

Parent Perspective: Strategies that Support Family-Professional Partnerships

By Dara Howe

A partnership is two or more persons with separate responsibilities and equal status working toward a common cause (*Ireys*).

Let's start with the assumption that everyone benefits when families and professionals work together as *partners*. I know this to be true after more than 18 years experience as a parent of a child with developmental disabilities. I have participated on teams that developed IHPs, IFSPs, and IEPs and have served on a continuous succession of committees, boards, councils and the like.

I understand what it feels like to be welcomed and appreciated for my participation, valued for my perspective and ideas, counted on to share in the work, and encouraged to provide leadership from time to time.

I've also been the awkward, sometimes token parent unsure of my role, unfamiliar with the issues and terminology, too embarrassed to expose my ignorance, and struggling to figure out how I might contribute. It is these uncomfortable experiences more so than the positive ones that are the most instructive.

I've observed the dynamics of family-professional collaboration and, for the past 14 years, made a career of helping families and professionals work together on behalf of children with disabilities and chronic illnesses. I am by my own confession a "professional parent," which is to say that professionals and parents tend to relate to me more as a professional than as a parent. This is especially true in matters of early childhood and early intervention. I am a generation removed from the experience with my own son, who is now 19, although my memories of those times are still vivid.

The truth is, wherever it is appropriate and desirable to include families, which is pretty much everywhere and at every level of discussion, planning, implementation, and review of services and programs for children, it is desirable to involve well-seasoned parents as well as the fresh, new-to-the-experience parents. Each has much to offer and learn from the other.

Books and articles abound describing family-professional partnerships and their benefits. The hard part is coming up with practical strategies and applying them on a consistent basis. Partnerships don't just happen. They take time and require some or a lot of effort to achieve.

Here are my suggestions for cultivating family-professional collaboration and partnership:

- 1** Step one is start by looking inward to recognize and address your fears and prejudices. If you honestly don't believe that parents and families in general (or particular individuals) are your equal and have as much to contribute as you, then you will have a tough time masking your true feelings and being a good partner yourself. Families know when they're being talked down to. You don't patronize your partners.
- 2** Think through and be able to articulate for families the expectations for their participation—not just the number of meetings or time commitment, but a rationale for why their involvement is important and desirable. A seasoned parent can be helpful in doing this.
- 3** Take time to adequately prepare families to participate on a team or in a group setting. Meet with them prior to a team meeting and offer materials in advance that explain the topics, the participants, and the process. In other words, do what you can to remove fear of the unknown as a reason not to participate. Again, seasoned parents can be beneficial in this regard.
- 4** Avoid situations that isolate families or cause them to feel like tokens. When possible, recruit more family participants than you think you'll need. Make sure families have an opportunity to get to know each other and talk about their goals and expectations. At a minimum, encourage single family representatives to bring along a friend or family member for support.
- 5** Find meaningful ways for families to contribute:
 - ◆ Construct meeting agendas that give family participants a role and a voice in the proceedings. On each topic discussed, encourage questions and comments from all participants who don't voluntarily speak up. Avoid singling out families so as not to seem patronizing. Instead of asking open-ended questions like, "Do you have any questions?" Ask, "What do you think about doing

this or that?” If the response is, “I don’t know,” be reassuring that it’s O.K. not to have an opinion. If “I don’t know” comes from lack of knowledge about the topic, then address that. See Item 3 above.


- ◆ Include families in the assignment of tasks during or between meetings. Nothing engenders trust and respect more than inviting families to take on some responsibility. Just make sure you offer and follow up with whatever assistance might be needed to help the family carry out the task. Here again, asking a seasoned parent to work on a project with a newbie can have multiple benefits.

6 Eliminate barriers to family participation:

- ◆ Arrange meetings at times and places convenient for families.
- ◆ Provide or arrange for childcare, and offer stipends to cover costs incurred by families for sitters, transportation, parking, meals, etc.
- ◆ When attendance is impossible, offer to make phone conferencing an alternative way to participate.

7 Avoid using jargon without explanation. During meetings, make a joke of it and assign someone the task of interrupting offenders who toss around acronyms with abandon. Don’t put families in the position of having to ask for interpretation on their own or, more likely, having to sit there in ignorance.

While I’m on the subject of interpretation, I want to emphasize the importance and necessity of incorporating culturally competent approaches when working with families from diverse backgrounds. When applying each of the points above, ask yourself, “What can I do to be culturally effective in working with this family?” When working with families for whom English is limited, providing interpreter services and translation of documents is not just a nice thing to do, it’s required of programs that receive federal funds.

There are other points and steps that could and should be made, and, with a little forethought and planning, you will think of some. 

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