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Building Positive Family/Caregiver Relationships with School-Based Personnel

Partnering with school-based personnel and having an ongoing relationship is a vital component to support student learning. Building a relationship with schools as a parent/caregiver is crucial for your child's educational success and well-being. It is acceptable, even encouraged, to be proactive in your child's education. Connect with teachers and administrators in both casual and formal settings as early as you can. Communication is key to building relationships. Effective two-way communication relies on families and educators having a variety of ways to receive and discuss information about students' progress within and outside of the school environment. This ongoing process allows for meaningful interactions and authentic connections between schools and families that are focused on supporting student learning while meeting the unique situational, cultural, and linguistic needs of all families.

Family/Caregiver Participation

There are many ways you might engage in your student's education. Meetings and events are opportunities for relationship building, sharing information and making informed decisions. Some processes you might be invited to are listed below.

Family-Teacher-Student Conferences

Families are essential partners in understanding and meeting the needs of their child and must know how their child is progressing in school and what they can do to support their child's learning and development at home.

Personalized Learning Planning Process

This ongoing process requires participation by families and other engaged adults. The Personalized Learning Plan (PLP) is a guide to help students, in grade seven through grade 12, meet their short-term and long-term goals toward graduation and post-secondary success.

Title I

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is the nation's general education law. There are several key provisions in the law related to family engagement in a child's education.

Districts receiving Title I funds must, set aside at least one percent of their Title I funds to carry out parent and family engagement activities and



Include parents and family members in decisions about how these family engagement funds are spent.

Educational Support Team (EST)

One process a family can be engaged in when a student needs additional supports is through the school's Educational Support Team. Student referrals may be brought to this team through a referral process or the team may use screening assessments to identify students who might need additional short-term, skill specific support. The team could include an administrator, teachers, a school psychologist, school counselor(s), parents/guardians, a social worker, and other staff with behavioral and/or academic expertise. Through this EST meeting an EST plan may be developed. This EST plan should usually be a relatively short-term, highly specific intervention. Family participation should happen before, during, and after an EST meeting.

504 Meeting

Another meeting you may participate in as a family member is a 504 meeting. Section 504 is a Federal law that provides a broad spectrum of protection against discrimination based on disability or impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. Qualified students who meet the definition of an individual with a disability under Section 504 are entitled to receive accommodation, supports, and services that are designed to access education. A 504 meeting might be to determine if your child is eligible for a Section 504 plan or a review of an existing plan to determine if updates are needed.

Family/Caregivers of Students with Disabilities

A successful family/professional collaboration is critical for the development and well-being for children with disabilities. According to "Family/Professional Collaboration for Children with Special Health Needs and their Families" (University of Vermont), a positive collaboration:

1. Promotes a relationship in which family members and professionals work together to ensure the best services for the child and the family;
2. Recognizes and respects the knowledge, skills and experience that families and professionals bring to the relationship;
3. Acknowledges that the development of trust is an integral part of a collaborative relationship;
4. Facilitates open communication so that families and professionals feel free to express themselves;
5. Creates an atmosphere in which the cultural traditions, values, and diversity of families are acknowledged and honored;
6. Recognizes that negotiation is essential in a collaborative relationship; and

7. Brings to the relationship the mutual commitment of families, professionals, and communities to meet the needs of children with special health needs and their families.

What does the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) say about parent-professional partnerships?

IDEA is based on professionals having a meaningful partnership with families. Parents are equal members on the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) and Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams.

“Parents” under IDEA are defined as:

- A biological or adoptive parent
- A legal guardian
- A person who is acting as a parent, such as a grandparent or stepparent with whom the child lives and who is legally responsible for the child
- A parent who has been appointed by the Vermont Educational Surrogate Parent Program
- A foster parent who was appointed as an educational surrogate parent

As members of the IFSP/IEP team, you as the parent/guardian, play a vital part in helping your child get the services needed. You are the best source of information about your child. The information you share with those who help your child is an important part of an effective education plan that meets your child’s unique needs.

Babies and Toddlers

Children’s Integrated Services – Early Intervention (CIS-EI) provides services to babies and toddlers, aged birth through 2 years old. CIS-EI services meet the developmental needs of your child and the needs of your family around learning how to enhance your child’s development. Services are written in the Individualized Family Service Plan or One Plan. The One Plan Team, of which the parent/guardian is the most important member, is a multi-disciplinary team which develops, maintains and evaluates One Plan Services.

The Service Coordinator ensures the delivery of your child’s services in your child’s One Plan and shares information and resources to support your family. The service coordinator will help you when you have questions.

As the parent/guardian, you are your child’s first and best teacher. At One Plan meetings, you will share your child’s medical history, health status and primary areas of development including: cognitive, physical, communication, social/emotional and adaptive/self-help.

Preschoolers

Preschoolers, ages three through five years of age, who qualify for Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) receive special education and related services provided by the school. The focus shifts from the family's needs to your child's learning needs under the provision of a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). Your child's services will be written into an Individualized Education Program. You, as the parent/guardian, are involved in all steps of the IEP process. If your child is transitioning from CIS-EI services to ECSE services, you will be part of a transition planning team which includes CIS-EI representatives and preschool service providers. You may bring a relative or friend for support at meetings. At transition planning meetings, you will share information about your family's culture and system of support, your hopes and dreams for your child, as well as challenges and concerns you might have.

