



## Supporting Family Participation

### A Family Guided Process

- Provides information and resources
- Is transactional
- Is individualized
- Offers choices
- Results in informed decision-making

A family guided process is based on the assumption that adequate information and support are provided to family members to assist them in making responsible and informed decisions. To guide the process and make it “fit” their child and family situation, the family members must understand the key concepts of the decision they are being asked to make.

One of the most, if not the most, essential responsibilities of the interventionist is to make information and resources available to families using methods and materials that are meaningful and easily understood by the family. The materials should be tailored to offer the information, in a format that is most beneficial to the family. The timeline for disseminating the information should be individualized for the family and not based on arbitrary program policies.

For some families, information will be shared through conversations; others may prefer written documentation to read and digest independently; still others prefer another parent to share the information with them. Many families prefer talking about an issue, such as using routines for intervention, with the early intervention staff and then watching a supportive video. There is no single correct way; the family guides the process by choosing the ways that are best for them.

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The information sharing, however, is not unidirectional. It is a transactional exchange. As information is shared with the family, the family is also sharing information with the interventionist about their values, interests, histories, concerns, and goals. The content shared by the family should help guide the interventionist in knowing if more information or resources are needed or if the family is ready to problem solve and make decisions.

Problem solving and decision making is initiated during the assessment while the IFSP process are continued and expanded in the intervention. Family guided routines for early intervention are developed using the family's choices for settings, participants, materials, and strategies. The routines are not available in a workbook for dissemination. Each one is different depending upon the family's interests and strengths. The family identifies who will participate, how often, when, and where.

Identifying the information with the family to develop the routines requires mutual respect, time, and effective communication skills. There is not a set of communication skills specific to the development of family guided intervention routines but simply a skillful application of the basic communication skill. These are useful in early intervention when a family realizes they are being asked to share very personal information.

**The interventionist needs to be able to:**

- **Listen:**
  - \* focus and follow the family's lead
  - \* use facial expressions to encourage
- **Reflect feelings:**
  - \* be clear and concise without adding or deleting information or judging
  - \* summarize sensitively
- **Reflect content:**
  - \* paraphrase briefly
  - \* organize and restate
- **Question:**
  - \* make open ended comments and queries
  - \* promote problem solving



Implementing a family guided process engages the team in a collaborative and creative problem solving process to achieve flexible and individualized participation for each family. The process includes steps that preempt jumping ahead to solutions without carefully identifying and examining the data, possible alternatives, and delineating an evaluation plan to be sure the decisions are most appropriate. No decisions made should ever be considered final but rather the team should embrace the value of ongoing problem solving to see new and better options for enhancing the child's development and the family's decision making capacity.

**Communication Skills**

- Listen
- Reflect feelings
- Reflect content
- Question/comment

In relationships valued by the partners, there is a tendency to provide answers to questions that are perceived as “correct” or the answer believed to be the one the questioner wants to hear whether it is true or not. Families value their relationship with their interventionists because of the services they provide for their child. Interventionists also value their relationship with the family. Both partners must appreciate the complexity of the communication focusing on embedding intervention within the daily lives of children and families. It is very personal.

If we look at the meanings and not just the words, families offer us some excellent guidance for communicating more effectively by the comments they make. Family members rarely describe themselves as equal partners in the intervention process. They lack the experience and expertise the providers have. A problem solving approach supports the back and forth exchange of ideas and strategies. No one has all the information; everyone has some. Together the best plan can be developed.

Interventionists frequently ask advice on how to get families involved in their child’s intervention. Involving families in the intervention process is really not the question. Families are involved simply by being a family. The question really needs to focus on the amount and types of involvement. The answers then can come from the ideas and strategies offered and the choices made by the family members.

The interventionists need to be aware of the ever changing needs of families and be able to accommodate the changes within their priorities and routines. Each visit becomes an opportunity to reflect on the current priorities, to brainstorm options and identify more preferred routines and intervention strategies.

“Meals are a good time to work on his goals. Even if you get really busy, he has to eat, so opportunities are always there. He’s usually in a good mood during meals, and I am able to pull in many different skills, making sounds, turn-taking, whatever. Plus, he’s developing life skills that he’ll have to have. Our family likes to eat and see it as a special time to be together.”



The intervention team, including the family, must determine if the opportunities for teaching and learning are sufficient for each child. The team must monitor the child’s learning as routines change and skills develop. Lives change; children change; concerns and priorities change. It is only logical that services and supports change accordingly. There is no perfect approach – only the one that meets the needs of the child and family.

**References**

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