## Family Communication: Strategies for Building Effective Partnerships and Working Relationships

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#### Abstract

This article offers a variety of strategies for pre-service and beginning teachers to utilize in order to create positive and effective relationships with families that are built on clear communication and trust. It is crucial for new and veteran teachers to understand the importance of successful communication with parents and families of students with special needs. Teachers and educational professionals should implement ongoing strategies throughout the school year to ensure that parents and families are educated about the approaches and services their child receives in school. Familial knowledge and understanding of the types of services and the schedule of when those services are delivered can lead to increased family involvement in their child's special education program. This involvement can ultimately increase the learning process and progress towards meeting goals and objectives for students with disabilities (Dunst, 2002; Kashinath, Woods, & Goldstein, 2006, Wellner, 2012). This article will define the following strategies: creating master schedules, writing a student at a glance, setting up team meeting schedules for the school year, creating team meeting and IEP meeting agendas, as well as explain the most effective use of *communication sheets*. These types of user-friendly approaches to establishing ongoing and consistent contact with families is necessary for family satisfaction and student success, especially for families of students with disabilities at all age levels (Bezdek, Summers, & Turnbull, 2010; Diliberto & Brewer, 2012).

## Family Communication: Strategies for Building Effective Partnerships and Working Relationships

#### Introduction

Family involvement has become an integral part of education for students with and without disabilities. Historically, families have been involved in the education of their children for many years. In recent years, with the initiation of legislation such as No Child Left Behind (2001) and the re-authorization of IDEA (2004), it is no longer an assumption that families will have a voice in the education of their child; it is an expectation implemented by law. (Rock, 2000; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2011). While the 1997 Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA 1997, P.L. 105-17) was put into place to increase family involvement and decision making, many families continue to feel detached from the team and planning for their child (National Information Center, 1998). Teachers, service providers and administrators too often take the role of decision makers, while parents take the role of consent

givers (Rock, 2000). Research has shown that these feelings of being uninvolved are the product of several barriers that impede familial participation and decision making. Some of the many barriers include educational professionals being insensitive to cultural differences, familial mistrust of the school team, teachers having an "I know best" attitude, as well as work and time conflicts (Quiroz, Greenfield & Altchech, 1999; Rock, 2000; Sileo, Sileo & Prater, 1996). Therefore, it is more crucial than ever that teachers, related service providers, and administrators create and maintain effective means of communication with families in order to build positive partnerships. Effective communication is the foundation for promoting and enduring trust between families and educational professionals. It is trust that is imperative for successful long-term partnerships between families and educators to enhance the teaching and student learning process for children receiving special education services (Cox, 2005; Dunst, 2002; Turnbull et al, 2011, Wellner, 2012).

While undergraduate and graduate level special education teacher preparation programs are focused on the fundamentals of teacher training: teaching methods, strategies and practicum experiences, there is little time to prepare them to work with families in the context of copious state certification and college/university course requirements. Many entry-level special educators enter the field of special education with little direct experience communicating and problem solving with families. Some student teachers may have initial contact and experience with families of their students by attending IEP meetings or participating in "meet the teacher night" but they may not have training in how to effectively communicate with families of children with disabilities with opportunities to build and maintain positive, trusting partnerships by taking a lead teacher role (Hedges & Lee 2010; Korthagen, Loughran, & Russell, 2006). In some instances, friction between families and new teachers may occur. This can be easily prevented by clear and effective communication from the start of the school year as well as ongoing communication that is planned and organized (Eberly, Joshi, & Konzal, 2007).

#### **Purpose**

In this article, we offer a variety of strategies for pre-service and beginning teachers to utilize in order to create positive and effective relationships with families that are built on clear communication and trust. It is crucial for new and veteran teachers to understand the importance of successful communication with parents and families of students with special needs. Teachers and educational professionals should implement ongoing strategies throughout the school year to ensure that parents and families are educated about the approaches and services their child receives in school. Familial knowledge and understanding of the types of services and the schedule of when those services are delivered can lead to increased family involvement in their child's special education program. This involvement can ultimately increase the learning process and progress towards meeting goals and objectives for students with disabilities (Dunst, 2002; Kashinath, Woods, & Goldstein, 2006, Wellner, 2012).

