Chapter 3
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Education must be a shared responsibility. Education of the whole child requires solid, well-functioning partnerships among school, community, and family.

Family members are a child’s first and most influential teachers. Educators need to understand family involvement as a way to enhance their work and improve student learning (Lueder, 1998). Too often the conventional pattern of relationships between schools and parents is limited to the role of parents as donors or classroom volunteers. This pattern must be transformed by recognizing families and communities as equal partners in preparing students for adult life. This perception is the key to family-centered practices that strengthen and promote competence in students, families, and communities.

It is now time to cultivate home–school collaborations that will allow both school educators and home educators to fulfill their commitments to develop each child’s potential. Home–school partnerships provide students the best opportunity for overcoming risks and disabilities, and to achieve their full potential in a complex, challenging world.

In this chapter, parent partnerships are the content focus (triangle in the opening graphic). We will explore processes (circle) of family involvement with schools as they emanate from the home setting context (square).

FOCUSING QUESTIONS

1. What legislation has mandated parent involvement and supported family empowerment in schools?
2. How does involvement by families in home–school partnerships benefit students, their families, teachers, their schools, and communities?
3. In what ways has family involvement matured into family partnership and collaboration?
4. What are barriers to home–school collaborative partnerships?
5. How can educators examine their values and attitudes toward families in order to build collaborative relationships?

6. What do teachers need to know to be better prepared to work with families of culturally and linguistically diverse students?

7. How can school personnel initiate and individualize partnerships with families?

8. How should students with special needs be involved in planning for their own learning?

**KEY TERMS**

- cultural and linguistic diversity (CLD)
- cultural competence
- efficacy
- empowerment
- equal partnerships model
- family-focused collaboration
- home–school collaboration
- Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP)
- parent involvement
- parent partnerships

**VIGNETTE 3**

The setting is a junior high school. The learning disabilities teacher has just arrived at the building, hoping to make some contacts with classroom teachers before classes begin, when the principal walks out of her office briskly, with a harried look.

**Principal:** Oh, I’m glad you’re here. I believe Barry is part of your caseload this year, right? His mother is in my office. She’s crying, and says that everybody’s picking on her son.

**LD Consultant:** What happened?

**Principal:** He got into an argument with his English teacher yesterday, and she sent him to me. After he cooled down and we had a talk, it was time for classes to change, so I sent him on to his next class. But he skipped out. The secretary called and left word with the baby-sitter to inform the mother about his absence. He must have really unloaded on her, because she’s here, quite upset, and saying that the teachers do not care about her son and his problems. Could you join us for a talk?

**LD Consultant:** Okay, sure. (Enters the principal’s office and greets Barry’s mother.)

**Mother:** I am just about at my wits’ end. It’s not been a good week at home but we’ve made an effort to keep track of Barry’s work. Now this problem with his English teacher has him refusing to come to school. Sometimes I feel that we’re at cross purposes—us at home and you at school.

**LD Consultant:** We certainly don’t want this to happen. I’d like to hear more about your concerns, and the problems Barry and his teachers are having. Is this a good time, or can we arrange for one that is more convenient for you?

**Mother:** The sooner, the better. I don’t want Barry missing school, but with the attitude he has right now, it wouldn’t do him any good to be here.

**LD Consultant:** Let’s discuss some strategies we can work on. We are all concerned about Barry, and we need for him to know that.
MANDATES FOR FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

School partners need to be aware of several legislated mandates intended to assure and strengthen educational partnerships between home and school. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (P.L. 94-142) prescribes several rights for families of children with disabilities. Succeeding amendments have extended those rights and responsibilities.

Legislation mandating family involvement is part of EACHA, the Handicapped Children’s Protection Act, Early Intervention for Infants and Toddlers (Part H of P.L. 99-457), and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, P.L. 101-476). Passage of P.L. 94-142 in 1975 guarantees families the right to due process, prior notice and consent, access to records, and participation in decision making. To these basic rights the 1986 Handicapped Children’s Protection Act adds collection of attorney’s fees for parents who prevail in due process hearings or court suits. The Early Intervention Amendment was part of the reauthorized and amended P.L. 94-142. Passed in 1986, it provides important provisions for children from birth through five years and their families. Part H addresses infants and toddlers with disabilities or who are at-risk for developmental delays. Procedural safeguards for families were continued and participation in the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) was added.

The IFSP is developed by a multidisciplinary team with family members as active participants. Part B, Section 691, mandates service to all children with disabilities from ages three to five, and permits noncategorical services. Children may be served according to the needs of their families, allowing a wide range of services including parent training. This amendment fosters collaboration based on family-focused methods. The legislation speaks of families in a broad sense, not just a mother–father pair as the family unit. Families’ choices are considered in all decisions.

