

Tip Sheets

Building Strong Connections with Families of Children with Disabilities

The Importance of Family Partnerships for Children with Disabilities

The quality of the adult relationships plays a significant role in children's sense of security and well-being. The ability of families and professionals to build and maintain collaborative partnerships may be the single most important factor in the successful inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood programs.

When building a partnership with families who have children with disabilities, it is important to understand your role as an educator and have an appreciation of the family's perspective.

Special Considerations to Partnerships

Developing an awareness of factors that may create barriers or present challenges to a partnership is especially important in the care of children with disabilities.

These challenges often include anxieties and insecurities for family members as well as educators, such as:

- Fears about their own abilities, insecurities, and success of the child.
- Feelings of anger and "unfairness."
- Fear of rejection.
- A family focused on meeting basic needs may not consider a child's special needs a priority.

These vulnerabilities may lead to feelings of doubt and a lack of confidence. Careful listening and sensitive questioning can help to overcome some of the misunderstandings that might occur.

Building Blocks of Successful Relationships

The following characteristics help support collaborative partnerships:

- Trust
- Mutual respect
- Working together
- Open communication
- Active listening



Share Expectations

Parents' expectations of what a program can accomplish must be realistic and appropriate. Group care requires everyone to adapt and compromise, including the child with special needs and their family.

It is fair and necessary for educators to explain to parents that the well-being of all the children in care must be considered and that this situation is likely to affect the level of assistance available.

Set Expectations with Written Policies

The process of clarifying expectations will help parents make decisions about the appropriateness of the program and help align their expectations.

Communicate ground rules and set mutual expectations through written contracts between families and caregivers, as well as parent handbooks that include program policies.

Confidentiality

A family's right to privacy must be honored, especially concerning medical, social, or

educational services and records. Educators are legally prohibited from providing personal information about a family or child without express written permission of a parent or legal guardian.

Be Adaptable and Flexible

Families should be included as much as possible. Fostering a sense of belonging is important, but understanding the demands placed on families may require flexibility. Families should be encouraged to participate to the extent to which they are able or interested.

- Participation of families whose children have disabilities may vary greatly.
- These families may be expected to participate and communicate more frequently but may be unable to do so because of the variety of demands on their time and energy.
- Family involvement fluctuates and changes over the course of time. There may be periods of time when the family is focused on meeting the needs of their children in different ways.

Whatever the circumstance or need of families, it is important to agree early that parents and caregivers will each strive toward a relationship of open communication and flexibility.

Parent Involvement and Inclusion

Early childhood education programs are settings in which inclusion can occur. When parents come together, they often discuss common problems and remedies. Opportunities to share with others reduce isolation and encourage camaraderie among families. Carry the spirit of inclusion to all activities in which parents and children are asked to participate.

- Family activity days or special events should be planned with attention to the physical access

needs and the interests of families whose children have disabilities.

- Outings and celebrations should be held in places where all children, including those who are non-ambulatory, can participate.
- Don't create activities developed around disability issues and concerns.

Ask for Additional Help

Early childhood educators may also be faced with situations they do not feel prepared to handle. Knowing when a family may need additional resources or referrals to other professionals or community agencies is essential to maintaining healthy relationships.

Locate resources to assist you regarding family concerns or have consultants available to meet with staff. Working with families and children who have multiple pressures in their lives requires adequate levels of support at the direct service level.

Additional Resources

Disability Hub | Resources for Families
<https://disabilityhubmn.org/for-families>

Head Start | Family Engagement
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/family-engagement/article/building-partnerships-families-series>

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