Family-Centered Practices for Strengthening Family-Professional Partnerships: Early

Intervention Support for Young Children with Autism

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FAMILY-CENTERED EARLY INTERVENTION

Abstract

The United States has a high prevalence of developmental disabilities, with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) being one of the most common. Early diagnosis, timely intervention, and support from families and early childhood professionals are crucial for meeting the individual needs of children with ASD. However, due to the unique and complex nature of ASD, families may feel inadequately prepared. As the primary advocates and experts for their children, parents and families play a critical role in the education and well-being of children with disabilities. They often need sufficient knowledge and skills regarding early intervention and other support services to achieve better outcomes for their children. Building a mutual and reciprocal family-professional relationship is essential for supporting families and enhancing the expertise of professionals. This article explores family-centered practices and approaches to actively involve families as genuine partners in the educational journey of children with ASD. It focuses on building trust, communication, and collaboration between families and professionals while considering the unique needs and challenges of children with ASD and their families. It also examines the role of early intervention services and plans, technology, and other support resources in fostering meaningful partnerships and empowering families to advocate for their children's development.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorders, early intervention, family-centered practices, family-professional partnerships

The United States has a high prevalence of developmental disabilities (Li et al., 2023), with recent data indicating that approximately 17% of children aged 3-17 have one or more developmental disabilities (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], n.d.). Developmental disabilities encompass a range of lifelong disorders that affect the child's physical, learning, language, or behaviors, potentially affecting their everyday functioning skills and quality of life (Zablotsky et al., 2019, 2020). Children with developmental disabilities are at a greater risk of adverse outcomes across medical, social, educational, and behavioral domains in comparison to children without such disabilities (Olusanya et al., 2018).

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), a neurodevelopmental disorder, stands as one of the most prevalent developmental disorders, significantly affecting a child's ability to engage in social interaction and communication (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders [5th ed; *DSM-5*]; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). While symptoms often manifest within the first two years of life, they may not become pronounced until later (DSM-5; APA, 2013). These symptoms may include restricted and repetitive behavioral patterns and persistent impairment in social communication skills (DSM-5; APA, 2013). ASD is designated as a spectrum disorder due to the wide variability in symptom type and severity; different children exhibit diverse strengths and challenges (DSM-5; APA, 2013). This variability spans verbal, minimally verbal, or nonverbal communication, significant deficits in intellectual functioning, or above-average intelligence, requiring varying degrees of practical everyday skill support (DSM-5; APA, 2013). Notably, the prevalence of ASD in the U.S. has risen from 1 in 44 in 2018 to 1 in 36 in 2020 (Maenner et al., 2023), a trend attributed to increased awareness and widened diagnostic criteria (National Research Council, 2001; Shattuck, 2006). This upward

trend underscores the imperative for enhanced collaborative support and early intervention to address the increasing prevalence of ASD.

Early Diagnosis and Early Intervention

Early identification and intervention critically impact outcomes for children with developmental delays and disabilities and their families during early childhood (Scherzer et al., 2012). Timely diagnosis allows children with ASD to receive interventions aimed at improving developmental outcomes and enhancing adaptive, communication, social, and behavioral skills (Bradshaw et al., 2021). Furthermore, early diagnosis facilitates families' access to appropriate support services, educational resources, and community programs (Okoye et al., 2023), ultimately improving outcomes for children with ASD, reducing healthcare costs (Jarbrink & Knapp, 2001), and alleviating disability-related family stress (Grzadzinski et al., 2021*)*. [The term "families" herein pertains to parents, siblings, relatives, or any primary caregivers of young children with developmental delays and disabilities].

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), children with delays and disabilities up to age 3 receive early intervention services under Part C. Upon reaching age 3, eligible children with delays and disabilities transition to receiving special education services under Part B of IDEA. These services are available in every state and territory within the United States, tailored to cater to each child's unique needs. The primary objective of early intervention is to leverage the child's strengths, facilitate the development of new skills, and overcome challenges, thereby enabling success in both scholastic and daily life (CDC, n.d.). Studies underscore the significance of early intervention during the formative stages of childhood, when the brain is more malleable for improving the communication and social skills of children with ASD (Lee et al., 2015).

Bronfenbrenner's (1974) research on early intervention programs and his ecological systems theory emphasizes the pivotal role of families in the success of such interventions. While no one-size-fits-all intervention program exists for specific developmental disability groups (e.g., ASD, ID, ADHD), families represent the child's initial institution and educators (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Families play a primary role in identification, intervention plan creation, and service implementation during the child's early years (Jimenez-Arberas et al., 2024). Furthermore, they wield significant influence in supporting their children with disabilities to sustain the benefits derived from early intervention (Cook et al., 2020).

