# Family Involvement in Special Education

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## Abstract

The effects of parental involvement, aspects that outline parental involvement, and strategies to improve parental involvement in public school special education are discussed. As a primary lens, special education law will be used as a framework for understanding the requirements for parent involvement and strategies for success. Further discussed are potential effects on groups and roles of individuals that include students, teachers, and administrators. Viewpoints from multiple theorists coupled with specific integration strategies are also offered. The overall purpose of this article is designed to promote advocacy and understanding for parental involvement while communicating appropriate guidelines for familial inclusion.

## Overview

Philosophically, parent involvement in public schools has been viewed as a key component for building success for children in general education environments. For special education students especially, the law mandates parental involvement. Historically, parent involvement has been viewed by educators from diametrically opposed standpoints. The first view held by educators of parents in educational environments is one of support; the second view is one of potential contention depending upon variable factors. This article purposes to provide an overview of multiple viewpoints related to parent involvement.

### Studies Support Involvement

One research study conducted by Mahoney and Wiggers (2007) indicated that there are at least three major reasons why parents are mandated to play a more active role in the developmental services their children receive. First, the federal legislation authorizing early intervention services (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, PL. 108-446) is based on two theories derived from the ecological theory of child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The first part of the theory indicates that parents are the most important influence on their child's early development and that children's learning occurs throughout the course of their daily routine activities in their natural environments. Both of these theories maintain the consistent indicators that early intervention must be focused on maximizing the routine learning opportunities expressed between children and their parents and other caregivers in their home environment. The second reason is related to opportunities parents have to influence their children's learning and development, particularly when compared with preschool and related educational service professionals. This effect is accentuated by the fact that most parents are typically a constant presence in their children's lives throughout the early childhood years. The third most important reason involves the potential of parents improving child success in early intervention programs.

For the past several years, researchers have been investigating whether the effectiveness of early intervention services is based on an evaluation of the way in which parents form relationships with their children. One study looked at the developmental outcomes of 637 children involved in early intervention research projects with a focus on how the programs affected parent's relationships with the children (Mahoney, Boyce, Fewell, Spiker, & Wheeden, 1998). In two of the projects investigated in this study—the Longitudinal Studies (Casto & White, 1993) and the Infant Health and Development Program [IHDP] (1990)—children received intervention services, with professionals focused on working directly with children. In the other two projects—Family-Centered Outcomes (Mahoney & Bella, 1998)] and the Play and Learning Strategies Program [PALS] (Fewell & Wheeden, 1998)—the interventions focused on parents either

## Keywords

**Collaborators**

**Ecological Theory of Child Development**

**Independent Family Service Plans**

**Intervention Agents**

**Parent Involvement**

**Positive Behavior Support Involvement (PBS)**

by improving parent-child interaction or providing family support services. In general, research from the study conducted by Mahoney and Wiggers (2007) suggested that early intervention seemed to be the most successful way of promoting child development, especially when programs supported parents in interacting more responsively with their children (p. 10).

Another earlier study indicated that family involvement in schools increased student academic achievement (Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995). Increased student academic achievement included:

- Improved test scores,

- Better grades,

- Increased attendance,

- Higher homework accountability, and

- Positive student motivation and attitudes about schoolwork (Darch, Miao, & Shippen, 2004, p. 25).

### Educating Autistic Children

In addition to the positive benefits of parent interaction for special education students, positive parent involvement is a key component contributing to effective intervention with children with autism. Autism interventions that included a parent appeared to increase positive outcomes by "influencing the magnitude of child outcomes. For example, in the area of challenging behavior, children with autism whose parents were directly involved in implementing behavior management displayed a significant reduction in problem behaviors" (Levy, Kim & Olive, 2006, p. 59).

