



How to Communicate Effectively with Early Childhood Professionals

Children are amazing little humans. When you meet with your child’s Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) or Individualized Educational Program (IEP) team, you will spend a lot of time talking about your child’s needs in order to create a plan that will help them develop and grow in those areas. It is important that the meeting also include discussion about your child’s strengths. Each child, regardless of their disabilities, has many interests and abilities that make them who they are and who they will become.

The role of the IFSP or IEP team is to listen to your concerns and develop outcomes and goals based on both your child’s needs and their strengths. By communicating a more complete picture of your child to early childhood professionals, you can help them select appropriate services for your child. Your role is to help the other members of 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 pace, there are general guidelines that list the skills and behaviors children typically have at specific ages. These guidelines can help you think about where your child is developing typically and where support might be helpful. Some parents find it helpful to discuss their child’s strengths and needs with a family member or friend before meeting with the team. Those trusted adults can validate or add to observations a parent has already made. 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	Prefers 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, use examples as you share them with the early childhood professionals. This can give the team a fresh, insightful way of looking at your child.

It's also helpful to share your child's likes, dislikes, and interests. Early childhood professionals can use that information to select an approach to services that will engage your child. For example, if a child is fearful of animals or pets, trying to build vocabulary through pictures of dogs may not be very successful. If that same child, however, is fascinated when the garbage truck comes or when passing a construction site, they may be enthusiastic about vocabulary activities involving different kinds of vehicles, and this may help them progress. When children are interested in something, they are more likely to stick with it and learn from it.

Remember, no one knows your child better than you do. If you have strategies that have been successful with your child, share them with the early childhood professionals, too. Your child will make better progress if everyone uses the same strategies. If the professionals recommend a strategy that you know does not work with your child, let them know that as well.

Ask questions

You always have the right to ask questions during a meeting if you do not understand what is being proposed or discussed. Asking for clarification, or for the meaning of a word that is being used, helps you understand and agree with team or primary provider decisions. Sometimes you will have questions after you leave a meeting; make sure that you know who to call for follow up questions or concerns.

It can feel intimidating to sit in a meeting with professionals who have a deep understanding of typical child development. It is important to remember that you are the expert in your child, and you bring that knowledge to the table. No one expects you to know everything about child 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 who is similar to mine?

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 their strengths, needs, likes, and dislikes, you provide valuable information that professionals can use to help your child. As they grow and change, you'll have new opportunities to continue learning and sharing. Early childhood professionals play an important role in developing outcomes and goals for your child and should be able to address your concerns while being respectful of your family values, beliefs, culture, and priorities. By practicing communication with your child's team and connecting with other parents who share your concerns, you will develop skills to make you an effective advocate for your child.

Additional resources

- **Birth to age 3: IFSP**
 - Call PACER Center at (952) 838-9000 and ask to receive a copy of "Families are Important! An Early Childhood Guidebook for Families of Young Children"
- **Ages 3-5: IEP**
 - "Working Together as an Effective IEP Team" [PACER.org/parent/php/PHP-c254.pdf](https://www.pacer.org/parent/php/PHP-c254.pdf)
 - "Top 10 Tips: Ideas to Improve Parent-to-Professional Communication from PACER Parent Advocates" [PACER.org/parent/php/PHP-c198.pdf](https://www.pacer.org/parent/php/PHP-c198.pdf)
 - Call PACER Center at (952) 838-9000 and ask to receive a copy of "Working Together: A Parent's Guide to Parent and Professional Partnership and Communication Within Special Education"

Web sites

- PACER Center: [PACER.org](https://www.pacer.org)
- Help Me Grow: [helpmegrowmn.org](https://www.helpmegrowmn.org)