This article will define the following strategies: creating *master schedules*, writing a *student at a glance*, setting up *team meeting schedules* for the school year, creating *team meeting and IEP meeting agendas*, as well as explain the most effective use of *communication sheets*. These types of user-friendly approaches to establishing ongoing and consistent contact with families is

necessary for family satisfaction and student success, especially for families of students with disabilities at all age levels (Bezdek, Summers, & Turnbull, 2010; Diliberto & Brewer, 2012).

#### Master Schedules

It is quite common for students with disabilities to have cumbersome Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and many team members that comprise their specialized programs. Students can receive services that include special education teachers, speech and language pathologists, school psychologists, occupational therapists, and physical therapists. Some children may receive over ten services during the school week, creating intricate schedules in addition to the regular classroom content and activities.

Special education teachers typically have the role of case manager for students who receive multiple services, leaving them in charge of creating well thought-out schedules for students with IEPs (Turnbull, Turnbull, Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2013). Scheduling for students who require a number of services can be a daunting task, especially when taking into account the general education schedule including academic blocks, specials (Art, PE, Music, Technology, Foreign Language, etc.) and social times in class. While developing a master schedule for students with disabilities can be difficult, it is not impossible (Bugaj, 2005). The "hours" page on a student's IEP can be overwhelming and challenging for families as well as for general education teachers to understand. Therefore, it is critical for special education teachers to create a master schedule for each student on their caseloads (see Appendix A) for all members of the child's team including the family. This schedule should be well thought out and created with the input of the regular education teacher and varying service providers to ensure minimal transition time for students in and out of the classroom, as well as to guarantee that each student receives the appropriate number of service hours in the correct setting, as mandated by the IEP.

Individual student schedules can also assist students in organizing their day and week at school, as well as to prepare them for upcoming events, classes, and/or transitions. Families can also use schedules as a means for communication with their child at home. It is beneficial for families to review a student's schedule before school to prepare for the day. Additionally schedules can be used after school as a tool for recalling events that happened during the school day (Downing & Hardin, 2001).

Once this schedule is created, the team should follow it for the first few weeks of school to determine its appropriateness for the student. When all service providers and teachers approve of the schedule, it should then be shared with the family. At times, communicating with families about their child's schedule too early in the school year can be confusing or disappointing for the family if and when changes need to be made. It is recommended that teachers meet with families to explain in detail how the schedule is set up and who will be working with their child and at what points during the week, as soon as it is established. This master schedule can be explained to the parent or primary caregiver as a work in progress as the needs of students often change as the school year progresses. This schedule can also be shared with the student if appropriate.

Sharing and explaining a student's schedule with the family can prevent confusion that is often caused by a lack of or unclear communication. With a comprehensive schedule, families are more aware of what interventions are being provided, when they are occurring and who is responsible for implementing the services. Furthermore, it will be helpful when families want to contact the service providers regarding questions, concerns and home carryover (Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011).

#### Student at a Glance

An IEP can be an intimidating and overwhelming document for educational professionals and families alike to read through and comprehend in its entirety. It is advantageous for special education teachers and/or other service providers to create a "student at a glance" for each student and share it with the family and team members. A student at a glance is defined as a short document (2-3 pgs) that represents a student in an outline form. This document includes a student's weaknesses/areas of need, strengths, goals and objectives (using shortened, reader friendly language), accommodations/modifications, service hours, and any additional recommendations including support from a paraprofessional, communication with parents, behavior plans, etc (see Appendix B). It is recommended that the student at a glance be reviewed with related service providers, regular education teachers, specials teachers, paraprofessionals, families, administrators, and any other professionals/related service providers that may be working with the student. This document should be created at the start of the school year in order for all educational professionals to have an introductory understanding of the needs of the students that they will be instructing (Jones, 2012; Weishaar, 2001).