Levy, Kim and Olive (2006) conclude that,

> Researchers have demonstrated the ability of parents to implement a variety of interventions, including a focus on areas such as language and behavior. Parents serve as effective intervention agents for three specific reasons(Ozonoff & Cathcart, 1998). First, parents can increase the number of hours of intervention children receive without increasing costs to service providers. Secondly, parents should be able to intervene throughout the autistic child's life span. Finally, parents who directly serve their children by providing intervention

in educational environments often report increased feelings of competence and support with decreased feelings of depression and stress (Ozonoff & Cathcart, 1998) (Levy, Kim & Olive, 2006, p. 59).

These are all reasons that support parental involvement in providing productive and positive outcomes for special education students in general education environments.

### Facilitating Family Involvement

Spann, Kohler and Soenksen (2003) indicate that parent participation leads to a multitude of positive outcomes for special needs children.

These positive outcomes include

- Greater generalization and maintenance of treatment gains (Koegel et al., 1991),

- Increased continuity in intervention programs (Bailey & Wolery, 1989),

- Improved levels of parent satisfaction (Stancin, Reuter, Dunn, & Bickett, 1984), and

- More effective strategies for resolving problems in school (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995).

Along with these research findings, Spann, Kohler and Soenksen (2003) make multiple recommendations for "how schools can develop partnerships with families, including engaging in quality communication, inviting parents to participate in school activities, soliciting parents' input on decisions about their child's education, and empowering parents to take action that addresses their own needs" (p. 228)

**Trust**

Trust was named as one of the central agents in promoting appropriate and positive relationships between teachers and parents. One strategy for facilitating family involvement in special education services is trust building. Parents interviewed by Soodak and Erwin (2000) stressed the importance of promoting trust in relationships between educational staff and parents. Parents interviewed for this study indicated that trusting relationships were "developed from interactions characterized by honesty, openness, and mutual respect." Specifically, parents reported feeling welcomed in educational environments through "an open-door policy, ongoing opportunities for involvement in school settings, and informal and open communication with professionals." Parents that reported higher levels of trust also reported that they "felt less of a need to be present in schools when relationships were based on trust and respect" (Soodak, 2003, p. 329).

**Communication**

Another strategy for improving relationships between home and school is to increase appropriate communication between teachers and parents. Spann, Kohler, and Soenksen (2003) conducted a study that examined the home-school relationship and ways that communication impacted this relationship. The researchers found that the most functional home–school communication occurred on a regular basis and typically consisted of communication that involved the child's teacher or paraprofessional. Parents reported that correspondence included various media, including "face-

to-face meetings, telephone calls, and written notes. The most common reason for communication was to exchange information related to the child's needs and performance. For example, several parents reported that they exchanged notes with the teacher to stay informed about the child's performance" (p. 234). Another typical form of communication between parents and school involved brainstorming to solve problems that came up, at either place. Within this framework, researchers reported that several parents indicated that teachers called them when children experienced difficulties with a school routine.

Conflicts were also reported.

> "These disagreements centered on a variety of issues, including differences in opinion on how to address a behavior problem and the school's failure to reply to a parent's question or request on the same day" (Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003, p. 235).

According to the researchers, several parents reported that they did most of the work to maintain correspondence with school personnel. One parent reportedly lamented that the "only time she communicated with her child's teacher was at quarterly IEP meetings." However, despite these and similar concerns, more than 80% of families expressed high to moderate satisfaction with the communication that they had with their child's school (Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003, p. 235).

### Community-Based Programs

Another way of promoting healthy and appropriate relationships between home and school employed the use of community-based programs. One study reported that community-based programs that are connected to the schools, not isolated from them, were more likely to assist families and increase student learning and success. According to researchers, community groups or leaders sometimes construct walls rather than bridges with schools (Newmann & Sconzert, 2000). Community programs also were reported to help parents connect to their children's schools. Well-organized community-based programs may act as brokers, interpreters, and guides to help all parents, and particularly language minority families (Collignon et al., 2001; Durán, Durán, Perry-Romero, & Sanchez, 2001). Equally important, community leaders and programs can facilitate an increased understanding of students' families, cultures, and customs (Epstein, 2001, p. 164).