The characteristics of children with ASD are unique and complex, often leaving families inadequately prepared (Rojas-Torres et al., 2020). Consequently, families may require comprehensive knowledge and skills related to early intervention and other support services to enhance child and family outcomes (Lee et al., 2022). As authorities on their child's development, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and experiences outside of educational settings, families play a critical role in the education and overall well-being of their children with disabilities (Iruka, 2015). Establishing a reciprocal family-professional relationship is paramount for supporting families and enriching professionals' expertise to achieve better outcomes (Keyser, 2017).

Family-Centered Practices

Notably, a paradigm shift from a child-centered, professional-directed model to a family-centered, strength-based approach has been under consideration since the passage of Public Law (PL) 99-457 in 1986, which aimed to provide services to young children with delays and disabilities, and their families (Raver & Childress, 2015). The emergence of the family-centered model in the United States is attributed to significant changes in family structures; such as

diverse family compositions (e.g., single-parent households, extended families, foster families), evolving social and cultural values, beliefs, and identities, necessitating tailored support to meet individual family needs (Turnbull et al., 2022). The family-centered approach emphasizes the importance of family-centered practices rooted in early childhood education environments (Bredekamp, 2019) to foster positive outcomes and benefit children with special needs and their families through early intervention (Bailey et al., 2011; Division of Early Childhood [DEC], 2014; Mas et al., 2019).

Family-Centered Early Intervention

Early intervention services employing a family-centered approach have demonstrated positive impacts on the social communication skills of young children with ASD (Park et al., 2019). The family-centered early intervention (Figure 1) highlights practices that place the family at the center of the intervention (Park, 2020) to support infants and young children with delays and disabilities, and their families (Guralnick, 2017). Previously, professionals viewed the primary aim of early intervention as training and preparing families to assume the role of a therapist or an early childhood educator (Berry & Hardman, 1998). However, the current belief among professionals is that interventions should be family-focused, involving families in the treatment and education of their children, identifying individualized family needs, and offering specific support and services tailored to family characteristics to nurture and preserve the natural parent-child relationship (Woods et al., 2011).

Supporting Families in a Natural Environment. A crucial aspect of foundational knowledge in early intervention and support services for children with ASD involves delivering interventions and services within the natural environment (Dunst et al., 2017). The natural environment encompasses settings and activities such as a child's home, childcare facilities, local

parks, or grocery stores, where interventions and services are seamlessly integrated into familiar routines and activities for the child and family (Raver & Childress, 2015). Notably, Part C of IDEA requires eligible children with delays and disabilities to receive necessary early intervention services in the natural environment to the maximum extent possible and outlines guidelines to assist professionals in enabling families to provide these services in natural environments (Raver & Childress, 2015).

Family's Role in Individualized Family Service Plan. Part C of IDEA requires that intervention services be provided in compliance with the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP). The family is an integral part of the IFSP, written for infants and toddlers with developmental delays or disabilities and their families receiving early intervention services. It encompasses various essential components, including developmental level statements, family resources and needs, expected outcomes for the child and family, services, service providers, and the duration and frequency of services (PL 108-446, Sec.636). Family engagement is critical in developing, implementing, and reviewing these plans to ensure their alignment with the unique strengths, needs, and goals of children with ASD, as well as the priorities, resources, and concerns of their families (Noonan & McCormick, 2006). Early childhood professionals are tasked with supporting families through the early intervention process and advocating for appropriate services and support (Cook et al., 2020). Notably, the Division for Early Childhood (DEC), the largest professional organization supporting families and young children with or at risk for developmental delays and disabilities, outlines recommended practices for professionals to engage with families collaboratively, establish respectful and trusting relationships, and closely interact with families when developing IFSPs with outcomes that address their concerns and priorities. Parents' involvement and consent are requisite at every stage as partners in early

intervention, from evaluation to IFSP development and early intervention service implementation. Additionally, IDEA (2004) stipulates that families of children with disabilities receive annual written notification of their rights and responsibilities.

Principles of Family-Centered Practices

According to Keyser (2017), family-centered practices are based on the notion that families possess unique "funds of knowledge," which enriches the understanding of early childhood educators. These practices prioritize family involvement, engagement, collaboration, partnerships, and, most importantly, empowerment in decision-making processes related to their child's education and developmental goals, ultimately benefiting the entire family (Frugone-Jaramillo & Gracia, 2023).

Family–Professional Partnerships

Family-centered practices establish collaborative partnerships between families and early childhood professionals, including educators, therapists, and service providers, to ensure coordinated and comprehensive support for young children with ASD and their families (Azad & Mandell, 2016). An effective partnership entails treating families with dignity and respect (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008), building a trustful relationship, and providing access to community resources and support services to meet the needs of children with ASD and their families (Garbacz & McIntyre, 2016; Santiago et al., 2022). These partnerships enhance the intensity and quality of interventions, as children experience consistent interventions at home and school (Azad et al., 2016; Fallon et al., 2016), contributing to improved student success both in and out of school (Garbacz & McIntyre, 2016).

