

Strengthening Family Partnerships: Engaging Families of Young Children with Disabilities



*Growth is never by mere chance; it is
the result of forces working together.*

- James Cash Penney

Families of young children with disabilities need and interact with a wide range of service providers (e.g. teachers, child care providers, allied health professionals, early interventionists, recreation specialists and social workers) to facilitate positive outcomes for their children. Forming family/professional relationships that empower and enable parents is an essential practice during early childhood. Service providers who best understand families of children with disabilities are better prepared to foster help-giving interactions that strengthen the capabilities of families and produce desirable outcomes for children.

El Brown, M.Ed. | elbrown@kinderjam.com

Engaging Families of Young Children with Disabilities

Introduction

Fifteen percent of children in the United States have a developmental disability.¹ That's roughly 1 in 6 children. Developmental disabilities are defined as a group of conditions due to an impairment in physical, learning, language, or behavior areas.² Therefore, there is a high likelihood that service providers in early childhood help-giving professions will engage with families of children with disabilities in their professional environment. Family engagement – a practice that supports a family-centered, strength-based approach to establishing and maintaining reciprocal relationships with families to assist young children's development has been acknowledged as a key contributor to a child's successful educational and developmental outcomes.⁹ Therefore, family engagement is an essential practice for early childhood service providers.³ Effective early childhood family engagement practice recognizes the diverse nature of the families served, including the range in developmental abilities. In your efforts to partner with families to best support children's learning and development, it is important to remember families and service providers both have distinct expert knowledge regarding the child.⁴



What Families are Saying...

"Keep me informed and ask my opinion"

"Family-educator partnership is important to me"

"Treat us like informed people with common sense"

"Look at the 'whole child: appreciate that the child's disability is one aspect of his/her self"⁵

(120 families surveyed)

Culturally Competent Engagement Practices

Effective family engagement requires cultural competence – the ability to acknowledge and understand cultural diversity, respect a family's beliefs and practices, and value cross-cultural communication. Cultural competence necessitates that service providers acknowledge and understand their implicit biases. Thereby, ensuring sensitivity, respect, and understanding when engaging with families, enabling practitioners to best understand and support a family's needs and make individualized and appropriate decisions with the family.⁶

“If a professional has information or knowledge that can guide me in working with my child. I would love to have it.”⁵

Strategies for Family Engagement

- **Acknowledge** that families know their child best.
- **Ask** families questions to better understand how you can be most helpful.
- **Establish** ongoing communication between the family and your practice.
- **Incorporate** children’s books that reflect respect of multiple abilities and diversities in your practice.
- **Listen** and invite families to talk about their children with disabilities.
- **Prepare** yourself before meeting with families. Schedule ample time for meeting with families so you can be completely present while engaging.
- **Practice** supporting a range of emotions. Families will go through a many feelings during this process. Learn to manage strong emotions in yourself and others.
- **Be a team player.** Work collaboratively with families and other professionals who may be involved in servicing children and their family.^{7,8}



Did You Know?

- Family Engagement is a significant contributor to a child’s successful educational and developmental outcomes.⁹
- Families participate more freely in a welcoming environment.¹⁰
- Families view service providers who work with young children as having a critical role in their child’s development.¹¹
- The family as well as all service providers interacting with the child should be included in an ongoing discussion of the child’s services, goals, and progress.¹²
- Trust is a key factor in family engagement and building trust is a long-term process.¹³

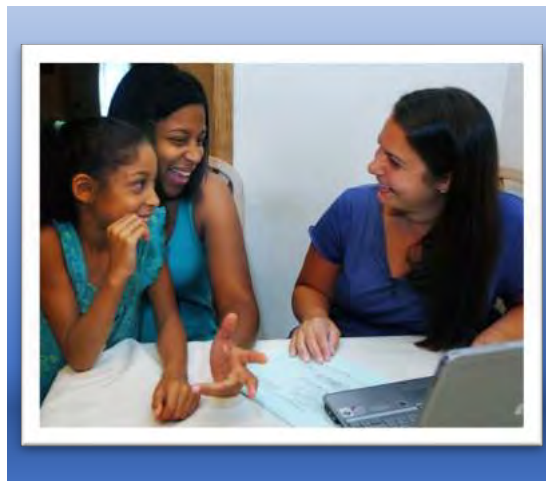
“I would like professionals to be aware that their contact with a child is usual temporary... A parent’s role is a lifetime role. We will never stop being parents.”⁵

Families as Experts

Families of children with disabilities have a wealth of knowledge to offer service providers based on their extensive and longstanding interaction with their children. Some healthcare and education organizations have incorporated family knowledge in training capacities.^{5,17}

Thereby, acknowledging that parents of children with disabilities are practical scientists and co-therapists who take an active role in educating and raising their children while becoming skilled at selecting appropriate interventions.¹⁴

Nonetheless, research suggests that parents, specifically mothers, must advocate to be recognized as legitimate experts.¹⁵ To ensure strong partnerships, it is imperative to recognize while service providers are the experts in child development, families as the experts in their child and their child's disability.¹⁶



“Listen respectfully and consider the information I give them [service providers] is based on my knowledge about her [my daughter].”⁵

Conclusion

Families and service providers share a common interest; both want children to maximize their personal potential for growth and development. By working together as a team, families and service providers can ensure that young children with disabilities have a village of support to help improve their development and educational outcomes. The act of enabling and empowering families by strengthening family partnership acknowledges the family's permanent role in the life of their child and ensures the family will have the skills and confidence necessary to serve as an advocate, educator, therapist, and coach for their child, long after their time spent with individual providers.

If you give a family a fish, you feed them for day. If you work with and teach a family how to fish, you feed them for a lifetime.

- Chinese Proverb (adapted)

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