To help ease your child's transition into a school environment, ask how you can prepare your child for that transition. Ask how you can help your child and if there is training available for you. Understand what expectations the school may have for you and how you can best partner with them. Work with your child's teachers to gather information about the school's procedures, teachers, resources, and programs so you are more familiar with them.

When possible, visit the school ahead of time and meet with your child's new teachers, the school principal, and other parents. Families of children with disabilities often work with many different professionals. At first you may feel that you do not have the information you need to make good decisions. You may also find it confusing to figure out what each professional will be doing to help your child. Setting up regular times to talk to your child's teachers and service providers can help you better understand IEP services. Contact your school district's Early Childhood Special Education coordinator or special education administrator if you have questions or concerns.

Resource: [Moving On: Planning Your Child's Transition Children's Integrated Services \(CIS\) - Early Intervention \(EI\) to Early Childhood Special Education \(ECSE\)](#) provides Vermont families of children with disabilities/developmental delays with information on the transition process from Early Intervention (CIS-EI) to Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) at age three.

Individualized Education Program

The Individualized Education Program is a written education plan for your child that describes the special education and related services your child will receive. Each child, ages 3 through 21, who is eligible to receive special education and related services will have an IEP. However, every child on an IEP is also a child in the general education system so the first step is to get to know the school's general education environment.

Roles of IEP Team Members

Parents/guardians know their child best. Caregivers can share their child’s history and culture, their strengths, challenges and interests. You can share your ideas for what your child needs to learn and how they learn best.

Children/youth should attend and participate in their IEP meetings when appropriate to share their hopes and dreams for the future, what they are good at or need help with, and what works and doesn’t work for them.

General education teachers can share information about the general curriculum, peer relationships, positive behavior intervention or strategies, and services or accommodations that your child may need to be successful learners and to be included in the general classroom environment.

Special educators bring their expertise about teaching strategies and methods, supplementary aids and services, testing accommodations, goals and objectives, and other parts of specialized individualized instruction.

Subject experts can interpret and explain evaluation results. The expert could be represented by one of the other team members.

For a child with a specific learning disability, at least one person who is qualified to conduct individualized diagnostic examinations.

The Local Education Agency (LEA) representative provides overall expertise about school resources and usually has expertise in special education. They have the authority to commit school resources and are responsible for the general curriculum and ensuring that services in the IEP are provided as written and agreed upon.

Families and the school can invite others with knowledge or expertise about the child. This may include medical professionals, therapists, childcare providers, or others who can speak to your child’s strengths and needs. Caregivers can also invite a family member, neighbor, friend, or advocate to take notes during the meeting and/or to be of support to themselves. Schools may invite a paraprofessional or a school nurse, should your child have health care needs, or related services personnel depending on the services being discussed. In addition, when transition services are being discussed for youth, outside agencies, such as HireAbility or adult service providers that may provide or pay for post-secondary services should be invited.

[“Family Engagement for Individualized Education Program \(IEP\) Team Members: Ensuring Meaningful Participation by Families”](#) provides strategies for IEP Team members to consider to develop a more comprehensive approach to family engagement for families of children with disabilities.

The Parent's/Guardian's Role IEP Team Meetings

Your role as the parent/guardian is to actively participate in all special education meetings by being an open and curious member of the IEP team, asking questions, stating your child's needs and advocating for appropriate goals and services. You have the right to participate in meetings about the identification of your child's needs, assessments, educational services and placement of your child in the school setting. If you have a barrier (e.g. childcare, transportation, disability, language etc.) that prevents you from participating in your child's IEP meeting, you can ask for help.

Caregivers often participate in the special education evaluation process by providing informal and formal information about their child. Your input during the evaluation process feeds directly into your child's present levels of educational and functional performance. You can and should ask for what evaluation or assessment results mean in plain language that you can easily understand. You can ask for additional time or may need to record a meeting to fully understand the information being presented.

Caregivers provide input during the development of their child's IEP. Your input is included via the Parental Input section or page within the IEP. This becomes a part of your child's file. This form is in addition to providing your input during an IEP meeting. When you have a concern, you should contact your child's teachers or administrators as soon as possible. Open and honest communication is the most important element of family/professional collaboration.

In conclusion, the relationship between families and professionals is a cornerstone in the development and education of children with disabilities. A positive relationship ensures that children receive individualized and consistent support, which provides your child with a solid foundation as they move towards adulthood.

Final Thoughts

You are indeed your child's first teacher, and you have a very important role in helping your child continue to grow and learn once they are in school. Partnering with your child's teachers is the first step to ensuring you are well informed about what your child is learning and how they are progressing.

Resources

- "Partnering with Your Child's School: What Families Need to Know, Share, and Ask," Agency of Education's [Family Engagement Toolkit and Self-Assessment](#), (page 129) includes guiding questions and recommendations for creating a partnership that includes two-way communication with your child's teachers and school. The goal of using this resource is to create a partnership that can help you and the school staff work together to better support your child's learning and development.

- [Moving On: Planning Your Child's Transition Children's Integrated Services \(CIS\) - Early Intervention \(EI\) to Early Childhood Special Education \(ECSE\)](#) provides Vermont families of children with disabilities/developmental delays with information on the transition process from Early Intervention to Early Childhood Special Education at age three.
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