Open Communication, Mutual Respect, and Building Trust. The family–professional partnerships are predicated on open communication, mutual respect, shared responsibility, and

trust (Maria et al., 2021). Open communication integrates families' cultural and linguistic practices, perceptions, and perspectives, and capitalizes on their strengths and abilities (National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 2020). Often, parents and families of children with delays or disabilities may go through a range of emotions (e.g., denial, guilt, stress, fear, anxiety, anger, depression; Drotar et al., 1975) and face several challenges (e.g., financial strains, time constraints, lack of support; Anderson et al., 2002). By acknowledging the needs and concerns of families of children with disabilities, a family-centered approach can mitigate the impact of challenges and emotions experienced by families and enhance their expertise and parenting skills (Cook et al., 2020). Additionally, communication and collaboration using an anti-bias lens that ensures every child has equal access to learning environments and experiences and recognizes children's identity and world can promote increased family involvement and engagement in sharing their interaction preferences, routines, traditions, needs, and priorities (Derman-Sparks et al., 2014).

Implementing effective communication methods, such as newsletters, emails, parent-teacher conferences, and home–school communication books, and leveraging technological platforms such as online portals, mobile apps, video conferencing, and chatbots, is instrumental in promoting family competencies and supporting children's development. Regardless of the method, initiating relationship-building early in the school year is essential to establish open communication (Hallahan et al., 2023) and to demonstrate that the professionals are invested, not only in the child's learning and interests, but also in knowing about the family, their priorities, concerns, and needs. (Sileo & Prater, 2012). It's helpful to discuss the child's strengths before discussing their needs to promote a healthy family-professional communication partnership.

(Esquivel et al., 2008). Honest communication about the child's challenges early in the year can help prevent surprises later (Hallahan et al., 2023; Sileo & Prater, 2012).

Creating a welcoming and inclusive environment where families feel valued and respected is essential for fostering trust (Steen, 2022). Mutual respect and trust are the foundations of a positive relationship, which develops over time through collaborative encounters and communication (Kalyva, 2013). Negotiating conflicts and reaching a consensus despite differences facilitates mutual recognition and respect for each other's knowledge and expertise, thereby instilling a sense of security and confidence in parents (Keyser, 2017) and encouraging parents to share more information with professionals (Ruffolo et al., 2006). Consequently, shared decision-making, responsibility, and collaboration in implementing evidence-based practices within natural settings further strengthens effective family–professional relationships (NAEYC, 2020).

Culturally Responsive and Inclusive Partnerships. Authentic partnerships in a family-centered approach extend beyond traditional involvement activities (such as parent-teacher conferences or volunteering), involving families as active inclusive partners in decision-making processes, intervention planning, and implementation efforts. This approach empowers families and respects their strengths, cultural diversity, and values (Bailey et al., 2012). Further, to build a strong, family-friendly, and inclusive relationship, professionals are required to exhibit flexibility (i.e., being available on request), active listening (i.e., making the family feel heard), and confidentiality maintenance (i.e., not sharing sensitive information with others), thereby fostering trust (Bailey et al., 2012).

Furthermore, when working with families of children with delays and disabilities from diverse backgrounds, cultural competence and sensitivity are imperative (Swafford et al., 2015).

This includes professionals' ongoing reflections, recognizing and respecting cultural differences, beliefs, and values, and providing culturally responsive support services and resources to families (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008). For example, if a family's native language is not English, interpreter or translator services should be made available. Ultimately, ensuring that interventions and supports are accessible, inclusive, and equitable for all families is an important aspect of inclusive family-centered practices (DEC, 2014).

Family Empowerment

Family empowerment is crucial to family-centered practices (Rouse, 2012). It entails the empowerment of parents to advocate for their child's treatment and education while actively engaging as partners within the school community. This aspect is critical for upholding an inclusive partnership and fostering the success of children with ASD (Casagrande & Ingersoll, 2017). Given families' diversity in abilities and needs (Rouse, 2012), professionals are expected to offer families the requisite support, diverse resources, training, and opportunities. The aim is to assist them in developing essential skills, knowledge, and competency in areas such as navigating the intervention process and education system, understanding academic standards, making informed decisions, and advocating for inclusive practices (Allen & Christopher, 1996; DEC, 2016; Dunst et al., 2017; Thompson et al., 1997). This approach encourages parents to recognize their strengths and express their concerns, ideas, and aspirations for their children. Consequently, parents are empowered to make well-informed decisions and advocate for their children with disabilities with confidence (McWilliam et al., 2009; Trivette et al., 2010).