A revised student at a glance should be created at the culmination of an annual review or triennial review to reflect the changes in the student's IEP. Teachers, families, related service providers and other educational staff appreciate the information presented in a student at a glance and use it to help create appropriate goals and objectives for their students receiving special education services. Furthermore, this strategy is intended to promote general education teachers' knowledge of a student's IEP which will, in turn, aid in the student's learning and progress toward meeting goals and objectives, as well as support a positive inclusive experience (Jones, 2012).

#### **Team Meeting Schedules**

Many students who receive special education services require regularly scheduled team meetings with primary caregivers/families in addition to standard annual IEP meetings in order to build team cohesion and family involvement. It is most efficient to create an agreed upon team meeting schedule at the start of the year that spans the school calendar (see Appendix C). It is helpful for parents and staff members to have set dates and times for team meetings. This predetermined schedule can prevent problems that typically arise from last minute scheduling. When this schedule is created in advance, it may also prevent parental anxiety and concern about scheduling times that respect and fit their schedule. Additionally, having meetings scheduled for the entire school year creates efficiency for educational staff. This is a simple strategy that can greatly ease family/primary caregiver anxiety.

While this is a useful strategy for students whose program requires regular team meetings for families and school staff to communicate and plan, team meetings can be held at any time during the school year for students with and without IEP's if the school staff and/or families deem it necessary.

#### Team Meeting and IEP Agendas

In conjunction with team meeting schedules, it is also useful for school staff and parents to work together to create an agreed upon agenda prior to a team meeting or IEP meeting. Giving families a voice prior to the actual meeting assists with easing nerves, fears, and overall concerns regarding being heard, the structure and flow of the meeting, and expectations (Fish, 2008). Creating an agenda that staff members and parents are comfortable with prior to the meeting also allows parents to be best prepared for discussions and decision making when planning their child's educational program. Typically, team meetings and IEP meetings are under strict time constraints, therefore it is helpful to assign a general time frame to each agenda item prior to the meeting. While this can be difficult to strictly adhere to, it does give parents an understanding of high priority topics that will be addressed at the meeting (Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). Receiving input from parents and sending an agenda prior to the meeting should be done in the way that works best for each family in written form. This gives staff members a written log of communication with parents. See Appendix D for an example of a team meeting and IEP meeting agenda.

#### Communication Sheets

Communicating regularly with parents and family members about students with special needs can be a challenging feat. The difficulty lies in accomplishing a balance among parental expectations, student needs, and teaching staff members' time, willingness and style. Daily communication between home and school can be a critical component in a child's educational growth and development (Eberly et al, 2007). Consistent written communication between home and school is advantageous for two reasons: 1) some people communicate thoughts, feelings and ideas more effectively and clearly in written form and 2) it provides a permanent product that can aid in record keeping (Hall, Wolfe & Bollig, 2003; Williams & Cartledge, 1997). When daily communication is a necessary aspect of a student's program it should be written into his/her IEP. While many teachers utilize communication sheets, they may contain ambiguous or subjective information that may lead to misinterpretation by the family. The purpose of a communication sheet is to give parents factual information about their child's day; for example, what was worked on in the resource room, in speech, in OT; what academic activities took place in the classroom; and what areas need extra practice at home. Communication sheets should not be used as an ongoing dialogue between home and school with back and forth questions and comments. Daily communication sheets are most helpful for students who are non-verbal and for those students that have difficulty recalling what occurred during the school day. Primary caregivers can then facilitate communication with their child with the information from a communication sheet.

If you are a teacher with a number of students on your caseload that require communication sheets on a daily basis, you must create a way of relaying the information in an effective and

efficient manner, while bearing in mind the legality of documentation. Below are three tips to remember when making a communication sheet that works for both teacher and parents:

- 1) Try to avoid using a notebook with blank pages, this leaves too much room for ambiguous language such as, "great day in reading," "did well with math lesson," or "had a super day." There is very little meaning and information relayed in the above statements.
- 2) Develop a one page form that is broken down into various sub-sections of the student's day. The sub-sections on the form should be based on student need (see Appendix E & Appendix F).
- 3) Remember to date and photocopy the communication sheet prior to it being sent home each day. Keep a folder of all communication sheets for each child for the school year.

