



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 great insights for care and practices and help teachers be more responsive to each family's needs (Garguilo & Kilgo, 2014). Teachers may also be able to partner with early intervention (EI) specialists for resources and support in working with individual children with a disability or other special need and their families (Cross et al., 2004). In addition to direct communication with families, teachers can sometimes partner with early intervention specialists for resources and support in working with individual children and their families (Cross et al., 2004).

Technical assistance (TA) and professional development (PD) professionals can help infant and toddler teachers strengthen their skills in connecting with families, learning about individual children, and partnering in their care. For example, a TA or PD professional might design reflective questions and provide extra support with the following strategies that teachers could use to connect with families:

- ◆ Warmly welcome 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.

What Can Providers Do When They Have Concerns about an Infant or Toddler?

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 two resources to help infant and toddler teachers talk with parents when concerns arise. Role-play can be a good way for early care providers to practice talking with parents about concerns.

[Talking to Families of Infants and Toddlers about Developmental Delays](#). This short article from the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) At Risk and Special Needs Interest Forum is reprinted from the NAEYC journal *Young Children*. It provides suggestions for preparing to meet with families, as well as tips for during and after the discussion. A list of online resources for family and caregivers is provided.

[Talking with Parents When You Have Concerns About a Child in Your Care](#). This presentation, developed by California Map to Inclusive Child Care and WestEd Center for Child & Family Studies, will help you guide a discussion with providers on how to address concerns about development.



- ◆ Ask families how they approach care routines with their infant or toddler at home (meals, sleeping, diapering, and so on). This information can help support continuity between home and the program.
- ◆ 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 across families, it is helpful for teachers to be aware of their own values and beliefs as they engage with children and families (Raikes & Edwards, 2009). Like the families they work with, their own cultural backgrounds and experiences shape how they see, understand, and respond to experiences, including their experiences with children with disabilities and other special needs.

TA and PD providers can encourage teachers to engage in reflective practice to consider the ways in which their own cultures, values, and beliefs might influence their work, particularly their work with children with disabilities or other special needs. By taking time to understand their own views and behaviors, they can create a stronger foundation to build partnerships with families and provide more inclusive services.

This kind of reflective practice or coaching encourages caregivers to take time to step back, think about their work and their responses to children and families, and let themselves explore their feelings about their work with families. Reflective practice offers teachers information and discoveries about themselves and what motivates their practices. When it is done regularly, ideally with a partner or reflective supervisor, it can help teachers become more aware of how their own thoughts, feelings, and actions influence their relationships and interactions with infants, toddlers, and families (Parlakian, 2001), thereby strengthening their confidence and ability to communicate and partner with families.

If caregivers are new to caring for a child with disabilities or other special needs, they probably have a lot of questions. Even if they are experienced with inclusive care, they may still have questions, since each infant or toddler and family is unique. Below are some important questions TA and PD providers can offer to caregivers as a starting place to help create a supportive program that fosters genuine relationships with families:

- ◆ How can we help *all* families feel valued in our program?
- ◆ How can we include families of infants and toddlers with disabilities in meaningful and authentic ways?
- ◆ In what ways can we work with families to create a real sense of belonging?
- ◆ What kinds of positive comments about children’s successes can also show respect for parents’ efforts in helping their children develop as fully as possible?
- ◆ How are inclusive practices outlined in my program’s philosophy, policies, and practices?
- ◆ How do I create environments that are welcoming to *all* children and their families? Consider the following areas:
 - Communicating with families to support partnership
 - Inclusive practices and meeting individual learning needs

Video Resource: Talking with Families about Developmental Concerns

[“Relationship-Based Practices: Talking with Families about Developmental Concerns”](#) is part of a family engagement video series from Head Start’s Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center. This short video for child care providers focuses on having important conversations with families when concerns arise.



Resources

[Birth to 5: Watch Me Thrive!](#): Access this site to learn about the importance of developmental and behavioral screening for children and support for families and providers who care for them.

[Partnering with Families of Children with Special Needs](#) (article by Julie A. Ray, Julia Pewitt-Kinder, and Suzanne George, published in *Young Children*): Read this article to learn about the special education process including key differences between an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) and an Individualized Education Program (IEP), and strategies to work with families of children with disabilities.

[Preparing for Transition from Early Intervention to an Individualized Education Program](#) (PACER Center: Champions for Children with Disabilities): Review this document to consider how families with children in early intervention programs can prepare for a change in supports and services when their child turns 3 years old, the age limit for Part C services.

[Sample Inclusion Policy](#) (Quality Rated, Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning): Use this document as an example when drafting or updating a program's inclusion policies.

References

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