

Infants & Toddlers

Family Engagement

Working With Families of Children With Special Needs

This lesson will highlight the ways in which you can play an important role in supporting families of children with special needs in your early care and learning program. You will learn recommendations for effective collaboration with families and other professionals and begin to understand the additional roles and responsibilities placed on many families of children with special needs.

Objectives

- Explore your own assumptions about working with families of children with special needs.
- Identify variables that may challenge or support family-centered practice.
- Choose and implement effective ways to support families of children with special needs.



Learn



Know

Families of Young Children with Special Needs

Infants and toddlers with special needs are members of our communities, programs, and families, and it is our responsibility to provide high-quality, inclusive support and care for these children and their families. While these families often experience additional challenging situations and stressors, they have hopes, dreams, and goals for their children just like other families. You can positively impact families with an infant or toddler with a disability by empowering them with knowledge, empathizing with their feelings, and collaborating with other support professionals in their lives.

Within the VLS, the terms special needs and disability are often used interchangeably. It is important to note that while the two terms have similar meanings, the word disability is generally used to refer to a long-term condition or impairment that impacts the way a child or youth learns, participates, or interacts with the world around them. The term special needs often refers to additional supports or assistance a child or youth may need within an educational, developmental, behavioral, or health context. Language is a powerful tool that can create a sense of

identity, purpose, and pride and is particularly important to consider when working with children and families. One critical way to empower families of children with special needs is to have a dialogue with them around their preferred language when referring to their individual child's unique needs and abilities.

Working with Families of Children with Special Needs

Establishing meaningful relationships with families is a critical part of your work, and your communication is especially important when working with families with infants and toddlers with special needs. Some infants and toddlers will enter your program with known disability, and other families will learn that their child has a disability or delay while enrolled in your program. You may even be one of the professionals that assists in identifying an area of concern or delay. Families with eligible children ages birth to three may receive early intervention services and have an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP). An IFSP is a written legal document that lays out the supports and services children with developmental delays would benefit from in order to make progress in the areas of need or concern. Others may only receive support from a medical center, and some families will be involved with multiple systems of support. Regardless, families can be overwhelmed by what feels like a constant flow of suggestions, therapies, and appointments to help their child learn and develop. These families often need more help supporting their children's development and may turn to you, or others in your program, for assistance with connecting to services or agencies outside your program. It may be helpful to form relationships with community agencies so you, or trainers and administrators in your program, have up-to-date information on how to make a referral and the types of services offered and available. Positive interactions with families and other professionals can decrease families' stress and improve their well-being, as well as improve their confidence in you as their child's early care and learning program.

Families with infants and toddlers with special needs may go through various evaluation processes and may ask you to complete questionnaires or provide input at the request of a doctor, specialist, or teacher. Other professionals rely on this input, especially when they have limited amounts of time with children compared to program staff who often spend many hours each week caring for, educating, and observing children in their daily routines. This information can be used to determine if a child has a specific area of need, support the child outcome summary (COS) process, determine eligibility for specific services, and develop goals for an IFSP or Individualized Education Plan (IEP). An IFSP is a written document that states families' desired outcomes, the steps needed to achieve those outcomes, and recommended services. You, or a trainer or administrator from your program, may be asked to officially participate in a families' IFSP review, a time when the team of professionals and the family come together to assess progress, create new outcomes, and determine needed services. Working with professionals from outside agencies helps things run smoothly for families and ensures that all of the professionals and caregivers in a child's life are communicating. This lessens family stress by reducing the need for primary caregivers to act as the in-between messenger of important information, goals, and expectations.

Effective Practices

The first step in establishing strong relationships with families of infants and toddlers with special needs is to spend time discussing and learning their wishes and concerns for their children and to learn about the meaningful activities and routines they participate in at home. Maintaining this communication throughout a child's time in your program is essential. Ask questions to learn about strategies that work at home and consider

using them when providing care. Through your interactions you can build trust so both you and families feel comfortable sharing children's strengths and if there are concerns (Sandall, Hemmeter, Smith, & McLean, 2005). Before communicating concerns with families, it may be helpful to discuss with a coach, trainer, or administrator your plan to share this information using family-centered practice. Be prepared for families to react in a variety of ways and know how you can offer support if they seek assistance from other agencies and resources. For families already receiving support from other professionals, ongoing communication with both families and professionals is critical to maintain consistency between program and home environments. When all the caregivers in a child's life are consistently using the same, effective strategies to promote development and outcomes, children are more likely to benefit and learn new skills.

In your collaboration with families, it is important to acknowledge and respect their strengths and unique background, while realizing their ability to make decisions that are right for them (Hanson & Lynch, 2004). This means that when family's wishes and decisions are different from what you would recommend, you respond to the family's decisions with respect. Ultimately, meaningful communication and relationship-building will enrich the process for both yourself and the families you serve.

Take a look at the following guidelines that reflect family-centered practice. You may remember some of these from Lesson 1. Then, think about which of these you can use in your work with families of children with special needs (Turnbull, Turbiville, & Turnbull, 2000):

- Recognizing the family as a constant in the child's life; caregivers and service systems often change
- Facilitating collaboration between families and professionals
- Honoring and respecting family diversity in all dimensions (cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic, spiritual, and socioeconomic)
- Recognizing family strengths and the different approaches that families may use to cope
- Sharing unbiased and honest information with family members on an ongoing basis
- Encouraging family-to-family support and networking
- Acknowledging and incorporating the developmental needs of the child and other family members into your practice
- Designing and implementing services that are accessible, culturally and linguistically respectful and responsive, flexible, and based on family-identified needs



See

Watch this video to learn about addressing the needs of families who have children with special needs.