Communication between teachers and families is absolutely critical to ensure ongoing student progress, learning and development. Creating a communication system that works for teachers, parents, is a key component to building a positive relationship linking home and school (Bezdek, Summers & Turnbull, 2010; Diliberto & Brewer, 2012; Handyside, Murray, & Mereoiu, 2012; Hall, Wolfe & Bollig, 2003).

#### Conclusion

Special education teachers along with general education teachers and related service providers and professionals create a unified team that represents many pieces of the puzzle that makes up the education of students with disabilities. The many services that a child with disabilities receives can be copious, creating complicated schedules and a variety of separate yet integrated interventions. Families have the right by law to understand the amount, frequency and timing of the services their child receives. It is crucial for both pre-service and in-service teachers to provide ongoing communication with families through clear and organized methods. In addition, those methods must be clearly communicated and tailored to meet the needs of diverse families. The strategies and approaches explained in this article are suggested for implementation for the multi-faceted teams that treat students and families with disabilities.

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## Appendix A **Master Schedule**

	Transfer Schedule
's Schedule	School Year
's Class	

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8:45	Arrival/	Arrival/	Arrival/	Arrival/	Arrival/
9:00	Skill Review/	Skill Review/	Skill Review/	Skill Review/	Skill Review/
9:15	Morning	Morning	Morning Meeting	Morning Meeting	Morning
	Meeting	Meeting	Social Skills in		Meeting
9:30	Math		class		
	Workshop		9:15-9:45	Resource	
9:40	Ms		Math	9:30-10:30	PE
10:00	in class 9:30-	Math	Workshop		9:40-10:10
	10:00	Workshop			
10:15	PE		Resource		Resource
10:30	10:15-10:45		10:15-10:45	Math	10:15-10:45
				Workshop	
10:55			Lunch/Recess		
11:00			10:55-11:35		
11:15					
11:35	SSR	SSR	SSR	SSR	SSR
11:45	Speech	Resource	Resource	Speech	Social Skills
12:00	11:45-12:15	11:45-12:15	11:45-12:15	11:45-12:15	11:45-12:15
12:15				Reading	Reading
12:30	Reading	Reading	Reading	Workshop	Workshop
12:45	Workshop	Workshop	Workshop	Ms.	
1:00			Ms.		
			in	in class 1:00-1:30	
			class		
			12:45-1:15		
1:20	Energy Break	Energy Break	Energy Break		Energy Break
1:30		OT		Energy Break	
1:45	_	1:30-2:00	Writing	Resource	
2.00	Resource	***	Workshop	1:45-2:15	Writing
2:00	1:45-2:45	Writing		****	Workshop
2:15		3.4		Writing	
2:30		Music	)	<b>A</b> .	
	~ .	2:20-2:50	Music	Art	~
2:45	Science/	Health	2:30-3:05	2:30-3:15	Science/SS
3:00	SS		Read Aloud		
3:10					
3:20	Pack Up/Dismissal				

<sup>\*\*\*</sup>Shaded areas –Service time

### Appendix B **Student at a Glance**

Name: EP DOB: Grade: 2<sup>nd</sup>

DRA: Level 12

#### **Strengths:**

- Identifies numbers 1-30, 1:1 correspondence to 25, tell time to hour and 1/2hour
- Identify 20/26 sounds, sight word reading, answers wh questions based on a story
- Generation of ideas for writing
- Friendly, empathetic, engaging
- Motivated by peers and positive reinforcement
- Vocabulary
- Good with routines (may need reminders at times)
- Wants to please/cooperative
- Enjoys peers (increase interactive language)
- Conversations with adults

The student at a glance serves as a useful summary of the student's strengths and challenges. It is beneficial for the entire team and is best presented to the team at the start of or prior to the start of the school year to begin the planning for each student.

