

Lecture 2

Book: Exceptional Children – An Introduction to Special Education

Chapter 3 - Collaborating with Parents and Families in a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Society

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Summary

Support for family involvement – The following three issues contribute to the increased emphasis on collaboration between parents and teachers in the education of exceptional children:

- **Parents:** Advocating for change – Parents of exceptional children have advocated for equal access to educational opportunities for their children with great effectiveness. The first parent group on behalf of children with disabilities was the National Society for Crippled Children organized in 1921. The United Cerebral Palsy Association founded in 1948 and the National Association for Retarded Citizens (now called the Arc) organized in 1950 are two national parent organizations largely responsible for making the public aware of the special needs of children with disabilities. Other well known parent based organizations are The Learning Disabilities Association of America, Association for Science in Autism Treatment and a large number of parent members in The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps (TASH).
- **Educators:** Seeking Greater Effectiveness – To meet the needs of children with disabilities, educators must expand the traditional role of the classroom teacher beyond that of instructing academic skills in the classroom. Effective special educators design and implement instructional programs that enable students with disabilities to use and maintain academic, language, social, self-help, recreational and vocational skills in home, school, and community settings. The many different settings and situations show the extent of the challenge teachers face in helping children use newly learned skills throughout their daily lives. Second, the many different settings and social situations children experience in home and community provide extended opportunities for learning and practicing important skills. Teachers must look beyond the classroom for assistance and support, and parents and families are natural and necessary allies. The effectiveness of educational programs for children with disabilities is increased when parents and families are actively involved.
- **Legislators:** Mandating Parent and Family Involvement – Congress gave important to parent involvement in the Education for Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142).

Moreover, in IDEA of 2004, Congress thus reaffirmed it, “Over 30 years of research and experience has demonstrated that the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by strengthening the role and responsibility of parents and ensuring that families of such children have meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children at school and at home.” The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 also views parent involvement as a key to academic success of students and states three parent involvement components:

- Schools must notify parents of their improvement status.
- Schools must collaborate with parents in developing and implementing a school involvement plan in which parents, school staff and students share responsibility for improving academic achievements.
- Schools must include strategies that promote effective parent involvement in the plan.

Understanding Families of Children with Disabilities:

- **Family Responses to a child with disabilities** – Early research on parent’s responses to having children with disabilities identified mostly negative outcomes as parents went through a grief cycle of confronting, adjusting and accepting or adapting. Poyaude (1993) suggested a stage beyond acceptance or adaptation that involves appreciation of the positive aspects of family life with a child with a disability. Many parents report not only coping successfully with the challenges posed by a child with disabilities but also experiencing benefits to the family. (E.g. some people feel “the presence of my child is very uplifting”, “my child is the reason I’m a more responsible person.”) After a period of uncertainty, most families of children with disabilities reestablish healthy family functioning. With strength and resilience they become determined to do whatever they can to meet their children’s needs as well as to move forward with a sense of optimism.
- **The many roles of the exceptional parent** – Parents of children with disabilities experience added physical, emotional and financial stress. Parents of such children play many different roles in the process of supporting their children :
 - **Caregiver** – The additional care giving requirements for children with disabilities can be tremendous and cause added stress. The level of care depends upon the severity of the disability. ‘ Respite care’ (temporary institutional care which provides relief for their usual caregivers) can reduce mental and physical stress on parents and families.
 - **Provider** – Providing for a child with disability means extra expenses. Many parents of children with learning and behavioral disorders pay thousands of dollars for specific treatments, behavioral intervention programs and in-home therapy. Some families receive assistance from federal, state or local agencies but its’ seldom enough to cover the costs. In addition to this, families of children with disabilities often have reduced income because one parent works part-time instead of full time or must withdraw from work to take care of the child.

- **Teacher** – As children with disabilities often do not acquire new skills as naturally and independently as normal children, some parents must learn to use and teach their children to use special equipment and assistive devices such as hearing aids, braces, wheelchairs, and adapted eating utensils.
- **Counselor** – Parents of a child with disabilities must also deal with their child’s feelings that result from their particular disability (e.g. “Why can’t I go swimming like the other kids?”) Parents play a critical role in how a child with disabilities comes to feel about himself. Their interactions can help develop an active, outgoing child who confidently tries new experiences or a withdrawn child with negative attitudes toward himself and others.
- **Behavior support specialist** – The frequency and severity of challenging behaviors exhibited by some children with disabilities can make it nearly impossible for their families to experience and enjoy normal routines of daily life. Some display dangerous behavior (violent, punching etc.) and some display difficult behavior (making loud noises, squawking etc.) Therefore, some parents must become skilled in behavior support techniques to achieve a semblance of normal family life.
- **Parent of siblings without disabilities** – Children are deeply influenced by having a brother or sister with special needs. Some studies show negative effects such as higher incidence of emotional or behavioral problems, lower self esteem, resentment or jealousy. But researchers have also reported many instances of siblings displaying nurturing and affection towards their brother or sister with disabilities. They can help their siblings with disabilities learn new social behaviors/ skills in the home.
- **Marriage partner** – Having a child with a disability can put stress on a marriage such as arguing about who is to blame for the child’s disability, disagreeing about expectations for the child’s behavior etc. Most families of children with disabilities experience average to above average levels of marriage adjustment. On the other hand, a child with disabilities can also strengthen a marriage because of the couple’s shared commitment to the child.
- **Information specialist** – Parents of children with disabilities know they cannot depend on appropriate actions and reactions from others. They must try to ensure that other people interact with their child in ways that support their child’s dignity, acceptance, opportunities for learning, and maintenance of adaptive behaviors.
- **Advocate** – Involvement in their children’s education is a must for parents of children with disabilities. They must be consistent and firm in presenting their concerns and wishes regarding learning goals, placement options, and career development opportunities for their children. They must often advocate for effective educational services and opportunities for their children.