### Parent Volunteers

Many conventional strategies for facilitating improved relationships between home and family are easily implemented and can be used to successfully increase parent involvement in school environments. One strategy to increase parent involvement is through volunteering in the classroom. Parent volunteers can provide instructional support in the classroom. Parents can also be helpful in the classroom by helping students both behaviorally and academically in the home by helping children with homework and in developing appropriate behavioral parameters. Parents can also be invited to participate in a school-wide volunteer plan. These include parent teacher organizations, school-wide advisory councils, volunteering in the school office, and participation on school-wide discipline committees (Darch, Miao, & Shippen, 2004, pp. 25-26). Key features that promote

these programs are four-fold and include four main phases:

- Proactive planning which includes integrates a teaching philosophy and the materials welcoming parent involvement;

- Creating a 180-day plan that seeks to include parents within each phase of educational planning;

- Clearly explained goals, objectives, and methods used in the classroom; and

- Accommodating the needs of diverse families (pp. 26-27).

To underscore each aspect of this parent plan involves developing a personal relationship based on meeting the individual needs of each of the parents that a teacher serves.

## Applications

### Students

Based on research collected from multiple sources, the effects of parent involvement on the education of special education students not only benefit children, but parents, teachers, and peers as well. Research has indicated that parent participation leads to a host of positive outcomes for children with special needs (Koegel et al., 1991; Bailey & Wolery, 1989; Stancin, Reuter, Dunn, & Bickett, 1984; & Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). Evidence suggests that students' success in school and in life is measured by many indicators which include, but are not limited to, achievement test scores. Adger's (2001) study indicated that student attendance, homework completion, report card grades, leadership skills, course credits, and postsecondary educational plans are important indicators of student success. Reportedly it was found that these variables can be positively influenced by parents, peers, teachers, and others in the community if activities are designed to mobilize their support and action on these goals (Newmann & Sconzert, 2000). Ultimately, students must succeed in general education environments in order to advance to post-secondary education, training, and employment. Based on these assertions, it can be concluded that educators, families, and community leaders have a mandate to collaborate and communicate so that students benefit from all available resources and support (Epstein, 2001, p. 164). Underscoring this idea, more students, especially those who are at risk of failing, need this kind of coordinated support so that they, too, have a better chance to succeed in school (p. 166).

It can be summarized that parent support in schools is highly beneficial to students. However, parents of children with special education needs may experience difficulty integrating within the educational environment. These difficulties may be underscored by unwillingness by the educational staff to create a meaningful plan to integrate within the school environment. One of the main goals for special education students is to teach them self-advocacy. In one specific program, Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS), educators design interactive homework that enables students to conduct guided conversations with parents about their practical experiences in math, science, language arts, and other subjects (Epstein, Salinas, & Jackson, 1995).

### Teachers

In order to promote parent involvement to the extent that

researchers indicate is beneficial, a paradigm shift is required on the behalf of educators and their work with parents. To create such a change in thinking, teachers should consider a progressive plan to increase parent involvement. Teachers also need to work diligently particularly in their work with parents of diverse needs. For special education children, diversity consists of multiple dimensions. In order to build collaborative relationships and partnerships with parents from culturally diverse backgrounds, teachers should meet two main goals:

- Prevent and break down barriers that disengage culturally diverse families from involvement in the IEP process; and

- Encourage culturally diverse parent participation by meeting parent's need for support and comfortable involvement in the IEP process.

Such a plan that builds, supports, maintains, and improves collaborative relationships with parents of diverse backgrounds seeks to do the following:

- Include parents in the collaborative relationship from beginning to end;

- Help teachers better understand the needs of families from culturally diverse backgrounds; and

- Includes activities designed to strengthen the trust that culturally diverse parents hold for educational professionals in the IEP process (Matuszny, Banda, & Coleman, 2007, p. 25).