#### Weaknesses:

- Math skills: addition/subtraction to 10, count by 5's and 10's, identification of money, counting coins, telling time to ¼ hour and 5 min intervals
- Language art skills: short vowel sounds, blending phonemes, stretching words, inventive spelling
- Attention/Focus: impulsive, inconsistent, easily distracted, requires increased prompting at times
- Can be oppositional/passively resistant
- Overly dependent on adults
- Independence skills
- Assertiveness and initiation skills
- Stamina for task completion
- Morning/afternoon routines
- Sensory needs (puts things in mouth)
- Immature speech/language patterns
- Consistent redirection
- Peer interactions (initiation and sustained play)
- Fine motor coordination (writing letters and numbers), hand strength
- Decreased strength, balance and coordination
- Visual motor
- Organization

#### Appendix B

#### **Student at a Glance (cont.)**

#### Goals & objectives:

#### • Reading:

- 1) use reading strategies to decode unknown words
- 2) decode CCVC words with initial digraphs
- 3) state short vowel sound when given corresponding letter
- 4) decode CVC words
- 5) read a passage at his reading level with appropriate phrasing with teacher modeling

#### • Comprehension skills:

- 1) state the main idea of a story at his reading level
- 2) recall events in order after reading a story at his level

### • Spelling/Writing:

- 1) encode CVC words (ie. cap)
- 2) spell 25 high frequency sight words
- 3) write 1-2 sentences about a picture or personal event no more than 2 prompts
- 4) complete graphic organizer prior to writing a paragraph about a given topic (2 prompts)
- 5) after completion of graphic organizer, write paragraph with topic sentence and 3 details

#### • Math:

- 1) identify ones and tens place when given a two digit number
- 2) solve addition equations with numbers 0-10
- 3) solve subtraction equations using numbers 0-10
- 4) skip count by 5's and 10's
- 5) assign value to all coins
- 6) count like coins to 50 cents
- 7) tell time to ½ hr, ¼ hr, and 5 minute intervals

#### Service Hours

- SPED- LA: 2.5/wk pull out, .5/wk push in, Math: 2.0/wk pull out, .5/wk push in
- Speech- 1.0/wk pull out, .5/wk push in
- OT- 1.0/wk pull out
- PT- .5/wk pull out
- Social Skills- .75/wk pull out
- Swimming- 2.0/wk pull out

<sup>\*\*</sup> para support for reading, writing, math, social studies/science, and lunch .5/month PT consult; .5/month OT consult; .5 per week S/L consult, communication sheet; monthly team meetings, .25/wk sped consult with reg. ed teacher

## Appendix C **Team Meeting Schedule**

's Team Meeting Schedule School Year		
October:	10/5/10	10:15-10:45
November:	11/9/10	10:15-10:45
December:	12/7/10	10:15-10:45
January:	1/11/11	10:15-10:45
February:	2/8/11 10:1:	5-10:45
March:	3/15/11	10:15-10:45
April:	4/12/11	10:15-10:45
May:	5/17/11	10:15-10:45
June:	6/14/11	10:15-10:45

This simple team meeting schedule is a very important tool not only for parents but also for school team members. This schedule alleviates a lot of confusion and miscommunication that can occur during the hectic school year. Parents often feel grounded and comfortable knowing that their meetings are on the calendar. This also provides service providers a time line to prepare in advance for each team meeting.

# Appendix D **Team Meeting/IEP Agenda**

	Student:		
	Date:		
1. Classroom Update			
2. Social/Speech			
3. Summer/1 <sup>st</sup> Grade			
4. Other			

	Appendix E  Communication Sheet
Date:	
Classroom	
Resource	
Speech	
Social Skills	
ОТ	

Parent Comments

## Appendix F **Communication Sheet**

Date:
Morning Meeting:
Reading:
Writing:
Math:
Special ():
Resource:
Speech:
OT/PT:
Social Skills:
Other:
Parent Comments: