

Handout 5.1 Family – Ask the Expert

Dr. Carol Trivette Answers Questions about Working with Families



What Does the Research Say?

Understanding how to build the capacity of parents is critical. Research has examined the practices that build the capacity of parents. First, by focusing on the knowledge and skills that the family already has, second, by identifying the knowledge and skills that the family sees as important and third, by providing parents opportunities and experiences where they feel successful supporting their children. Research shows that when parents have trusting relationships with professionals and professionals ensure that their interactions with parents' strengthens the parents' beliefs that they can meet their children's needs, then positive outcomes for families and their young children with disabilities are demonstrated. Positive family outcomes include enhanced parental well-being and positive parent-child interactions. Research also shows that the use of capacity building practices with parents has a positive effect on child outcomes.

Compared to other frequently researched topics in the field such as parent-child interactions, there are few experimental research studies the focus on family practices. However, there have been several meta-analyses conducted by different research teams that used correlational studies regarding family practices. These meta-analyses have reported positive effects of family-centered, capacity-building practices on parents and children with disabilities. One research area that needs more study is appropriate practices with families of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds who have children with a disability.

Why Is This Important?

The important role that families play in the lives of young children is well-documented. Parents are the primary provider for meeting their children's physical, social-emotional, linguistic, and cognitive needs. Many practitioners understand the important role of families in the development of their children. With this knowledge, practitioners must then use their expertise to support parents who then help their children. The practitioner's goal is to work with the parents to enhance the child's development. This goal requires an additional set of practitioner skills beyond the skills used when working directly with the child. Practitioners need the expertise to enhance the parents' competence by building their knowledge and skills, in a way that allows parents to feel confident they can support their child's development.

Practitioners must understand how to implement essential family-centered, capacity building practices. The practices that are important for practitioners to use with all families include those that demonstrate respect for the family and build trust with the family by listening and honoring the uniqueness of their culture and beliefs. Practitioners need to provide the family with accurate, complete, and unbiased information so that the family can make their own decisions. Intervention practices in the home must be developed around the strengths of the child, the strengths of the family, and the priorities important to the family. Working in collaboration with the family, the practitioner can promote positive outcomes for the parents and the child.

Why Is This Important for Children with Disabilities?

First, families with young children with disabilities may face many of the challenges (e.g., financial insecurity, lack of time to get things done, care for elderly family members) that other families experience. They may also have many of the strengths (e.g., time management skills, engaging personalities, extended family support) that other families possess. However, families with young children with disabilities may have additional challenges that result from their children's disability; for example, higher medical costs, inconsistent child behavior or performance, and greater interactions with professionals and services. Practitioners need to use their expertise to support the family's active participation in meeting their challenges.

Bottom Line

Families of children with disabilities who access services want to help their children grow and develop. They often want new or more knowledge and skills about how to support their children's development. They want to feel competent and confident about how they support their children. Practitioners should work with families in ways that meet their requests for knowledge and skills in a manner that enhances the families' confidence and competence in their abilities to help their children reach their full potential.

About the Expert

Carol Trivette is an Associate Professor at East Tennessee State University where she teaches masters and doctoral students within the Department of Early Childhood Education. With colleagues, she continues to work on the promotion of practitioners' practices that enhance the capacity of all families to support their child's learning through research and dissemination efforts.