Several teacher activities might be implemented in order to improve relationships between parents and children. Activities include:

- Facilitating a cultural arts and crafts night where parents and professionals teach others how to create useful and/or fun items;

- Contacting each child's family by the end of the first week of school by calling or sending a personalized note to share positive information about the child;

- Learning simple words and phrases in the family's language such as "hello," "thank you," "I'm glad you are here," and "welcome."

Individuals could also be invited from the students' community or culture to share cultural or other information with students or attend cultural events in the parent/student community; and meeting with or calling parents or families at the close of the year to discuss collaborative experiences between home and school (Matuszny, Banda, & Coleman, 2007, p. 27).

While the previous list is a limited overview of ways of constructing parental involvement in classrooms, it does provide an overview of specific activities that can be designed by teachers to increase parental involvement for parents of all children. To underscore these strategies, administrators play a key role in supporting a "system of diversity" and are important advocates in facilitating a professional learning community.

### Administrators

One important way that administrators can support a professional

learning community that seeks to invite parents as collaborative team members is to inform practices based on these philosophies, because administrators play a key role in providing expertise in facilitation and advocacy. A practical method for deliberately planning a positive and nurturing environment for all children is through data collection. The data collection could be deliberately constructed and based on questions like:

- How do parents prefer to be involved in their child's education?

- When do parents wish to receive information regarding their child's education?

- In the school environment, what events and activities do parents wish to be involved?

- What are the cultural beliefs of the parent, and how might these beliefs impact the school environment? (Adapted from work by Matuszny, Banda, & Coleman, 2007, p. 29).

After the data is collected, the data can then be utilized to inform teachers about parental attitudes regarding involvement in classroom environments. These collected data can also be utilized to promote productive dialogue and advocacy for all interests that center on the key question: How can parents and educators collaborate effectively to promote the most caring and productive learning environment for children?

## Issues

### Overcoming Barriers to Parental Involvement

Research substantiates the need for parental involvement in special education; special education law mandates parental involvement. However, parental involvement is often thwarted by barriers. Educators seeking to construct stronger bridges among home, school, and community can obtain help from the National Network of PartnershipSchools at Johns Hopkins University (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon, 1997; Sanders & Epstein, 2000). The National Network provides research-based guidelines, publications, and other tools that enable schools, districts, and state departments of education to design and maintain comprehensive programs of school, family, and community partnerships. Teachers and administrators should continue to research ways of forming a more collaborative professional learning community in order to ensure the greatest amount of parent involvement and nurturance for students with special and diverse needs. Ultimately, educational staff is most versed in how educational environments are constructed, their cultures, and internal beliefs. Educational staff has a responsibility to share these practices and beliefs with parents in order to support students.

## Conclusion

The main difficulty for educators in involving parents in educational partnerships is the teacher's personal assumptions regarding the role of parents and ways of working with parents to build positive and effective relationships. Teachers need to be aware of their own assumptions coupled with lawful mandates and how to infuse best practice in their teaching process. Teach-

ers seeking support should turn to more experienced colleagues or administrators who have a more informed understanding of these roles and practices. New teachers should recognize the roles of active communication and collaboration and infuse these assumptions in constructing a "system of diversity" that meets the needs of all students.

## Terms & Concepts

**Collaborators:** Here, collaborators can be described as the team of educational professionals, parents, and other stakeholders systemically working together to ensure best practice and most secure environment for students in learning environments.

**Ecological Theory of Child Development:** The theory posits that parents are the most important influence on the early development of their children and that children's learning occurs throughout the course of their daily routine activities in their natural environments.

**Intervention Agents:** Interventions agents can be identified as the ability of parents to implement a variety of interventions, including a focus on areas such as language and behavior for special education children.

**Parent Involvement:** Parent involvement can be described as basic obligations of parents, including child-rearing skills, and responsibility for children's health, safety, supervision, discipline, and guidance and roles of parents in schools in governance and advocacy.

**Positive Behavior Support (PBS) Involvement:** Positive Behavior Support (PBS) Involvement can be described as optimized parent participation that moves significantly beyond simple parent cooperation to true parent and professional collaboration.

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