Together We're Better!

Families of young children with disabilities or developmental delays have at least one professional who provides specialized care for their child. It may be a pediatrician, a social worker, a speech therapist, a public health nurse, or another individual who provides services for young children and their families. Many children with disabilities have a team of professionals, each with a unique specialty, who work together to design intervention that facilitates the child’s optimal growth and development.

When parents enroll their child with a disability in your program, you have an opportunity to become part of that team, and each team member becomes your resource. In some cases, parents may choose to share information with you as they receive it (either in writing or verbally). At other times, parents may rely upon you and other team members to contact each other and work together.

Frequently, the family and the team have already met and the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) or Individualized Education Program (IEP) is in place. You may ask the parent for a copy of the developmental goals and objectives team members use to guide their services so you can become an additional asset in nurturing the child’s development. If parents do not invite you to become part of the team, you may wish to bring it up as it is advantageous for you to be actively involved at some level. However, your actual participation on the team may vary, depending upon the child’s needs and the parent’s wishes. Until you become a formal team member, you can:

- Review current literature/materials about the child’s disability.
- Ask child care providers or other early childhood professionals who include children with disabilities for ideas and feedback (remember confidentiality).
- Confer with the child’s parent(s) on a regular basis.
- Ask parents for a copy of the developmental goals and objectives identified on the IFSP or IEP.
- Participate in training relevant to inclusion.

When you become an active team member—and you have parent’s (or guardian’s) permission to do so in writing, you can:

- Contact therapists and invite them to schedule therapy and/or intervention during your program activities.
- Observe the child in other settings (therapy, home, preschool, evaluation).
- Contact the individuals providing services (especially the service coordinator) to ask questions and convey interest in receiving current information.
- Receive training and information regarding strategies to enhance the child’s development during program/group activities and routines.

- Arrange with parent(s) (and/or service coordinator) to be included in developing and reviewing the IFSP or IEP.

Specialists and child care providers are valuable resources for one another. Special educators work hard to ensure that their services focus on the family’s priorities while at the same time they contribute their professional expertise on behalf of the child’s development. Early childhood professionals also work hard to form effective partnerships with parents. Your experience with young children and your early childhood setting form a natural environment to encourage play and development of social and other important skills. Working together as a team, you have the resources that make inclusion work for every child.
Try It Out

If the team is going to work together, frequent communication is very important. Think of how busy you are. It is likely that the other team members are equally as busy. Here is a list of ways teams can communicate.

**Team meetings:** If the meeting is scheduled when you cannot get away, take responsibility to write down your ideas and give them to another team member so your observations or questions can be addressed.

**Written reports:** Sharing reports does not happen automatically. In order for a therapist or physician to share their latest report, two things must be in place: 1) they must know you want and need a copy, and 2) they must have written permission from the child’s parent.

**Working together:** Many teams regularly schedule opportunities for two or more team members to observe the child together, using the results to plan interventions.

**Telephone calls:** When a meeting is impossible to schedule, regular contact can be maintained through telephone calls.

**Team notebook:** When many different team members are involved, it is often difficult to keep everyone current about the child’s progress day to day. Creating a notebook that goes back and forth with the child allows team members to regularly communicate about the child’s progress. This notebook is an especially useful tool for new team members because it shows the child’s progress over time.

A Child Care Provider’s Question

**QUESTION:** I have a child with disabilities in my program, but the parents said they will take care of all the team stuff. What should I do now?

**ANSWER:** For a variety of reasons, a few parents may be reluctant to allow the release of any records or information to you. They may be unsure about how the information will be used or fear that if you know everything about their child’s disability, you may treat the child differently. As you build a partnership with the family, it is likely that they will eventually recognize your need for information about their child. If not, this is a decision you must respect and accept without judgment.

Do not be alarmed if a parent refuses to provide consent for release of confidential information. Remember that this is their right, and in fact, many parents feel obligated to protect their child’s records. Without the parent’s written permission, you cannot obtain the child’s records, but you can still gather general information from the local library or agencies familiar with young children with disabilities. Although not specific to the child, this kind of information can help you learn more about the care a child needs while in your program and formulate specific questions to ask the family from time to time.

Since the child’s parents are your bridge to the team, offer information about your program (handbook, newsletters, schedule), collect samples of the child’s work, and provide written notes from your observations for them to share with team members. You can invite team members to visit your program, to observe, and play with the child during learning activities and routines. This kind of goodwill opens the door for collaboration and may eventually result in parents inviting you to become more actively involved on the team.