Supports and Resources for Families

Access to Technology and Digital Resources. Children with ASD may encounter communication and socialization challenges, leading to difficulties in acquiring various skills

(CDC, n.d.). Research underscores the benefits of utilizing technology and digital resources to teach language and social skills to children with ASD (Grynszpan et al., 2014; Kuo et al., 2014), a sentiment shared by parents who recognize the positive impact of technology on children with ASD (Finke et al., 2015). Among technology devices, the use of tablets, smartphones, and iPads is significantly prevalent among children with ASD (Clark et al., 2015) owing to their accessibility, mobility, visualization effects, high quality, and the ease of installing diverse applications, facilitating meaningful feedback, and enabling turn-taking, sharing, and learning (Yavich & Davidovich, 2019).

Assistive Technology (AT), a device that augments the functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities (Assistive Technology Industry Association, n.d.), can increase and improve communication for children with ASD, regardless of the degree of impairment. Augmentative and alternative communication, a form of AT, has been shown to improve communication skills, social interaction, and practical everyday skills for individuals with ASD (Autism Speaks, n.d.). Because ASD is characterized by significant phenotypic heterogeneity and potential comorbidities (DSM-5; APA, 2013), children with ASD have diverse learning needs (Rashedi et al., 2022) and research shows technology can bridge the gap between social, communication, or behavior skills and learning in children with ASD (Ganz, 2015). Therefore, guiding families of children with ASD on technology to enhance communication, learning, and social interaction in young children with ASD may be beneficial (Rashedi et al., 2022), and is a pivotal component in a family-centered model. Furthermore, families would benefit from guidance in selecting appropriate technology tools for their children with ASD, along with strategies for monitoring and periodically reassessing these tools as their child's goals are achieved. Providing technology-related support, such as using mobile applications, online

forums, and virtual support networks to connect families with information, resources, and peer

support, would also benefit families.

Other Supports. To enhance families' understanding of ASD and aid in supporting their

child's development, avenues such as education, training, workshops, seminars, and support

groups focused on early intervention strategies, behavior management techniques, and accessing

community resources are pivotal components of a family-centered early intervention approach

aimed at empowering families (also see Table 1).

Table 1

Family Information and Online Resources

Online Resources	Description
https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/afirm-modules#content	Autism focused interventions
https://www.autismspeaks.org/tool-kit/parents-guide-autism	A parent's guide to autism
https://autismsociety.org	Autism society resources
https://eiclearinghouse.org/einotes/natural-envir/	Intervention in natural environment
https://asatonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/New-Parent-Packet-2021.pdf	Parent information packet on ASD
https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/index.html	Developmental milestones app
https://asdtoddler.fpg.unc.edu	Evidence-based practices for children with ASD
https://www.marcus.org/autism-resources/autism-tips-and-resources	Autism information and tips
https://www.cdc.gov/autism/communication-resources/index.html	Autism materials and resources
https://www.pacer.org/ec/early-intervention/guide-child-outcomes.asp	How to participate in your child's outcome measurement process?
https://www.scdhhs.gov/resources/programs-and-initiatives/babynet/families	EI system for infants and toddlers
https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/parents/states.html	EI contacts

Note. ASD = Autism Spectrum Disorder; EI = Early Intervention

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Conclusion

The role of professionals working with families of young children with developmental delays and disabilities has undergone a significant evolution. Professionals, once the sole decision-makers and expert providers who prescribed service implementation to families, now emphasize viewing families as active, mutual partners and collaborators in planning and implementing services. The family-centered approach has gained recognition as an essential component of early intervention and early childhood programs, benefiting children with delays and disabilities and their families (Bailey et al., 2012). In line with the recommendations, standards, and policies proposed by the Division of Early Childhood (2014) and National Association for the Education of Young Children (2020), incorporating family-professional partnerships in the early years of children's lives is paramount. Additionally, measuring the impact of family–professional collaborative initiatives and utilizing data to inform continuous improvement efforts are crucial. This may encompass collecting feedback from families, professionals, and other stakeholders to evaluate the effectiveness of collaborative strategies and pinpoint areas for enhancement. Utilizing this feedback to refine practices and ensure that family engagement efforts are responsive to the community's needs is imperative. By addressing the key areas discussed in this article, family-centered early intervention practices that empower families of young children with ASD can effectively cultivate authentic family-professional partnerships, foster positive developmental outcomes, and bolster the overall well-being of children with ASD and their families.

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Figure 1

Essential Components of Effective Family-Centered Early Intervention

- Supporting families in a natural environment
- Family's participation in Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP)
	Family–Professional Partnerships
	  - Open communication
	  - Building mutual respect & trust
	  - Culturally responsive & inclusive partnerships

- Family Empowerment
  - Active engagement as partners
  - Advocate for their children
  - Well-informed decision making
	- Supports and Resources
	  - Access to technology, online & digital resources
	  - Education, training, workshops, seminars, community resources, & support groups

Family-Centered Early Intervention