The 1990 amendments under P.L. 101-476 increased participation by children and adults with disabilities and their families. An example is the formation of community transition councils with active participation of parents in the groups. Subsequent court decisions and statutory amendments have clarified and strengthened parental rights (Martin, 1991). The spirit of the law is met when educators develop positive, collaborative relationships with families.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997 were signed into law in June of 1997 after two years of analysis, hearings, and discussion. This reauthorization of IDEA, as Public Law 105-17, brought many changes to P.L. 94-142. Parent participation in eligibility and placement decisions, and mediation as a means of resolving parent–school controversies are two critically important areas of change. P.L. 105-17 strengthens the involvement of parents in all decision making involving their children (National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities, 1997). This legislation added to the impetus of Goals 2000: Educate America Act featuring parent involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children as one of its eight goals. More recently, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation sets forth several goals for schools, including closing achievement gaps between privileged and disadvantaged students, improving teacher preparation, instituting accountability systems for schools, teachers, and students, and setting academic standards with required testing to determine student progress (Hanna & Dettmer, 2004).
EDUCATIONAL RATIONALE
FOR FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

A student’s school, family, and community provide overlapping spheres of influence on behavior, development, and achievement. The collaborative team should include all three spheres, with the student at the center.

Strong home–school relationships support student development and learning (Epstein, 1995; Hansen, Himes, & Meyer, 1990; Reynolds & Birch, 1988). Extensive research about the effects of family involvement demonstrates that parent involvement enhances students’ chances for success in school and significantly improves their achievement. Students improve in terms of both academic behavior and social behavior, with higher attendance rates and lower suspension rates. They have higher test scores, more positive attitudes toward school, and higher completion rates for homework (Christenson & Cleary, 1990).

Children are not the only beneficiaries of family involvement. Family members benefit from improved feelings of self-worth and self-satisfaction, and increased incentive to enhance the educational environment of the home (Murphy, 1981). They have the opportunity to learn skills that help with their child’s needs, such as behavior management techniques and communication strategies. As parents work with teachers, they have opportunity to provide input about their children’s interests and needs and to express their own wisdom. Teachers learn more about their students’ backgrounds. They receive support from family members who are valuable sources of information about their children’s interests and needs and can provide encouragement to their children as they study and learn.

School systems benefit from home–school collaboration through improved attitudes toward schools and advocacy for school programs. A positive home–school relationship helps others in the schools and the community. Family involvement increases positive communication among all who are involved on the education team. It augments opportunity for school program success (Shea & Bauer, 1985), and enhances school and community accountability for serving special needs (Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wheat, 1982). These points all provide strong evidence that “reaching the family is as important as reaching the child” (Rich, 1987a, p. 64).

Family Empowerment

Special education laws and changes in laws do require significantly new and different ways of working with families. Empowerment is the goal (Royster & McLaughlin, 1996; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). Staples suggests this definition of empowerment: “An ongoing capacity of individuals and groups to act on their own behalf to achieve a greater measure of control over their lives and destinies” (Staples, 1990, p. 30). In their research with families of children in early intervention services, Thompson, Lobb, Elling, Herman, Jurkiewicz, and Hulleza (1997) looked at “pathways to family empowerment”:

- Family-level empowerment, in management of day-to-day situations;
- Service-level empowerment, in families working with the systems of professionals and agencies; and
- Community/political level empowerment, in parent advocacy for improved services to all children with special needs (pp. 99–113).
To maximize all levels of empowerment of families with children with special needs, educators will want to hold timely meetings with appropriate interagency attendance, help families identify and build their social support systems, and provide models and mentors for parents to learn and adopt skills in each of the three levels.

**MOVING FROM PARENT INVOLVEMENT TO PARTNERSHIPS WITH FAMILIES**

Educational consultants and their colleagues must be aware of the realities facing today’s families. Challenges in working with families today are very different from those faced a decade or two ago. Significant changes have taken place in society, along with new educational legislation and new demands for accountability for student outcomes. Poverty levels, births to unwed adolescent parents, and the numbers of nonbiological parents as primary caretakers (foster care, grandmothers, extended family, adoptive parents, and so on) have increased. In addition, there are increasing numbers of cultural minority families. Families can include single parents, parents with disabilities, gay and lesbian parents, families in poverty, and blended and extended families.

