Building Relationships with Families of Children with Special Needs

Family members have important information about their own children, and this information is valuable to anyone involved in a child’s care. Parents and guardians have a special understanding of their children’s unique qualities and characteristics, such as temperament, strengths, and interests. Their perspective adds important information for teachers and other professionals to consider. This is true for all children and is particularly important when an infant or toddler has a disability or other special need (Brillante, 2017; Cross, Traub, Hutter-Pishgahi, & Shelton, 2004).

The way family members view their child’s disability or other special need is also an important factor for child care providers when they are building relationships with families. For example, a family may give reasons for a child’s disability or special need, based on their own cultural and family experiences. A family’s beliefs, concerns, wants, and expectations must be part of the conversation when planning for how to include the child in the child care setting (Raikes & Edwards, 2009).

Communicating with families can give you great insights and help you be more responsive to each family’s needs (Garguilo & Kilgo, 2014). You may also be able to partner with early intervention specialists for resources and support in working with individual children and their families (Cross et al., 2004).

Here are some ways to strengthen your skills in connecting with families, learning about individual children, and partnering in their care:

- Warmly welcome and orient all families when they enter your program, including those with disabilities or special needs.
- Use opportunities like drop-off and pick-up times to communicate informally with families and build rapport.
- Schedule times to check in with families to talk about how things are going and find out if families have questions, concerns, or suggestions about their infant or toddler’s experience in child care.
- Ask families how they approach care routines with their infant or toddler (meals, sleeping, diapering, and so on) at home.
- Learn about the cultures, values, and beliefs of each family by asking open-ended questions. For example, “What are some ways we can help your baby feel more at home while here in our care?”

Of course, families are diverse, differing in their structures, cultures, values, relationships, concerns, priorities, resources, and interactions, and in other areas. In considering this diversity, it is helpful to be aware of your own values and beliefs as you engage with children and families (Raikes & Edwards, 2009). Like the families you work with, your own cultural background and experiences influence how you see, understand, and respond to experiences, including your experiences with children with disabilities and other special needs.

Video Example: What Might Family Members Experience When They Learn Their Child Has a Special Need?

You can use this 4-minute animation to explore how you can support and partner with families through the process of identifying special needs. (Note: Although the video is aimed at Early Head Start staff, it applies to anyone who works with families of infants and toddlers with special needs.)

Strengthening Partnerships to Support Babies with Special Needs

A transcript of the video is available here:

Transcript
It's worth considering the ways your cultures, values, and beliefs might influence your interactions with children, particularly those with disabilities or other special needs. By taking time to understand your views and behaviors, you can create a stronger foundation to build partnerships with families and provide more inclusive services.

The time spent reflecting on our work, alone or with others, helps us think about the way we respond to children and families and allows us to explore our feelings about those experiences. When this is done regularly, ideally with a partner or supervisor, it can help you become more aware of how your own thoughts, feelings, and actions influence your relationships and interactions with infants, toddlers, and families (Parlakian, 2001). The process of reflecting on your work strengthens your confidence and ability to communicate and partner with families.

People who are new to caring for a child with disabilities or other special needs probably have a lot of questions. Even if you are experienced with inclusive care, you may still have questions, since each infant and family is unique. Below are some important questions for you to ask yourself and your colleagues as you create an inclusive program that fosters genuine relationships with families.

**Questions to Consider When Building Relationships with Families of Children with Special Needs**

- How can I help all families feel valued in our program?
- How can I include families of infants and toddlers with disabilities in meaningful and authentic ways?
- How are inclusive practices and procedures described in my program’s philosophy, policies, and information for families?

- What approaches do I use to connect with families?
- What thoughts and feelings do I have when I work closely with a family, or when I consider having conversations with families about a potential developmental need or assessment?
- How do I communicate with families about children’s individual development, including strengths, interests, and progress?
- What responsive and respectful practices do I use with children with disabilities and their families?
- How do I partner with early interventionists and families?

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**What Do You Do When You Have Concerns about an Infant or Toddler in Your Care?**

Sometimes child care providers are the first people to notice that a child may have special needs. This can be a sensitive topic for everyone involved and therefore requires careful thought.

Here are three resources to help you talk with parents when concerns arise:


The Family Engagement page of Head Start’s Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center website offers several resources for child care providers to help with the family engagement process including guides, webinars and videos.
Resources

**Building Partnerships: A Guide to Developing Relationships with Families:** Use this guide from the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement to increase your skills in partnering with families to support inclusion of children with special needs.

**Head Start and Early Head Start Relationship-based Competencies:** This resource from the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement can help you assess your relationship-based competencies and improve your interactions with families to best meet their goals.

**Family Engagement and Ongoing Child Assessment:** Explore ways to share child assessment information with parents in this resource guide from the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement.

**The Family Partnerships Process: Engaging and Goal-Setting with Families:** This document provides seven steps for setting and reaching goals with families to support their child’s development and learning. This resource was created by the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement.

**Sample Inclusion Policy:** Review this sample policy on inclusion, compare your program’s policy, and consider what information to add to it. This sample is provided by Quality Rated, Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning.

References


