

How to Communicate Effectively with Early Childhood Professionals

Children with disabilities also have a lot of abilities. By communicating both your child’s needs and strengths to early childhood professionals, you can help them select services that will be most appropriate for your son or daughter.

You and this team of professionals will create your child’s Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) or Individualized Education Program (IEP). Their role is to listen to your concerns and develop goals based upon your child’s strengths and needs.

Your role is to help the team understand your child. Here are some ideas that can help you do that effectively.

Know Your Child’s Strengths and Needs

While all children develop in their own way and at their own rates, general guidelines show the skills and behaviors children typically have at certain ages (Order a free development wheel at www.health.state.mn.us/divs/fh/mcshn/wheel.htm). These guidelines can help you think about where your child is developing typically and where some support might be helpful. Some parents find it helpful to discuss their child’s strengths and needs with a family member or friend. As you consider your child’s development, look for consistent patterns, not just one or two instances of a behavior.

Here are some examples other parents have defined as strengths and needs:

STRENGTHS	NEEDS
I am happy that my child:	I’m concerned that my child:
Smiles back at me or others.	Doesn’t smile back at me or others.
Follows movement of an object by turning her or his head.	Doesn’t follow moving objects around by turning her or his head.
Reaches for objects and holds them.	Has difficulty reaching for objects and holding them.
Makes sounds, babbles, or talks.	Seldom attempts to make sounds
Understands common words such as “no,” “bye,” and “all gone.”	Doesn’t seem to understand common words such as “no,” “bye,” and “all gone.”
Likes to play with other children.	Likes to play alone.
Sometimes uses two- to three-word sentences.	Uses only single words and only occasionally.
Talks and usually is understood by others.	Talks, but is not usually understood by others.

Share Information

Once you’ve identified your child’s strengths and needs, share them with the early childhood professionals and give examples to illustrate each one. Doing so can provide the team with a fresh, insightful way of looking at your child.

It's also helpful to share your child's likes and dislikes. The early childhood professionals can use that information to select an approach to services that will engage your child. When children are interested in something, they are more likely to stick with it and learn from it.

Remember, no one knows your son or daughter better than you do. If you have strategies that have been successful with your child, you might want to share them with the early childhood professionals, too.

Ask Questions

No one expects you to know everything about your child's development, but it's good to learn as much as you can so you can be a strong advocate for your son or daughter. To learn more, you might want to ask early childhood professionals questions such as:

- How can you help me so I can help my child?
- Have you worked with a child that is similar to mine?
- What community resources would be helpful to meet my child's needs?

Early childhood professionals and others, such as PACER Center, can help you find the support, information, and resources you need.

Remember...

You are the expert on your child. By sharing your child's strengths, needs, likes, and dislikes, you provide valuable

information that professionals can use to help your son or daughter. As your child grows and changes, you'll have new opportunities to continue learning and sharing. Early childhood professionals play an important role in developing goals for your child and should be able to address your concerns while being respectful of your family values, beliefs, culture, and priorities. As you practice communicating with your child's team and connecting with other parents who share your concerns, you will be on the road to becoming an effective advocate for your child.

Related Information

From PACER Center

"Thoughts About My Child," a book for families of young children with disabilities, helps parents organize information about their child's daily routine, likes and dislikes, skills, unique characteristics, birth and health history, needs, and names of medical or school professionals. It's free to Minnesota parents; order publication PHP-a15 at www.PACER.org/publications or call 952-838-9000.

Web Sites

- PACER Center: www.PACER.org
- Minnesota Department of Health: www.health.state.mn.us/divs/fh/mcshn/wheel.htm
- Minnesota Parents Know: www.mnparentsknow.com