

Including Families in Information Gathering Processes

A thorough and reliable assessment of a child's level of developmental functioning at any given time is usually dependent on **three sources of information**:

- direct interaction with the child
- observation of the child
- collection of information from family members, caregivers, and others who interact with the child regularly

Whether information is being gathered as part of a standardized assessment or as part of a general screening, collaboration with families is important. Including families in assessment processes has a **two-fold benefit for children**:

- It provides assessors, service providers, and teachers with more information about the child and about possible needs of the family.
- Collaboration also provides family members with opportunities to observe, reflect on, and better understand their child's development.

Parental involvement is a critical element of both assessment and care/education of infants and young children.

- Family participation is central to the framework of **IDEA** (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) and it is important that families are treated individually.
- Family involvement has been mandated by the **Head Start** framework since 1964.
- Family participation is a tenet of **NAEYC's** (National Association for the Education of Young Children) Code of Ethical Conduct (see Section II).



In addition to formal guidelines for assessment and program services, families should be involved in all decisions that affect their children's experiences with a program or classroom. References for more information related to requirements for family participation:

- Head Start – Family Engagement
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/browse/topic/family-engagement>
- NAEYC – Practices in Early Childhood Assessment: Position Statement (2014)
<http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/PSETH05.pdf>
- TATS – Families as Partners
<https://www.livebinders.com/media/get/MjM0NDcwMDg=>



Engaging with Families

It is important that appropriate focus be placed on interactions during the assessment process related to gathering information about the child as well as clarifying roles of assessor and family members during the assessment process.

Family information sharing is a voluntary activity for families, so it is important to articulate why their involvement is important and at the same time address any concerns they have about their roles. Take time to prepare family members by explaining the process and describing the types of activities involved in the assessment.

- **Interview**

Although assessment instruments for young children include some items that require direct interaction and/or observation by the examiner, there are items that address information that people who see the child in a variety of situations will need to provide. This is usually accomplished with an interview of the family members.

Listed below are ideas for **addressing some of the barriers to family participation**:



- Give the family members an opportunity and some time to talk about their child and to ask questions before beginning to ask the questions related to assessment.
- Reassure them that the goal of an interview is to gather accurate information about the child. Some family members might be reluctant to discuss what might be perceived as “weaknesses” in their child’s development. Some might fear that their child’s difficulties might reflect on their parenting skills.
- Within the guidelines of the standardization of the assessment, provide additional clarification about questions when necessary. Ask for additional information by using probe questions to gain more specific information.
- If family members are uncomfortable with having a team of assessment staff present, designate a team member to conduct the interview while other assessors play with the child or begin assessment items with the child.

- **Assessment Tasks**



A unique aspect of the assessment of young children is that parents, caregivers, and/or other family members are often present during the assessment. It is important that family members understand the necessity of the examiner’s observations and structured assessments be reliable and based on the child’s performance at the time of the assessment. Explain the nature of standardized assessment to the family and emphasize the following characteristics of both the assessment and of children:

- Items on standardized developmental assessments are arranged in a sequential order with difficulty increasing through the age level milestones. Therefore, some items (including interview questions) are below the age expectation and will seem “too easy” for the child. Some items and questions are above the age expectation and will seem “too hard” for the child.

- It is a requirement of a standardized instrument to present items and questions until a child has accomplished, as well as missed a certain number of items. Therefore, it might seem that their child is “missing” or getting “a lot wrong.” Explain to the family that the assessment is designed to give information across a wide age level.
- Children often perform differently during an assessment than they do in informal situations. Family members might have seen different levels of skills at home than they observe during the assessment. Reassure them that you will document their comments about differences they notice.

Building Rapport with Children and Families

Family Culture

Because there are such differences among cultural, ethnic, racial, and linguistic groups, it is difficult if not impossible to address each of the various groups. It is useful to have a foundational set of strategies to address the needs of diverse families.



Strategies for enhancing collaborative relationships are listed and described below. The resource document is available at this site: https://cms-kids.com/providers/early_steps/training/itds/Module5/Lesson5-6.html

- **Respect unique family systems** – Some households and support systems include extended family member who network to provide support while others focus on the immediate family and seek external support. An understanding of family structure helps in determining the needs of the family as well as in understanding previous experiences that might impact a child’s development.
- **Personalized Relationships** – Some families prefer a formal relationship with professionals while others prefer an informal, friendly relationship. Cultures often differ in the recognition of the person who is “head of the family” and it is important to be aware that families have unique systems for making decisions about their children.
- **Appropriate Communication** – Providing information in ways that family members understand is crucial. Efficient and accurate translations are necessary for families who speak a language other than English. A question- answer format, as well as assessors assuming the lead in directing topics of conversation, might be sources of tension for some families. Suggestions related to appropriate communication are listed below:



- Talk about the child in positive terms. Family members are likely to be sensitive to the idea the “everyone knows what she cannot do”.
- Avoid using jargon and acronyms. When it is necessary to use technical terms, give an explanation about the meaning.
- Thank the family members for their help and their commitment to their child. Ask if they have questions or need help finding resources and/or services for their child or family. Be cautious of making predictions or promises but give the family information about “next steps”.

Guiding Families

Interpretations of results should extend beyond descriptive reporting and be at a level that facilitates family members' understanding and involvement in addressing the needs of their child. Families usually want to know and should be given information about delays, interventions, services, and strategies that are appropriate for their child. Beyond the discussion and planning for eligibility of services, family should be offered information to assist them in accessing community services.

Providing Information about Community Services

- Provide families lists of community agencies which support children and families. These lists are specific to counties and communities, but such a list could include the following:
 - Needs for school enrollment if the child will be attending a Prekindergarten class.
 - Locations and information related to family and child health services, including the Department of Health access information.
 - Public agencies which assist family members with childcare, mental health concerns, and other needs related to families with young children
 - If the child will be attending school, receiving itinerant therapy services and/or early intervention provide the names and contact information for the staff and/or agencies that are likely to provide the services.
 - Information given to families should not include recommendations for specific private service providers.
- Families should be encouraged to use strategies at home that will focus on the developmental sequence of milestones instead of focusing on a level of development from a checklist. Encourage families to provide consistent routines and appropriate play and communication interactions. Many developmental checklists include suggestions for activities, as do the websites listed above.

References:

Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center (ECTA). (2020). Engaging Families as Partners. Practitioner Practice Guide.

Newborg, J. (2016). Battelle Developmental Inventory, 2nd Edition Normative Update, Examiner's Manual. Riverside Insights Publishing.

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