Many families are overwhelmed by family crises and normal life events; many face multiple and prolonged stressors such as long work hours, illness and disability, and multiple responsibilities. Many are discouraged and burned out. Multiple cultures and languages, differences in perceptions of the role and value of education, multiple stressors, and economic and educational barriers will make family collaboration a challenge for many consultants and many families. Educational legislation and social reality call for recognition of all types of families in school–home collaboration to achieve positive educational outcomes for children. This inclusiveness gives educators the opportunity and flexibility to work collaboratively with persons who may be helpful and supportive of the child’s success in school.

**Broadened Conceptualization of Family**

Changing times and changing families require new ideas, new languages, and new models. The first step in these changes is to think in terms of family rather than parent. Many children do not live with both parents, or with either biological parent. Part H and Section of 619 of IDEA refer to families rather than parents. A broad, inclusive definition of family should be used by consultants who are collaborating with adults responsible for the development and well-being of children with special needs.

This new, inclusive definition of the family was suggested to the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS) by the Second Family Leadership Conference:

A family is a group of people who are important to each other and offer each other love and support, especially in times of crisis. In order to be sensitive to the wide range of life styles, living arrangements, and cultural variations that exist today, family . . . can no longer be limited to just parent/child relationships. Family involvement . . . must reach out to include mothers, fathers, grandparents, sisters, brothers, neighbors, and other persons who have important roles in the lives of people with disabilities (Family and Integration Resources, 1991, page 37).
Educational legislation and social reality call for recognition of all types of families in school–home collaboration for positive educational outcomes for children. This inclusiveness gives educators the opportunity and flexibility to work collaboratively with persons who may be helpful and supportive of the child’s success in school. The critical issue for student learning is not any existing or perceived difference between home and school, but the successful relationship between them. Home and student must not be separated from school and teacher (Christenson & Cleary, 1990).

Beyond Involvement to Collaboration

It is possible for families to be involved in the school life of their children without being collaborative. Although the two terms—collaboration and involvement—have been used interchangeably in the literature, collaboration goes beyond involvement. Educators too often regard involvement as giving parents information, conducting parenting classes, and developing advocacy committees. However, this kind of involvement does not assure that family needs and interests are being heard and understood. It does not signify that educators are setting program goals based on family members’ concerns and input. It might involve parents in a narrow sense, but not in working together to form a home–school partnership.

It is important to distinguish between parent involvement and family collaboration in this way:

■ Parent involvement is parent participation in activities that are part of their children’s education, for example, conferences, meetings, newsletters, tutoring, and volunteer services.
■ Family collaboration is the development and maintenance of positive, respectful, egalitarian relationships between home and school. It includes mutual problem solving and shared decision making.

Values Inherent in Home–School Collaboration

Collaboration with families adds a dimension to home–school relationships. Not only should family members be involved with schools, educators must be involved with families. Metaphorically speaking, a one-way street becomes a two-way boulevard to provide an easier road to “Success City” for students. Family-focused home–school collaboration is based on these principles:

■ Families are a constant in children’s lives and must be equal partners in all decisions affecting their educational programs.
■ Family involvement includes a wide range of family structures.
■ Diversity and individual differences among people are to be valued and respected.
■ All families have strengths and coping skills that can be identified and enhanced.
■ Families are sources of wisdom and knowledge about their children.

Effective family-centered help-giving is comprised of elements of relationship and of participation (Dunst, 2000). Central to family-centeredness is the respect for family concerns and priorities, issues of family competence and assets, and utilization of family and community resources and supports.
Hammond (1999) lists these characteristics of family-centered programs: Flexible programming; individualizing services for families; communication; developing and maintaining relationships; building family–staff collaboration; and respecting the family’s expertise and strengths. This is a tall order for educational consultants, but new, empowering relationships and better outcomes for students depend on this shared sense of respect and care.

BARRIERS TO COLLABORATION WITH FAMILIES

Changing families make traditional methods of recruiting parent participation somewhat problematic. Barriers can include teacher factors, lack of organizational cultural competence, and family historical, attitudinal, or perceptual factors. Issues of work, transportation, and child care influence family participation. School systems and educators also create barriers when they relegate parents to a passive role in their child(ren)’s education.

Demographic data show that in recent years there has been a big drop in the proportion of people who have children in schools. National forums such as the Public Agenda reports reveal that educators are out of touch with typical views of parents and the public, which does not mean that any group is right or wrong, just that they are disturbingly far apart (Brandt, 1998). School consultants who recognize potential barriers to home–school collaboration will be better prepared to use successful and appropriate strategies to bridge the gap between home and school.

