



Resource Article

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"Engaging Families -
Helping Families Use
Intervention Strategies"

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Engaging families is core to the philosophy and practice of Part C early intervention. The theoretical underpinnings of early intervention include the transactional model of development (Sameroff, 1975). This model reinforces the key role parents play in their children's development and defines how parents' behaviors affect children's behavior and vice versa creating a transactional context for child learning. Also foundational to the work of early intervention is Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory of development (1979). Bronfenbrenner theorized human development from an ecological framework, accentuating how the interplay of evolving environments, including those beyond the immediacy of the child, influence children's development. Bronfenbrenner (1992) further reinforced the necessity to consider the child and environmental context in unison rather than separately and added that this approach could most effectively identify the aspects of the environment that are development enhancing or development impeding for children.

Yet, as family engagement is key to quality early intervention, it can also be challenging. To address this challenge Roberts, Hensle, and Brooks (2016) explored several questions about engaging families and supporting children's natural occurring learning opportunities specifically related to promoting children's communication development. In their article "More than try this at home: Including parents in early intervention" they provided responses to questions regarding why include parents in early intervention, how to include parents, what strategies to focus upon and how to choose those strategies, how to teach parents, and how to measure parent progress beyond child progress.

The answer to the question about why to include parents in early intervention is in part embedded in Sammeroff's transactional model of development and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory of human development. Roberts et al. reinforced that "intervening during these everyday transactions with typical communication partners increases the likelihood the child will generalize skills learned to other activities with the

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same communication partner” (p. 131). Also contributing to their strong argument for engaging parents was the concept of reliable dosage and the ability of parents to support their children between early intervention visits. Further, by empowering parents and building their competence and confidence to support their child and family they gain skills for creating multiple development enhancing opportunities that can last long past the early intervention years.

In response to the question of how to include parents, Roberts et al. stressed that “early intervention is more than teaching them (parent) a set of strategies” and that “it is not the job of speech-language pathologists to teach parents to be therapists, but rather to work with them within the context of their everyday routines and activities” (p. 131). Practitioners should employ a family-centered methodology that regards families as key team partners and key decision makers, building upon family strengths and empowering them within a respectful relationship that is uniquely individualized to the child and family.

When considering what strategies to teach, Roberts et al. highlighted six evidence-based language facilitation strategies commonly used to facilitate language. These included increasing the quantity of language that the child hears, using responsive strategies that acknowledge the child’s actions (e.g., parallel talk), providing verbal instructions for the child, using multi-modal strategies (e.g., pairing gestures with words), and engagement-based strategies that promote

engagement and participation (e.g., being playful). Roberts et al. provided supportive detail for each strategy and reinforced that strategy selection should be based upon the child’s developmental level. Equally important is considering the functional outcomes the family has identified, the current family situation, and the routines and activities that are part of the child and family’s day to day life. By capitalizing on natural learning opportunities parents can most effectively promote their child’s skill attainment and generalization. To teach parents strategies, that align with their outcomes and are meaningful in their day to day routines and activities, Roberts et al. highlighted the importance of adult learning principles, which includes providing opportunities for parents to practice the strategies being explored and taught. In partnership with practitioners.

Beyond helping parents discover and learn strategies to promote their child’s development, Roberts et al. emphasized the importance of also measuring parent progress with intervention strategies. They identified varied methods for measuring parent progress such as using clinical judgement, using rating tools, and applying observational methods and instruments. Without some means for determining family confidence and competence it will be difficult for the parents and practitioners to know if the strategies are working. Early intervention is multifaceted and must maintain a focus on family engagement. After all, families have the greatest capacity to enhance their very young children’s development.

- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1975). *The Ecology of Human Development*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
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- Roberts, M. Y. , Hensle, T., & Brooks, M. K. (2016). More than “try this at home” - including parents in early intervention. *Perspectives of the ASHA Special Interest Groups SIG 1, Vol1(Part 4)*, 130-142.
- Sameroff A. (1975). Transactional models in early social relations. *Human Development.*, 18, 65–79.

What do the data say?



Why is Family Engagement So Important?

There is a strong body of research documenting the positive impacts of family engagement on children's development and school participation and success. Included here are a few of the many findings evidencing the lasting benefits of family engagement.