There are many ways you can demonstrate respect and consideration for families of infants or toddlers with special needs or disabilities in your classroom. Consider the following:

- Acknowledge that families know their infant or toddler best and ask them questions about services, resources, or typical routines that may be helpful to you.
- Establish ongoing communication between home and the early care and learning setting. Communication journals are a great way to maintain communication. These are usually sent home with the child and returned the next day. Caregivers can share noteworthy observations, events, or daily challenges, and families can respond to those or share their own news or reflections. While communication journals can be used with families of all the infants or toddlers in your care, they can be an especially valuable tool in establishing consistency between home and the early care and learning environment for infants and toddlers with special needs.
- Incorporate children's books in your classroom library that reflect consideration of multiple abilities and differences.
- Modify daily activities so that all children can participate in their own way.
- Invite families to talk with you about their infant or toddler. For example, a family member may come in your classroom and talk about their child's use of adaptive equipment (e.g., braces, wheelchair, or a communication device). The family member may explain the use of equipment, which can help children and other families understand aspects of their life. This also promotes acceptance of differences.
- Be a team player! Work collaboratively with families and other professionals who may be involved in the delivery of services to infants and toddlers with dis/abilities.

If disagreements or miscommunication arise, consider the following:

- Remind yourself that your role is to support families' hopes and dreams for their child.
- Be patient. Caring for an infant or toddler with a disability may be challenging at times, and family members need time to navigate this experience at their own pace.
- Avoid making judgments of families and their infants or toddlers.
- Consider difficult times as opportunities to build trust between yourself and families.
- Question your assumptions about working with families of children with disabilities or special needs and urge other professionals you know to do the same.

- Talk with your trainer, supervisor, or coach when in doubt about any aspect of your work with families.

Watch the video below to learn about having difficult conversations with families. Refer to the content two sections above for more ideas on how to communicate about difficult situations.



Explore

What are some of your assumptions about families of children with disabilities and your role when working with them? In the activity, *Reflecting on Families of Children with Special Needs*, share your thoughts after each question. Then, share your responses with a trainer, coach, or administrator.

In the activity, *Using Family-Specific Language*, read the scenario and write down how you would handle speaking to the child's family. Share your responses with your coach, trainer, or administrator.



Reflecting on Families of Children With Special Needs

Consider your view on families of children with special needs and think about your role in their lives



Using Family-Specific Language

Consider how much information a family is comfortable sharing about their child's needs



Required: Complete and review this document with your trainer, supervisor, or administrator



Apply

Use the handout, *Useful Resources for Families and Professionals*, to explore the websites and learn more about ways to support families of children with special needs or disabilities. You may consider sharing this information with families. Think about how the information in *The Emotional Experience of Families* will impact how you view families and respond to their decisions and behavior.

Building a collection of resources that can be easily shared with families in your program is a great way to build supportive relationships. Use the *Disability Services Resource* activity to create a resource to help families learn more about local agencies that provide services for children with disabilities. CDA candidates should use the *CDA*

Family Resource Guide: Disability Services handout to complete this activity.



Useful Resources for Families and Professionals

Use these resources to learn more about families with children with special needs



The Emotional Experience of Families of Children with Disabilities

Understand the emotional impact families can experience when they learn about their child's disabilities



Disability Services Resource

Create a list of resources to support children with disabilities



CDA Family Resource Guide: Disability Services

This activity is required for the CDA Professional Portfolio and should be completed by CDA candidates only.

GLOSSARY

CHILD OUTCOMES SUMMARY (COS) PROCESS:

Team process required by the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs for all state early intervention and preschool special education agencies to report data summarizing a child's functioning in three outcomes areas: (1) positive social-emotional skills, (2) acquisition and use of knowledge and skills, and (3) use of appropriate behaviors to meet needs

EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIAL EDUCATION / IDEA PART B:

Federal program implemented by local education agencies to provide services and accommodations to eligible students with educational disabilities ages three to twenty-one

EARLY INTERVENTION / IDEA PART C:

Federal program implemented by states to provide services to families with eligible children with developmental delays or disabilities ages birth to three

EXCEPTIONALITIES:

Any accommodation a student needs outside of standard classroom instruction and design. This is a blanket term and can include students with behavioral issues, students on accelerated learning tracks, and students with physical dis/abilities.

INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAM (IEP):

Written program for special education (IDEA Part B) that lists educational goals, services, and accommodations for eligible children ages three to twenty-one

INDIVIDUALIZED FAMILY SERVICE PLAN (IFSP):

Written plan for providing early intervention (IDEA part C) services for eligible families with children ages birth to three

LOCAL EDUCATION AGENCIES:

Publicly-funded school districts

RELATED SERVICES:

Including but not limited to the following services: speech-language therapy, audiology, interpreting, psychological, physical therapy, occupational therapy, recreation, counseling, orientation and mobility, medical services, nursing, social work, parent counseling and training

**Demonstrate**

- Q1** Finish this statement: In your work with families of children with special needs, family-centered practice... *
- honors and respects family diversity in all aspects (racial, cultural, ethnic, spiritual, socioeconomic, and linguistic).
 - encourages family-to-family support and networking.
 - facilitates collaboration between families and professionals.
 - All of the above

Q2 Which is not an appropriate way to communicate with the family of a child with special needs?

*

- Ask the family what their wishes and concerns are for their child.
- Ask the family to share resources with you regarding the education of their child.
- Tell the family that you are disappointed they don't agree with your recommendations about their child.
- Ask the family to share reflections about how their child functions in their home environment.

Q3 True or false? It is not important for you to reflect upon your thoughts and assumptions about families of children with special needs. *

- False
- True

References & Resources

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