

Voices from the Field: Judy Swett



Q1: How did the practitioners working with you and your child involve you in the early intervention process?

When my daughter was receiving early intervention services, I remember being told to do a lot of things with her to help her develop and learn. The problem was that no one asked me what I thought was important or explained to me why I needed to be doing certain things. Why was it that she was not supposed to “w” sit? After all it really was her favorite position. I didn’t understand the relevance of her learning to draw shapes. The practitioner would bring in a basket of toys, show me some things my daughter could do with these toys and then left with that same basket. I would remember her saying something about crossing midline, but I wasn’t sure why this mattered or how I could get her to do it after the provider left.

I wish that someone would have talked to me about my fears and my belief that I was totally responsible for helping my daughter close the gap in her development. I wish we had talked about my guilt over that fact that my daughter was a 10-week preemie. Thoughts about how I could have prevented this throughout my pregnancy wracked my brain constantly. I don’t remember being asked for my input in writing the plan goals and I didn’t realize that I should have a role in that. When my daughter moved to a classroom setting, I was concerned about how I would continue to be involved in helping her achieve her goals at home. Looking back on that experience, I realize how different things would have been if the practitioner had been using practices that supported my engagement in the process.

Q2: What could the practitioners have done differently to support your engagement as a team member?

The active participation of families is essential to making progress on IFSP outcomes and IEP goal/objectives. Practitioners always need to be conscious of how they are developing and maintaining relationships, partnering with families in ways that build trust and understanding. Awareness of cultural differences, the family’s learning style and recognition of the family’s strengths and priorities will also help to support this partnership. The answer to these questions can be obtained simply by asking the family questions about their culture, how they like information to be shared, areas of strength and skills for which they would like additional support.

Family engagement begins at the first contact through the ongoing review of the IFSP/IEP. The way in which practitioners share information with families and seek their input will set the tone for the relationship. Families need to know that their views are respected, and their input valued. They also need unbiased information shared in a way that allows for informed decision-making regarding supports and services. They need to be given accurate information regarding the Early Intervention/Preschool special education process so that they have a thorough understanding of their rights at each step along the way. Having previously gained information from the family about how they like to have information shared will help practitioners share this information and in a way that will allow the family to learn and understand.

The way that practitioners collaborate with other team members is essential to a strong collaborative relationship with the family. If all team members are not in agreement or are delivering mixed messages to the family, the family's trust in the teaming process will be eroded. Families also need to be clear on program expectations and the service delivery model being used. For example, in programs that use a primary service provider model, families need to understand how the model works, have confidence that other team members are being consulted on a regular basis, and that the primary provider may change depending upon the needs of the child. Families also need to be given an explanation of the purpose of the early intervention services and the importance of their involvement in home visits.

When moving from home-based services to a classroom model, families need to be assured that their input is still valued. They need to be given enough information about strategies used in the classroom or by related services providers so that they can use these strategies at home. This way, families can continue to support their child's development and learning at home. Family input should always be sought when reviewing IFSPs/IEPs or doing ongoing assessments and writing progress reports in the classroom.

When practitioners use teaming and collaboration skills with families, the family will continue to feel that they are a valued member of the team and are an integral partner in their child's ongoing development and learning.