



## Linking Your Efforts to Strengthen and Broaden

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Since 1995, local family support teams of parents and service providers have been working together within the IEIC framework to find ways to help parents who have young children with disabilities get reliable information and find each other. These efforts include working in parent/professional partnerships to address eight elements of family support.

While the teams relate that these efforts are good and worthwhile, a frustration emerges that these efforts should not be limited to such a small group. Not only does having such a limited target audience prove unworkable in some geographical areas, it also creates what seem like artificial barriers in the minds of parents. For many years, families and service providers have used the term “The Black Hole” to refer to the vast area of need for information, connections, and support for families who have school age children with disabilities.

Families who have young children birth to school age are the primary intended audience for IEIC Family Support efforts, Fiscal Source Code J. Since this IEIC family support initiative comes with financial boundaries and requirements, it is not acceptable to simply dilute these dollars to address the needs of a larger group. But there is no issue with becoming more effective and expanding the results by working with partners and creating linkages to other groups, including families with school age children, all families and all children, and other family support teams regionally or in clusters.

### **Families with school age children.**

Children grow up, and parents expect their experience of partnership and support that was present in early intervention to continue into the school age experience. Facilitating connections between families and establishing a reliable means for families to get information are particularly needed during these school years. Many children are not diagnosed until this time. Parents in this group may have the time and desire to become more involved with others and with system development. Connecting with a parent whose child is older or someone who has “walked the walk” and “knows the ropes” can be a benefit for parents of younger children.

Types of collaborative partners include:

- Parent Involvement Initiatives in the schools
- Local Arcs
- Children’s Mental Health Collaboratives
- CTICs (Community Transition Interagency Committees) and transition groups

Shared efforts that may be successful include:

- parent-to-parent mentoring
- certain support groups

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- trainings
- leadership opportunities
- newsletters

### **All families and all children in the community.**

Linking with these groups reflects a desire for integration into the whole landscape of the community.

Potential partners include:

- Community education
- Head Start
- ECFE
- Week of the Young Child activities
- child care organizations
- Family Service Collaboratives
- other collaborative efforts

Possible shared activities include:

- community resource fairs and other awareness activities
- partners in training

**Other family support teams regionally or in clusters.** Many family support activities have greater momentum, impact, and networking opportunities if they involve families from a larger geographical area and age span.

Possible activities are:

- regional retreats
- specific support groups
- Parent-to-Parent Programs
- newsletters

Logic and common sense would suggest the benefits of using these IEIC family support dollars as “seed money” to broaden the effort to include families whose children are older, to make inclusive linkages to initiatives for all families and all children within the community, and even with other families in similar circumstances in neighboring communities or counties. Linkages in family support are healthy and will accomplish more than if each group works in isolation. Our current systems that families must negotiate are fragmented and erratic. For too long there have been many parallel efforts with no connecting point. Making linkages that strengthen the effort and broaden the audience will be especially beneficial for families as time passes.