- Early positive relationships shape and form the actual architecture of the infant's brain. Through regular responsive caregiver-baby interactions, in a "serve and return" manner, babies brains form essential neurological connections. And when the early brain architecture is strong, the more likely the infants and toddlers will "be robust learners throughout their lives" (p. 1).

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, "Young Children Develop in an Environment of Relationships," Working Paper No. 1 (2004). http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/reports_and_working_papers/working_papers/wp1

- Children's early experiences have a lasting impact on later success. Hart and Risley (1995) found variations in children's IQ and language abilities relative to the amount parents spoke to their children. Children with less verbal enrichment early on in life were more likely to be behind in cognitive and language abilities in kindergarten and elementary school. And children living in poverty were found to hear fewer than one third of the words heard by children in higher-income families.

Hart, B., & Risley, T.R. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes.

- Family engagement can lead to improved social emotional competence and reduced anxiety in children. It can also contribute to reduced conduct problems and aggression related instances.

Hernandez, L. (2000). *Families and Schools Together: Building Organizational Capacity for Family-School Partnerships*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project.

- Family engagement is associated with reduced drop-out rates. Interestingly, studies on patterns of children dropping out of school indicate that these children started distancing themselves from school at an early age and were absent more often than their classmates as early as first grade.

Epstein, J. L. & Sheldon, S. B. (2002). Present and accounted for: Improving student attendance through family and community involvement. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 95(5), 308-318.

- Family engagement and intervention efforts that involve families in supporting their children's learning at home are associated with higher achievement. "When parents talk to their children about school, expect them to do well, help them plan for college, and make sure that out-of-school activities are constructive, their children do better in school" (p. 8).

Henderson, A. & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Annual Synthesis. Austin TX: National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools Southwest Educational Developmental Laboratory.



Consultation Corner

3 Strategies to Prepare Families – and Yourself – for Supporting Caregivers

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Sure, we could dive right into what to do to support caregiver learning during visits because that's what we all want to know. If we did, though, we would miss a vital part of the process. Before you can effectively support caregivers, you have to prepare yourself and the parent for the process. Facilitating caregiver learning takes an intentional effort of remembering why you are there and what you want to accomplish. It also involves a true partnership between you and the caregiver which requires that both halves of the partnership understand how things will work.

Imagine this Scenario

You walk into your first visit with a family. You are determined to focus on both learners during the visit – the parent and the child – because you read this great article in last month's newsletter. You sit on the couch beside the parent, explain how early intervention (EI) works, then ask the parent if you can join whatever routine she and the child would have been doing had you not been there. The mother looks at you, shrugs her shoulders, and says they would just be hanging out, with the kids watching cartoons and playing while she does laundry or cleans up after breakfast. At this point, your enthusiasm slips and you find yourself moving to the floor to join the children's play. Once down there you ask yourself, "What do I do now?"

Does this feel familiar? I can tell you that I've been there. I know the ease with which we can slip right back into child-focused interactions, while the parent watches (or does laundry

nearby), especially when we don't know what else to do. This visit is at a crossroads. You can either keep playing with the children while the mother watches (or gets up to do chores), or you can reflect on how to engage the mother and support parent-child interactions. I would suggest that the answer to "What do I do now?" actually involves three strategies that should have happened before your bottom hit the floor. Let's break down each strategy and imagine how you might implement them.

Strategy #1: Reflect on Your Beliefs

In a nutshell, you practice what you believe. Take time to pause and reflect on your role as an early interventionist and what you believe about your job. If you believe that you are there to help infants and toddlers reach their milestones, then you are more likely to use child-focused intervention. If you believe that you are there to build the capacity of the parent to facilitate her child's development during naturally occurring activities, then you are more likely to use family-centered intervention (Swanson, Raab, & Dunst, 2011). Be honest with yourself. It's very hard to evolve your practices without honest self-reflection, so think about what you do, talk with a colleague or supervisor, or journal about it.

