



## The Continuum of Parent Involvement

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There is ample research to prove that most children have better outcomes when parents are involved in designing their programs and work in partnership with service providers. Most initiatives that focus on outcomes for children and families acknowledge, at least on paper, that parent involvement or participation is an integral part of the process. Yet the difficulty in getting and keeping parents involved in meaningful ways is identified as the biggest frustration and challenge those initiatives face. IEICs have reported this as their biggest challenge for years.

Many families in our culture struggle with complex issues —not enough time, too many demands, life is hectic, etc. While those may be valid stresses, it would be a mistake to assume that parents are too busy, or that having parents actively participating is not worth the effort it requires. Some simple changes in perspective may be helpful and may suggest different approaches.

### 1. Look at parent involvement as a continuum.

When viewed as a continuum, there may be strong parent presence in areas not previously considered, while other areas emerge that could be improved. Narrowing the area of focus in this way may make efforts to increase parent involvement seem less daunting. Keep in mind that this continuum is not hierarchical: parents do not need to work their way from one type to another, but can engage at whatever point best suits their individual personality or ability.

Consider the continuum of parent involvement:

- **Parenting.** Parent involvement at the most basic, most important level; i.e. caring for their child, establishing a bedtime ritual, eating together, modeling problem solving, reading to their child, attending conferences, attending the child's activities, being involved in the development of IEP or IFSP activities.
- **Participating** in family support activities. Taking advantage of and creating opportunities for self growth: i.e., reading a newsletter, requesting and using a parent to parent match, going to a parent support group, attending a workshop or training about their child's disability, attending an information fair, attending a parent retreat.
- **Planning** family support activities. Looking at the bigger picture to organize and plan activities for other parents; i.e., planning a parent retreat, facilitating a support group, contributing to or editing a newsletter, organizing a Sibshop, being a parent mentor, helping tabulate data from a needs assessment survey, organizing refreshments for a gathering, designing orientation and information packets for new IEIC

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and committee members, setting up a mentor program for new IEIC and committee members.

- **Policymaking.** Partnering with professionals in making policy decisions about various efforts and initiatives; i.e. IEIC participation, setting priorities and planning for the Part C allocation plan, writing or calling legislators regarding a policy impacting families, designing a model for service coordination, etc.

### 2. Consider parent needs.

- For some parents, parenting a child with a disability is a new situation, and they have energy for only simple tasks, such as reading a newsletter or meeting with a mentor parent.
- Participation can be very threatening for some parents because it requires public and private acknowledgement of having a child with special needs.
- Some people like to work in groups, others prefer to work alone.
- There are individuals who are cautious and like to check things out first, and others who do not feel like they are helping unless they can jump right in head first.
- Others may lack confidence and feel they won't be of much help.
- The right fit may be a creative venture for some, a concrete task for others.
- There are always other priorities for the parent or family, and parents need to guard their energies for the long haul.

### 3. Consider individual differences and abilities.

- Be alert for skills or characteristics a parent may bring such as enthusiasm, friendliness, good people skills, community knowledge, a knack for numbers, or formal training in certain areas, and find a way to use them.
- Make opportunities for involvement clearly defined and time limited, i.e. one meeting, one year, one mailing, one set of phone calls.
- Be sure the work is worthy of their time.
- Give a clear picture of how this will improve or change things for their child, their family, or other families.
- Recognize and appreciate their efforts.

There is no single approach that will be successful in increasing parent involvement. Strive to continue to make available an assortment of ways that parents can be involved with your IEIC. Parent involvement is an ongoing process, with parents cycling in and out of the pattern and at some point, as their children grow, they will eventually move on. As each new parent enters this new world, they, too, will need the opportunity to be nurtured and to discover what a valuable asset they are.

