- Providing honest but tactful interchanges.
- Staying focused on the goal of the collaboration. Focus on and communicate the positive as often as possible. Avoid divisiveness and a "blaming" attitude. Use 'we,' 'us,' and 'our' words versus 'you,' 'I,' 'yours,' and 'mine' words.
- Giving concrete examples such as, "What I've observed is" or "I've noticed that when then this occurs."

Reflection:

1. How does your role as a professional compare with the family's role in relation to their child?
2. What methods does your program/agency use to foster positive family-professional partnerships?
3. How can you improve communication between school and home?

Tell me and I'll forget. Show me and I'll remember. Involve me and I'll understand. - Confucius

References and Resources:

Banks, R., Santos, R. M., & Roof, V. (2003). Discovering family concerns, priorities, and resources: Sensitive family information gathering. *Young Exceptional Children*, 6(2), 11-19.

Blue-Banning, M., Summers, J., Frankland, H. C., Nelson, L., & Beegle, G. (2004). Dimensions of family and professional partnerships: Constructive guidelines for collaboration. *Exceptional Children*, 70(2), 167-184.

Christenson, S. L., & Sheridan, S. M. (2001). *Schools and families: Creating essential connections for learning*. New York: Guildford Press.

Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS) – Early Childhood Research Institute

Identifies, evaluates, and promotes effective and appropriate early intervention and preschool practices for children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Resource bank for effective materials and strategies.

<http://clas.uiuc.edu/aboutclas.html>

Dunst, C.J. (2002). Family-centered practices: Birth through high school. *The Journal of Special Education*, 36(3), 139-147.

Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE)

Part of the Harvard Family Research Project. The work of the Network includes increasing teacher and administrator preparation in family involvement and community partnerships; dissemination of assessment methods in family involvement programs and training models; and highlighting opportunities for families and schools to participate in design and implementation of teacher preparation programs. Much current information on school/teacher/family partnerships is available through their resource link.

www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine.html

Jordan, D. (2001). *Parent and professional collaboration: A cultural perspective curriculum*. The Technical Assistance Alliance for Parent Centers (The Alliance). PACER Center.

Kalyanpur, M., & Harry, B. (1999). *Culture in special education: Building reciprocal family-professional relationships*. Baltimore: Brookes Publishing

Klass, C. (2004). The relationship between the parent and the home visitor. *News Exchange – National Association for Home-Based Family Early Interventionists*, 9(2), 1-4.

Lynch, E.W. (2005). Parent and family involvement. In McLoughlin, J.A. & Lewis, R.B., *Assessing students with special needs* (6th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

PACER Center

Created by parents of children and youth with disabilities to assist other families and is staffed primarily with parents of children with disabilities. It has extensive links and information to family involvement in school and the education system for children and youth with disabilities. www.pacer.org

Partnership for Family Involvement in Education

One component of its mission is to ‘increase opportunities for families to be more involved in their children’s learning at school and at home.’ Partner organizations work with postsecondary institutions and local schools to develop teacher preparation and professional development opportunities in family involvement. www.pfie.ed.gov

Rush, D.D., Sheldon, M. L., & Hanft, B.E. 2003. Coaching families and colleagues: A process for collaboration in natural settings. *Infants and Young Children*, 16(1), 33-47.

Sandall, S., Hemmeter, M.L., Smith, B.J., & McLean, M.E. (2005). *DEC recommended practices: A comprehensive guide for practical application in early intervention early childhood special education*. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.

Technical Assistance and Training System (TATS)

Statewide project providing technical assistance and training to programs in Florida serving prekindergarten children with disabilities. Website provides information and resources on curriculum and instruction, evaluation and assessment, family involvement, inclusion, program effectiveness/quality, and transition, as well as, linking early childhood partners.

www.tats.ucf.edu

Turnbull, A. & Turnbull, R. (2001). *Families, professionals, and exceptionalities: Collaborating for empowerment* (4th ed.) Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Ulrich, M.E., & Bauer, A.M. (2003). Levels of awareness: A closer look at communication between parents and professionals. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 35(6), 20-24.



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