

# Partnering with Families of Children

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**"There's no good way to tell you. Your baby has Down syndrome," said the pediatrician. My world instantly stopped, and I felt a black fog closing in. I couldn't move or breathe or speak. The only sound I heard was my husband sobbing. My first thoughts were "No, I can't do this. How do we go from expecting a perfectly healthy baby to receiving a stranger?" Finding out that our daughter Ella had Down syndrome was like being told that the baby we dreamed of had died and now we had a child we knew absolutely nothing about.**

*—Baby Ella's Mother (One of the Authors)*

## FAMILIES MAY LEARN THEIR CHILD HAS A DISABILITY

during pregnancy, at birth (as baby Ella's parents did), or even later, when their child enters a child care program in a home or classroom setting. Although a family's reaction to the news that their child has a special need may depend upon the child's age, the severity of the disability, and the family's cultural view of disabilities (Muscott 2002), researchers liken the experience to the grieving process that Kubler-Ross (1969) describes in her classic book, *On Death and Dying*. Reactions move from denial of the disability to anger at the diagnosis, to bargaining with the experts

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involved in the diagnosis, depression, and to acceptance of the disability. Acceptance of the diagnosis can take years, as frequent reminders of the disability cause families to reexperience the grief. For example, one parent said, "Grief may hit you when you least expect it—during a Christmas shopping trip . . . when you buy baby toys for a 9-year-old" (Naseef 2001, 207).

## Stages of adjustment

Some parents criticize this "grief" view of adjustment to a disability as being patronizing and not fitting their experiences. Ulrich and Bauer (2003) propose instead that the adjustment experience occurs in four levels as parents gradually become aware of the impact of their child's disability. These levels include the following:

# with Special Needs



As an educator, you may find that it is not as important to classify families by stages of adjustment to the child's disability as it is to understand that families have varied reactions and may work through their feelings in a different way and pace. It is helpful to realize that you and the family may not be operating at the same level or stage of understanding about the child rather than to make comments like "That family is so demanding" or "If the dad would get over his anger, we would be able to work together better" (Ulrich & Bauer 2003, 20). Listening to families is key in working with them as partners in supporting the learning and development of their child with special needs. Unless you have a child with a disability, you cannot fully understand the experience.

As you get to know the child and family, it is also important to learn about and participate in the development of the child's Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) or Individualized Education Program (IEP).

## IFSP and IEP services

Some early childhood teachers may feel overwhelmed and unprepared to have a child with special needs in their care. However, it is imperative that they learn about the special education process so they can support families in the myriad decisions they will face about their child's education. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 ensures early intervention, special education, and related services for more than 6.5 million infants, toddlers, children, and youths with special needs (U.S. Department of Education 2009). A child younger than age 3 can receive early intervention services in the home or child care setting through an Individualized Family Service Plan developed specifically for the child by a team that may include therapists, early intervention specialists, teachers, caregivers, and parents. For children with special needs age 3 or older, the local school system develops and administers an Individualized Education Program.

Both the IFSP and the IEP state the goals and objectives for the child's

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- 1. The ostrich phase.** Parents do not deny a disability but do not fully realize its impact. For example, a parent may say, "He's all boy. He just doesn't like to sit still and read a book."
- 2. Special designation.** Parents begin to realize that their child has a special need and seek help or ask for special services.
- 3. Normalization.** Parents try to make the differences between their child and children without disabilities less apparent and may actually request a decrease in services and more regular classroom time.
- 4. Self-actualization.** Parents do not view being different as better or worse, just different. They support their child in learning about his or her disability, including how to be a self-advocate.

## IFSP and IEP Key Differences

| Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP)<br><i>Birth through age 2</i>   | Individualized Education Program (IEP)<br><i>Ages 3 through 21 years</i>  |
|---|---|
| Focuses on the family and parents' role in supporting the child's learning and development  | Focuses on the child  |
| Outcomes focus not only on the child, but on the family   | Outcomes focus on the child   |
| Includes the concept of natural environments as places where learning occurs, such as at home, in child care, outdoors in parks, and so on (services may be provided in the home) | Focuses on school and classroom environments, with services provided in the school setting  |
| Involves many agencies in providing services because of the child's age; the IFSP integrates the services   | Assigns the local school district to manage the child's services  |
| Names a service coordinator, who assists the family in carrying out the plan  | Authorizes the local school district to coordinate the program  |
| Involves an initial meeting with the family to offer information and resources and to define the various agencies' roles and financial responsibility                             | Involves a meeting with the family to develop long-term and short-term goals for the child, accommodations and modifications, services, and child placement |
| Typically includes a meeting with the family every six months   | Typically includes a meeting once a year  |
| <b>Sources:</b> Bruder 2000; PACER Center 2000; Concord Special Education Parent Advisory Committee 2001; United Cerebral Palsy 2009.   |   |

developmental and educational progress. This plan or program also specifies who delivers the services, such as speech or occupational therapists, how the child's progress is assessed, and if any special classroom placements are needed. The parents' agreement with all the plans in an IFSP or IEP is required.

