

What you will learn in this module

How to build partnerships with families of children with disabilities

Good communication and respect are necessary between teachers and parents. Working together teachers and parents help each child reach his potential. When a teacher shows interest, parents know that she cares about their child.

How to meet family needs in a culturally sensitive way

A family's culture affects everything its members do. Early childhood teachers should be aware of their own culture and how it affects their work. This helps them manage the differences between themselves and the families they work with.

How to help families manage stress

Families of children with disabilities often experience additional stress around child-rearing issues. Parent education and chances to share with one another help families cope. Directors of early childhood programs assist families in finding the resources they need to manage chronic, long-term stress.

You already know a lot about working with families

You know how to partner with families to support their children's development.

Good relationships with families start with good communication. Daily contact helps teachers respond to family questions and concerns. Families share valuable information about their children's interests, strengths and support needs. Teachers keep families up-to-date about program activities. Working together, families and teachers find new ways to help children grow and reach their potential.

Most families of children with disabilities communicate openly with their child's teacher. But some may not want to tell too much about their child. They may need to be sure that the child is safe and is doing well before they open up. It is important for teachers to address parent concerns to put their minds at ease.

You know that families come in all shapes and sizes.

Some children live in traditional two-parent families. One parent stays at home while the other works full time. Or both parents may work. Many children live with single parents or other relatives.

Children with disabilities are members of all types of families. And these families often find themselves isolated and alone. The birth of a child with a disability can cause relatives to withdraw. The parents are left trying to adjust to all the new things happening in their lives. They often are without the help of other family members.

A family's culture affects its beliefs about child rearing and parent-teacher relationships. It also affects how family members react to the birth of a child with a disability.

You know how to help families manage stress.

Families rely on early childhood teachers to keep their children safe. The comfort of knowing their children are well cared for helps families manage the stress that comes with child rearing. Early childhood programs help families meet each other and share common concerns. Families rely on early childhood teachers to answer questions about child development and where to find resources.

A child's disability increases the family's stress. Parents can't always tap into the informal supports that other families depend on. Early childhood teachers help these families form relationships with others. When families share information about their children's progress they feel less alone and less stressed. They feel more encouraged about their children's acceptance and well being.



How to build partnerships with families of children with disabilities

Early education in an inclusive setting helps families meet the challenges of raising children with disabilities. These affect the whole family. Often the family of a child entering an inclusive program has a history of problems with other early childhood programs. Perhaps the program wouldn't enroll the child. Or dismissed him when staff couldn't meet his needs. This family may not want to share information about their child's special needs. It may fear being rejected. Another family may worry that their child can't keep up with others. They fear that other children will reject their child.

Enrollment

“But it’s hard to provide a quality program if you don’t know about the child’s special needs,” said Ms. Khang. “You don’t know how to plan.”

“That’s why we train our student teachers to reach out when the child is enrolling,” said Ms. Alvarez. “We make sure that this first contact lets families know that disability doesn’t mean rejection.”

“What do they do that’s so reassuring?” asked Ms. Khang. “Do they use a special form or ask special questions?”

“They ask everybody the same questions,” replied Ms. Alvarez. “But both the enrollment form and their questions assume that some children have disabilities. Teachers let parents know they expect that.”

“Can you give me an example of what you mean?” asked Ms. Creegan.

“Well,” said Ms. Alvarez, “instead of saying ‘does your child have special needs?’ our form says ‘please check off any special needs your child has so that we can make the right accommodations.’ We don’t define ‘special needs’ as only a disability like language problems or developmental delays. We include conditions like allergies or asthma that are common in childhood. And we add two other categories: ‘other’ and ‘none of the above.’ Families with a child who has a special need that’s not listed can describe it. Those that have no special needs check ‘none of the above.’”

“So the way the form is set up tells families that you don’t see disabilities as unusual,” said Ms. Creegan. “You know that some children will have them.”