Working with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families:

- **Understanding and respecting cultural differences** – In the US, there are many children who speak a language other than English. Thus, schools should provide materials in both the native language and in English and preferably communicate with the family directly through home visits or by telephone. Many parents of English language learner (ELL) students believe that their participation does not help schools perform their jobs as educational institutions and as a result they separate themselves from the process. It has also been observed that two thirds of ELL parents come from low income families (some parents are uneducated/ do not have any formal education). Besides this, families from culturally diverse backgrounds tend to be family oriented. Extended family play an important role in rearing and caring for the child. It is important for educators to respect this informal kinship system of support and to understand that schooling may represent a much more formal and impersonal support service for some families. Culturally diverse families may have different experiences or views about disability (some may believe in superstitious or religious views). The educator must keep all these things in mind however, must also avoid the error of assuming that all members of a cultural or ethnic group share the same experiences, values or beliefs.

- **Culturally Responsive Services for Families are as follows:**
 - Have native speaking staff members make initial contacts.
 - Provide trained, culturally sensitive interpreters during parent- teacher conferences and IEP/ IFSP meetings.
 - When a language interpreter is not available, use a cultural interpreter (someone who has basic knowledge of the culture) whenever possible for conferences and family interviews.
 - Conduct meetings in family-friendly settings.
 - Identify and defer to key decision makers in the family.
 - Recognize that families from diverse cultures may view time differently from the way professionals do, and schedule meetings accordingly.
 - Provide transportation and child care to make it easier for families to attend school-based activities.

Home-School Communication Methods:

- **Parent teacher conferences** – It is a universal method of home-school communication. It includes establishing specific objectives for the conference, reviewing a record of the students' recent grades, selecting examples of the student's work, creating a graph/ chart showing his/her progress, and preparing an agenda for the meeting.

- **Written communication** – Written messages can be an effective way to maintain home-school communication. But, teachers should never rely on solely written messages as a method of communication. They must also be sensitive to the cultural and linguistic backgrounds as well as educational levels of parents.
- **Happy grams and special accomplishment letters** – The simplest type of home-school written message is a brief note informing parents of something positive their child has accomplished at school. This also gives an opportunity for parents to appreciate/ praise their children more.
- **Two-way home-school reporting forms** – Teachers can build a two-way parent teacher communication system around a reporting form or a notebook that the child carried between home and school. The teacher can communicate regarding homework assignments, behavior in the classroom, progress on IEP goals etc. Parents sign the form to indicate they have received it and can use the form themselves to provide information or request assistance from the teachers.
- **Dialogue notebooks** – Home school dialogue notebooks offer another form of written communication between parents and teachers in which they write observations about the child's behavior or progress each day and write comments or questions to each other.
- **Home-school contracts** – It specifies parent delivered rewards for the child contingent on his or her behavior/ academic performance in the classroom. Home school contracts use parent controlled rewards, help build parent's recognition and praise of the child's accomplishments and involve the parents and teachers together in a positive program to support the child's learning.
- **Class newsletters and websites** – These are additional methods of fostering home-school communication. A one or two page monthly newsletter can provide parents information that is too long or detailed to give over the telephone. Featuring student produced stories, photos and news items in a class newsletter or website transforms a teacher task into an enjoyable and meaningful learning activity for the entire class.
- **Other methods** of communication include phone calls, voice mail, email and text-messaging.

Other important forms of parent involvement:

- **Parents as tutors:** Teaching their children many skills including casual routines of everyday life, self help and daily living skills etc.
- **Parents education and support groups:** Research shows benefits of systematic parent education, particularly in programs that teach parents ways to interact with their children. Parents should be also be involved planning and conducting parent groups as much as possible.
- **Parent to parent groups:** P2P programs help parents of children with special needs become reliable allies for one another and gives the opportunity to receive support from a parent who has experienced similar circumstances and challenges.

- **Parents as research partners:** Parents are the best means to identify meaningful outcomes for exceptional children, observe and measure their performance in the home and community and let researchers know if their ideas and findings have any real validity.