

It is Not Just About the Kids

Systematic Approaches for Engaging Families of Children with Disabilities

by Amanda Schwartz

In early education, families are the center of our work. Young children's everyday lives are closely tied to their family; each child's life begins with these close bonds. Adult relatives nurture, support and respond to their children's needs. For families of children with disabilities, there are often additional responsibilities and stressors that come from the delays or disorders that their children experience. The way early childhood teachers and staff interact with families matters so

much because your support can keep the connection between family and child strong. Your ongoing interactions, communication and support can make life easier and better for children with disabilities and their families.

As you may have experienced, families are as diverse as the children you serve—their strengths, challenges, and needs vary widely. Meeting families where they are requires patience and openness, understanding the dynamics of each family and each individual in that family. They may be coping with having to adjust expectations for their child's life, struggling with day-to-day routines, and/or worrying about their child's future independence. Thinking about their needs and being open to the solutions families bring to your program will help you build strong, family-centered partnerships.

There are several systems within your program that can effectively engage families of children with disabilities when planned in detailed and intentional ways. Thinking through these steps and how your program imple-

ments them can make the difference for a family and improve your ability to partner with them.

Enrollment

The process of enrolling a family is much more than simply filling out paperwork. Often programs offer tours of the facility, talk with family members about the program's values and approaches, and introduce family members to teaching staff. These moments are filled with opportunities to engage families of children with disabilities. Consider how you:

- collect information from families about their child in order to individualize for them;
- talk with families about the ways their child will access learning opportunities;
- partner with special education providers to help families make a smooth transition into your program; and



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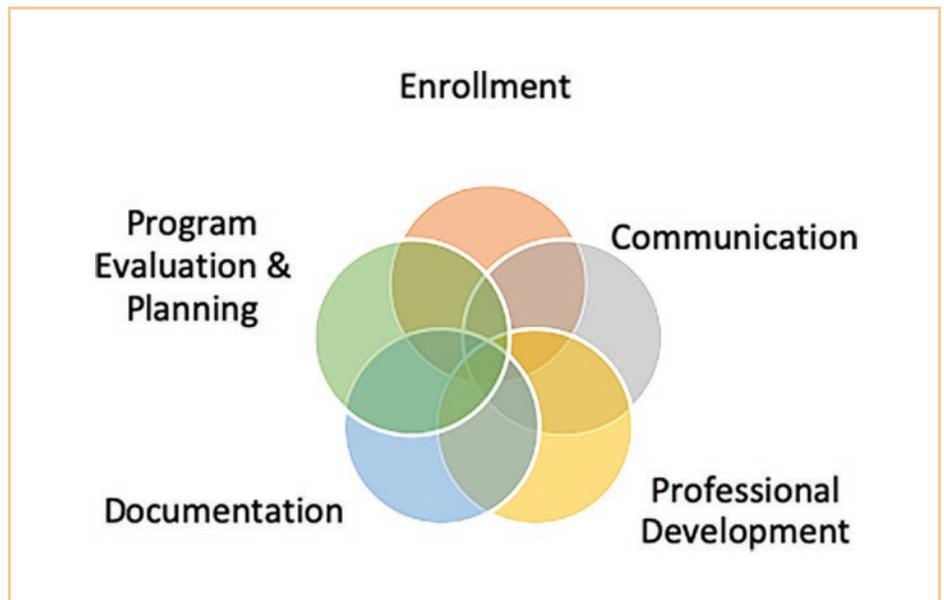
- use screening and referral processes to get families support they need.

Starting on the right foot with families helps them know that you are there for them. A well-planned enrollment process can reassure them that you are an inclusive program that will nurture and support their child.

Ongoing Communication

It is important to remember that the frequency, types and tone of communication are really important to families of children with disabilities. What you say and how you say it is as important as how often you communicate. Communication can offer updates and information about their child’s daily experiences but it can also be a way for them to know how their child is fitting in to your setting. Families often hear about their child’s challenges, so telling them about successes and simple stories about each day can alleviate some of the tension and stress they may feel. Additionally, families may be struggling as they adjust their expectations for their child—they may be sensitive to the information you have to share. Thinking about how you share information will make a difference. Finally, they may be working with multiple providers so trying to be consistent with others is critical. Consider how you:

- maintain positive relationships with families from the beginning;
- keep families informed about their child’s experiences and development;
- stay informed about special education and other related services;
- build relationships with other providers and share information with them (with parents’ permission); and



- stay “on message” so you are offering consistent messages about each child.

Relationships are particularly important in early childhood settings and successful communication is what defines them. Ensuring systems are in place can make sure families of children with disabilities feel supported and included in your setting.

Professional Development

For staff to be successful in inclusion, they need support and training. They need the ability to identify children’s developmental milestones in their classrooms, but that is only the first step. They also need to be able to share developmental information with families and collaborate with special educators to support children with disabilities in meeting milestones. Therefore, your professional development systems need to reach beyond basic child development to support relationship-building. Consider how you:

- ensure staff:
 - understand typical child development,

- can identify developmental red flags,
- know how to share information with families, and
- partner well with special education providers;
- provide ongoing support to enhance staff-family and partner-staff relationships; and
- problem-solve challenges as they arise.

Developing ongoing support and training helps staff reflect and improve their strategies to engage families of children with disabilities. Inclusion is a process with many possible solutions, and developing a responsive professional development system in your program allows you to adjust to meet family needs.

Documentation and Recordkeeping

Individualizing to meet family needs requires ongoing documentation of what is working for families and what challenges remain. Therefore, your documentation and/or recordkeeping systems need to be strong and capture

information that helps your program make decisions that support inclusion. Because families of children with disabilities often work in multiple systems, documentation can be more complicated. Ensuring a family's right to privacy while also being aware of all the services they receive means that you need to have explicit conversations about confidentiality policies and follow them precisely. Consider how you:

- obtain and record parental/legal guardian consent;
- collect information from families and partners with consent;
- track and maintain relevant information;
- inform and protect families' confidentiality;
- link your information with your partners; and
- provide families with information about how you collect, track and maintain their information.

Helping families understand their privacy rights supports you in building relationships. The key is to ensure trusting, positive relationships so that your staff have the information they need to support children's growth.

Program Evaluation and Planning

Most programs conduct a regular evaluation of their program to identify how they are serving young children and families. These opportunities to

check in with parents, partners, and staff can inform the ways you engage families of children with disabilities and plan better strategies. Thinking about engagement in various ways—level of engagement, in addition to the number of opportunities—can help you learn more about what you are doing to support families. Being engaged in the process supports the inclusive environment, so when possible conduct surveys, interview family members, or hold meetings to learn what works best and what could be improved.

Consider how you:

- review the level of engagement (e.g., how much support families are able to offer in the classroom and program);
- engage families in program evaluation/monitoring;

- determine success in meeting families' needs;
- make all family activities accessible;
- collaborate with partners to address needs and reduce duplication; and
- represent the diversity of families in your program.

Programs that use ongoing information to change their practices and find new solutions are always improving the way they meet family needs. They set the stage for child growth by knowing that services will need to adapt to the needs of each child and family. They also provide the most inclusive settings for families of children with disabilities.

Moving from Learning and Understanding to Planning

Programs that include families of children with disabilities have all of these systems in place. They use them to grow and adjust to individual needs, which allows them to accommodate everyone.

The process starts with gathering the right information in a way that makes families feel invested in the program. Then the information helps all management and staff understand each family's experiences in order to plan specific strategies that meet family needs. Together, the early childhood community can ensure that all families are welcome and promote the development of every child.