For more info on family capacity-building, check out these free resources from the Early Childhood Technical Assistance (ECTA) Center:

[Family Capacity-Building Online Module](#)
[Family Capacity-Building Checklist](#) (a great self-reflection tool)

Consultation Corner (continued)

Strategy #2: Embrace Your Role as a Facilitator of Adult Learning

You're off to a great start by committing to read this series! However, it can be very helpful to seek out specific information about how adults learn too. Consider these five adult learning principles:

#1 – [Adults learn best when what is being learned is immediately relevant and useful to them.](#)

#2 – [Adults learn best when new knowledge is built on prior knowledge.](#)

#3 – [Adults learn best through active participation and practice.](#)

#4 – [Adults learn and remember most successfully when what they are learning is practiced in context and in real time.](#)

#5 – [Adult learners want feedback on their learning and performance.](#)

If you want to know more about how these principles apply to your work in EI, click each link to read a post on the EI Strategies for Success blog (Childress, 2015).

Basically, what we know about adult learners can be very useful when you consider how to support caregivers. We know that the best way to impact the child's development is through parent-child interactions (Mahoney, 2009). Walking through the door of every visit with the mindset that you are there to help both learners is critically important. Even when the going gets tough, keep this perspective in mind. You are a facilitator of adult learning too. Look for those golden opportunities during visits to help parents learn and use an intervention strategy with their children. It's not enough anymore to model for the parent for an hour when you can spend that hour helping the parent: a) consider which aspect of the child's

development would be most useful to address right now; b) explore what the parent knows and has already tried; c) practice and problem-solve how to use strategies during relevant family routines in real time, with your support; and d) share reciprocal feedback to facilitate the parent's deep understanding of what to do with the child.

Here's a fantastic, practical resource from TaCTICs: [8 Concepts from Adult Learning You Can Use to Support Caregivers](#)

Strategy #3: Paint a Picture for Families

Now, let's shift to thinking about how to prepare the family. On your first visit, be sure to spend time talking with families about how EI works. This will set the stage for how families understand intervention and for how they participate in the process (Pletcher & Younggren, 2013). Ask the parent what she knows about EI. Be specific when explaining how the parent-provider partnership works and emphasize the importance of the parent's active participation during, and between, sessions. Adults like to know why something is important (e.g., its relevance to them) so be sure to explain this. You can go back to our field's [Mission and Key Principles](#) (Workgroup on Principles and Practices in Natural Environments, 2008) for help knowing what to say.

Help the parent realize that you will be visiting to help her, not just her child. Describe a typical intervention visit and the importance of what happens between visits. Emphasize that the purpose of an EI visit is to brainstorm, observe, practice and problem-solve together. Help her prepare for the next visit by planning ahead for what you will do together. Specifically tell her that during the visits, you hope to collaborate

Consultation Corner *(continued)*

as partners, interacting with the child while trying out intervention strategies so that between visits, she will feel comfortable and confident using those same strategies with her child during daily activities. Ask the parent how this sounds to her: Is this what she expected? How would she like to work together? Air out any misconceptions and start building your partnership from the very first contacts.

...and Repeat!

You will probably have to repaint versions of this picture several times and that's okay. Remember, parents are learning their role in what is likely to be a very new and different system. This is part of the parent's learning process and repetition can be a great tool. Same goes for you and Steps 1 and 2. Reflecting in your own practices is an ongoing professional development activity so get into the habit of thinking about what you do and why you do it.

But What About...?

As we wrap-up this segment, you might be wondering things like "...but what about when the parent just wants me to teach her child?" or "but what about the fact that I've been practicing EI since the dawn of time and it's working just fine?" To both of these, I would recommend patience and openness to new things. This may be new for you, so give yourself time to learn and practice. This is undoubtedly new for the parent, so help her understand how important she is. Be flexible and responsive both to her and to yourself. As long as you set the stage, prepare all the payers, and maintain your perspective as a family capacity-builder, you'll both be just fine.

Next month, we'll dig into three strategies you can use to facilitate caregiver learning during visits because once everyone is prepared, the fun really begins!

References

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On the WWW

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has a line of resources in the form of articles, blogs, and family materials all focused on family engagement. Check out the article *Making connections. The professional obligation to value families* by Rhian Evans Allvin, review the blog *Understanding the power of*

parent involvement, or learn more about family tips for talking to teachers.

The direct link to these resources and more is:

<https://www.naeyc.org/resources/topics/family-engagement>



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Upon successful completion of the exam, you will receive a certificate of non-discipline specific continuing education contact hours.

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