Educators and families both benefit in understanding the key differences between an IFSP and an IEP (see "ISFP and IEP Key Differences"). Although there are some common themes between the IFSP and the IEP, the differences focus on two main areas. In an IFSP, the concept of providing services in natural environments, such as the home or child care setting, is an important component. In an IEP, the school setting is typically where services are provided. Another major difference is the focus in an IFSP on the needs of not only the child, but also the family.

IDEA legislation requires the coordination of services from various agencies to avoid fragmented delivery of these services. In the child's first three years, a service coordinator assumes this responsibility, which may include any help needed for the family to function more effectively, such as food, shelter, health care, and education. When the child turns 3 and leaves the early intervention program, the service coordinator's role concludes.

From age 3 through age 21, the local school district acts as coordinator.

Teachers and caregivers are important partners with families in the implementation of an IFSP or IEP. Families should be a part of the IFSP and IEP planning processes; educators can make sure this happens. For example, Ella's parents and all of Ella's caregivers and specialists attended and shared information during IFSP and IEP meetings, which gave a view of her development from several different perspectives. Educators facilitate the day-to-day environment in which the child participates, so it is essential to communicate with the family and other service providers, such as physical or developmental therapists, to know about and understand their recommendations for appropriate activities and materials to use with the child. For example, Ella's occupational therapist showed her preschool teacher how to help Ella hold pouring utensils so she didn't soak herself at the classroom water table.

As an educator, helping to implement objectives and obtain outcomes for the child with special needs is a major role for you, as well as reporting child outcomes to the IFSP and IEP teams. Also, asking family members questions to learn what you can about their child's specific abilities and needs is appropriate and helpful throughout the process.

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## Transition from the IFSP to the IEP

At age 3, children leave their state's early intervention program and move into the public school system's early childhood special education program. This transition from the natural home or infant/toddler child care setting to the typically more institutional classroom environment can be difficult and overwhelming for families, who must now learn about the IEP process and education laws, attend lengthy meetings, get acquainted with new therapists and school staff, and subject their child to new testing and evaluations.

**As Ella's parents, we experienced a range of new emotions in this transition from the IFSP to the IEP. We felt sad, tired, concerned, angry, and surprised—**

**"Overnight, our child went from a baby to a school girl!"**

**"The complexity of our schedule increased with meetings, paperwork, and travel to numerous therapy locations."**

**"Our daughter would be exposed to illnesses in the classroom setting that she was protected from when receiving services at home."**

**"Strangers were telling us what they thought was best for our daughter based on a test score and a single meeting."**

**"We did not know we would have to fight for our daughter's rights."**

Supportive caregivers and teachers can ease the stress of the transition from an IFSP to an IEP. Explaining families' rights and the procedures in the special education process and encouraging families to learn about the process is one way to provide support. Preparing families for an IEP meet-

ing, typically once a year, by informing them of who will be there, what each person's role is, and what will happen in the meeting is also helpful. Let families know that they can bring advocates with them to this meeting.

Emphasize beforehand to the families their importance in the IEP meeting, and suggest they prepare and bring a list of their goals for their child. If needed, help them identify their concerns, family strengths, and priorities for their child. Encourage families to raise questions at the meeting about things they don't understand to make sure they agree with the IEP before they sign it (North Bay Regional Center 2008; PACER Center n.d.).

## Strategies for working with families of children with disabilities

Families of children with special needs often have ideas from their perspective as parents about other ways educators can show support. Some collected suggestions focus on understanding family life, learning about disabilities, communicating frequently, and working through challenges with families.

### Understand family life

Appreciating and respecting the extra work it takes for families to care for and educate children with special needs is important. At the age of 3 months, Ella began a weekly schedule of six hours of physical, speech, developmental, music, and occupational therapies. She engaged in oral-motor exercises three times daily.

**We taught all of Ella's caregivers how to feed, carry, and play with her. To accomplish the innumerable daily therapy goals, we kept lengthy, detailed checklists for separate caregivers. We asked caregivers to work on occupational therapy tasks such as having Ella pick up objects with clothespins and tongs or blow bubbles or suck drinks through thin straws to work on oral-motor (speech) therapy. All play activities were tailored to meet therapy objectives, as were the toys and books we purchased. Ella is now 5 years old, and our lives revolve around her therapies.**

**Our family's life is not unique in the strain that a child with special needs can place upon family time. Whether it is a therapy session, exercises, medical treatment done at home, or an unexpected hospital stay, there are extra demands for families of children with special needs. For working parents who cannot rearrange their daily schedule to fit therapies or doctors' appointments, difficult choices between their child's care and workplace requirements cause additional stress.**



Courtesy of Julia Pewitt-Kinder

Supportive teachers and caregivers help ease parents' stress, whether it is implementing daily therapies or offering a sympathetic listener's ear. Some parents may not be aware of all the services needed to meet their child's needs or be able to afford them. Thus, informing families about resources in the community and how to access them is an important teacher contribution. For example, because of a mother's limited literacy abilities, one early childhood teacher helped her fill out the paperwork necessary to get home medical equipment for her preschool child with severe disabilities.

