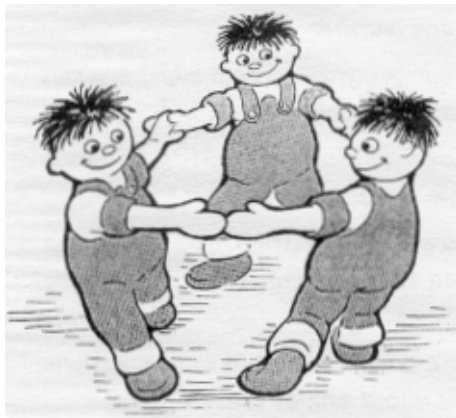


Being Part of The Team



Every child with a disability enrolled in an early childhood program is receiving specialized care from at least one other professional or agency. The specialist may be a pediatrician, social worker, speech therapist, public health nurse, family support specialist, or other individual. Most children actually have a team of professionals—each with a unique specialty—who work together to design intervention that will help the child develop new skills. When a child with a disability is enrolled in an early childhood program, the team is expanded to include the child care provider or other early childhood professional.

Working with young children with disabilities can be challenging. Questions may arise that no one person could answer. That's one good reason why a team of professionals works together to create the kind of intervention that will help a child grow and develop. An early intervention specialist may have questions about the implications of a rare genetic disorder, and the geneticist can provide those

answers. The child's motor therapist may not understand how to help a child learn to produce specific sounds, but the speech therapist knows how. Because no one person is expected to have all the answers, the team needs to work together so that each person's expertise is used to the child's advantage. Working together, however, isn't always easy. Each team member shares the responsibility to create relationships that include respect, communication, and collaboration.

RESPECT: It is unlikely that any two team members will have the same background and expertise. The team may include a physician and a physical therapist, and each one provides different kinds of information. Respect develops as each team member's unique role is recognized and their possible contribution is understood. One way to develop respect is to simply list the team members and identify the contribution each one can make. Some members of the team may be overlooked because their role is misunderstood. Many early childhood educators report that team members do not seem to understand their role initially. In order to be recognized as a valued contributor, you need to explain what you do in your program. It may seem silly, but many individuals think of child care and preschool programs as baby sitting—not early care and education. It is important to be respectful of other team members as well as to be clear about what you do and what role you can play. Team members can be involved in many ways. A valuable contribution should not be overlooked just because the individual can't attend meetings or is hard to contact.

COMMUNICATION: Think of how busy you are and imagine that each of the other team members is probably just as busy. It is no wonder that it can be difficult to schedule meetings! If the team is going to work together, ongoing communication is important, but meetings may not be. Communication among team members can be accomplished by sharing information in written reports/updates and in frequent telephone calls, by scheduling joint sessions with the child and family, or by recording observations in a common journal where others can read them. Of course, when the team does schedule a meeting, everyone should have an opportunity to contribute even if they cannot attend.

COLLABORATION: Collaboration means being willing to work with others and to use their suggestions to modify as needed. Modifications may include adding a piece of equipment or changing the routine for a child's therapy appointments. Part of being a member of a team is *giving* input as well as *getting* input from others. Children benefit most when team members appreciate each other's expertise, and intervention becomes richer and more effective through their collaborative efforts.

As beneficial as the team is to the child, the benefits for the early childhood professional are even greater. You have the opportunity to profit from the expertise of many different individuals—to ask questions when you aren't sure about a child's needs, to brainstorm with someone who can offer a fresh perspective, to share frustrations, to celebrate accomplishments, and to offer the valuable information you have learned about the child.

Making It Work

Practical Ideas for Working with Specialists

- ★ Set aside a place for team members to leave a coat and personal belongings when they visit your program. This is also a great place for items or notes that team members want to share with one another.
- ★ Find a spot to post your daily schedule so specialists can orient themselves to your program. Team members can use your schedule to find ways to integrate their ideas within the child's regular routines.
- ★ Be sure to ask the therapist to take some time to introduce him/herself to each child. It's exciting to see a specialist become part of the whole program rather than being viewed as a single child's therapist.
- ★ Model your respect for confidentiality: always ask parents for permission to share information, avoid negative comments about team members or programs, and keep conversations focused on the specific child rather than talking about other children in your group.
- ★ When team members visit your program, make it clear that your focus is on the children. Adult conversations should occur outside the children's range of hearing, especially if the content is about one of the children.
- ★ Use effective and efficient communication strategies. Try a variety of strategies to find what works best in each situation. Stay flexible; families' wishes, children's needs, and team membership will change over time.
- ★ Photographs and work samples (paintings, name-writing efforts, story dictation, etc.) can help present useful information about a child's progress. If parents agree, share these with team members.
- ★ Share program materials. When specialists are well-informed about your program, they can build a respectful relationship with you and look for ways to embed IFSP or IEP goals in your routine. To be more specific:
 - ▶ Distribute your written program philosophy to team members explaining how you view the roles of the child, adult, and environment in your program, and how you feel about pull-out therapy vs therapy that is integrated naturally into group activities and children's play. What guidelines would you like to share with therapists?
 - ▶ Share your policy statement including child guidance strategies, arrival and departure times, program holidays, and other policies that guide your program.
 - ▶ Parent newsletters provide team members with ongoing information about your program themes and activities. Many specialists enjoy using field trips or program themes that have captured the child's attention.
- ★ Help team members get a picture of the environments and materials you provide for children. This helps them develop goals and suggest ways to use or modify what you already have to meet the needs of a particular child.
- ★ Be sure to let specialists know your needs! They may be able to help you get the equipment or materials you need to successfully include a child. They can also provide information and ideas from their area of specialization that can enhance your existing skills.
- ★ Specialists need to know about your abilities, interests, and any special skills you have. When team members are well-informed and use each other's strengths, the quality of service for the child grows.
- ★ Help team members become acquainted with your entire staff—regular employees, substitutes, volunteers—so they can also be included in the team's efforts.
- ★ Nurture yourself. Ask for help when you need it and keep track of your successes. Keeping a journal, listing strengths you see in yourself, and positive self-talk can all be useful for early childhood professionals.

Just as children benefit from your efforts to be an active team member, so can you. When we see ourselves as learners as well as teachers, we can truly enjoy—and benefit from—collaboration with other professionals.