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edge about their child's disability, beyond their personal experience. Providing information that you've learned about the disability helps to support them.

### **Communicate frequently with families**

As is true with families of all children, ongoing two-way communication between teachers and families is key in working successfully with families of children with disabilities. You can arrange a meeting

with the child's parents prior to the child's start in your program or school. To get to know each other, find out as much as possible about the child and the family's goals for their child's learning and development, and tell parents how you design your program to meet individual children's needs. Provide a simple questionnaire for the family to specify important information about the child's likes, dislikes, personality traits, skills, special health needs or medications, and emergency contacts. As one father advised, "The first thing is to listen to us . . . because we know our kids better than anybody" (Blue-Banning et al. 2004, 175).

Continue to stay in regular contact through formal and informal conferences, phone calls, notes, and e-mails. Keep a record of all communication with family members, including dates and the content of the communication. Do not hesitate to ask the parents questions or request advice about learning or behavior issues that arise during the day and if they have experienced similar incidents at home. For example, after working cooperatively with a family, a kindergarten teacher determined that the reason their daughter refused to come inside at the end of recess was because the ringing bell on the school wall was painful to hear, due to her sensory integration disorder. After the class lined up in a different location away from the bell, the child willingly joined her class in line.

In your communications as an educator, include positive comments about the child's successes and express your respect for the parents' efforts in helping their child

### **Learn about the disability**

As an educator, you may be familiar with a particular disability diagnosis, such as Down syndrome, but there is wide variation in its manifestations among children. Therefore, it is crucial to learn as much as you can about the individual child. The child's family may be the best resource for information, as well as the child's other teachers, caregivers, pediatricians, and therapists.

Borrow books and familiarize yourself with resources and free newsletters from national organizations. For example, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Division of Early Childhood (DEC) offers several publications and professional development opportunities on the education and development of children with disabilities ([www.dec-sped.org/About\\_DEC/Whats\\_New](http://www.dec-sped.org/About_DEC/Whats_New)). Understanding a disability can help you better plan for the child's learning. Some of the families you work with may not have resources or knowl-

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develop as fully as possible. For non-English-speaking families, obtain translation services through your school, other family members, or the community. Use graphics or icons to convey information in your written communication (Al-Hassan & Gardner 2002).

By using accurate terminology, educators gain the family's trust. When you convey your knowledge, compassion, and respect, such as by saying "a child who is deaf" instead of "a deaf child," you place *the child as first and most important* over the secondary concern, the disability. Avoid categorizing children in negative ways. Describing Marcus as a child who "has blue eyes, likes music, and has autism" frames the wholeness of the child in contrast to categorizing him as "an autistic kid."

It is disrespectful and trivializing to shorten the name of a disability by saying "a Downs child," for example. Even "a child with Downs" sounds as absurd as "a child with Cerebral." Educators should avoid making such references as "normal child" or "normal development" in discussions with families as well in professional dialogue. Such uses imply that children with special needs are abnormal; the correct terminology is *a child with disabilities* or *a child with special needs* and *a child without disabilities*.

As an educator, you need to avoid making generalizations about children with disabilities. Saying that all children with Down syndrome "are developmentally delayed" or "mentally retarded" is not accurate. Due to individual differences, improved health care, early intervention, and new methods of teaching, children with Down syndrome can meet the same developmental guidelines as children without disabilities. Although Ella has special needs in fine and gross motor development, she does not have a cognitive disability and at age 5 is ahead of her peers in some developmental areas. It is important to learn about each child as an individual, beyond the label of "disability."

Children with disabilities may have a variety of teachers, from their daily child care provider or classroom teacher to a special educator, personal aide, or a speech, physical, or occupational therapist. Families may need help

understanding how team teaching works (Salend 2006), being confused possibly about who is their child's real teacher. Educators' communication efforts can help families learn about the different services their child receives.

When explaining early intervention and special education services, avoid educational jargon and acronyms like LD (learning disabled), BD (behavior disorder), EMH (educably mentally handicapped), OT (occupational therapy), and

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PT (physical therapy), or the names of tests like DIAL-3 (Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning) or WISC-R (Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised). These can be confusing to families and need to be fully explained.

### Working with challenging situations

When working with families of children with special needs, you may encounter parents who appear angry, confrontational, mistrustful, or questioning about your teaching methods. Do not take this personally! Historically, families have had to be their own advocates for an appropriate education for their children with disabilities, and some families you are working with may have had negative experiences with the system in the past. They may have had to fight their medical insurance company for needed therapies or may have disagreed with school professionals about testing results or the best classroom placement for their child.

Strive to listen to families, understand their point of view, and be patient. Avoid creating another adversarial experience for them, and work toward building a positive, collaborative relationship.

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## Conclusion

In your efforts to partner with families in their child's learning and development, you are the expert in child development and education, but they are the experts in their child and the child's disability. Be a teammate with families, and do not try to work alone in educating their child. Together, you and the family can help their child reach his or her full potential.

Finally, don't fear or worry about having a child with special needs in your classroom, center, or school. See the whole child, not just the hearing impairment, the cerebral palsy, or the autism. Remember, they are just kids!

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