Virtually all families care about their children and want them to succeed, so they are eager to obtain better information from schools. In that same vein, just about all teachers and administrators would like to involve families (Epstein, 1995). However, Phelps (1999) contends that many teachers are apprehensive about working with families, and this negatively shapes their attitudes. A study by Bennett, DeLuca, and Bruns (1997) did report positive teacher attitudes toward parent involvement, with young teachers in the sample more positive than experienced teachers.

In reviewing research about parent involvement, Bennett, DeLuca, and Bruns (1997) conclude that, although family involvement is endorsed by educational professional organizations and is considered best practice, it is more theory than actual practice. Epstein (1995) calls this the “rhetoric rut.” Why is home–school involvement more an ideal than a reality? Barriers to effective collaboration can be programmatic, school and consultant related, or family related. Finders and Lewis (1994) suggest that family involvement practices too often use a deficit approach model, that is, programs are based on the assumption that educators are the experts and family involvement is for the purpose of remediation. Bennett, Deluca, and Bruns (1997) stress the need for parents to be included as respected and equal members of the team, and they stress that improved communication with families can have positive effects on the inclusion experience. Administrators must use creative scheduling to allow time for this communication, and teachers need to access the resources that will make inclusion and collaboration work. All too often a general school climate of mistrusting parents can inhibit collaborative efforts. The school context is a powerful determinant of home–school interactions and partnerships (Phelps, 1999). Administrators should encourage teachers to initiate contact with families by providing resources and safe environments for partnership activities. Healing relationships with parents and neighborhoods seem directly related to the ability of teachers and school administrators to reflect on their own practices and move toward a family empowerment model (St. John, Griffith, & Allen-Hayes, 1997).
Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families

Active parent and community involvement in educational programs for culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students is essential, yet the growing differences between cultural and linguistic backgrounds of school personnel and their students makes home–school collaboration a challenge. Persistent portrayal of CLD families as deficient in knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to ready children for school is a huge barrier to active parent participation. Misconceptions about parental concern for their children’s schooling are all too prevalent among school personnel (deValenzuela, Torres, & Chavez, 1998).

Another barrier to parent involvement is basing programs on middle-class values, expectations, and behaviors to the exclusion of minority families, their languages, and their cultures. Consultants must understand that there are differing views between home and school regarding parents’ appropriate roles in the education of their children.

August and Hakuta (1997) describe patterns of parental involvement (parent behaviors that support education) of Puerto Rican families, Chinese American families, and Mexican American families. Studies reveal that parent behaviors fostering child learning may not be visible to school personnel.

Consultants need to help school personnel accommodate differences in families—families of children with disabilities, poverty-level families, CLD families—and consider that they are not homogeneous groups. Educators need to respond in individually relevant ways rather than to make assumptions about families based on language, ethnicity, and background.

Thurston and Navarrete (2003) surveyed 263 mothers on welfare to learn about their parent involvement practices. Only 22 percent of these mothers had completed high school, and a majority of those having children with disabilities had received special services themselves as students. Despite this, 70 percent reported good relationships with the teachers of their children, and there was no significant difference between mothers of children having disabilities and those of children having no disabilities. The group was nearly unanimous in expressed interest for getting involved in their children’s schooling. Fewer than 3 percent were uninterested. The researchers suggest that educators focus on the strengths families bring to home–school partnerships and serve in a strong advocacy role for families in poverty.

Fox, Vaughn, Wyatte, and Dunlap (2002) remind educators that parents are involved with their children’s education twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. These researchers interviewed twenty culturally diverse family members about the impact of children with problem behaviors on families. They found three issues that educators should keep in mind when collaborating with parents:

- Family members had difficulty coming to terms with their child’s disability;
- Having support of a genuinely caring person is very important;
- Problem behavior has a pervasive impact on all aspects of family functions.

This pervasive impact was investigated by Park, Turnbull, and Turnbull (2002), who analyzed the literature to discover the impact of poverty on quality of life among families of children with disabilities. They found five domains of impact: health, productivity, physical environment, emotional well-being, and family interactions. They suggest that educators act as advocates for poverty-level families of children with disabilities. Educators need to learn more about full-service models and collaborate actively with related service providers and community networks. If they become knowledgeable about services and advocate for
broader services and access, collaborative efforts with parents will be more successful, to
the benefit of students, families, and school personnel.

Classrooms today have increasing numbers of students from culturally and linguisti-
cally diverse backgrounds. Education consultants must remember that disability is a cultur-
ally and socially constructed phenomenon. Each culture and society defines the parameters
of what is considered normal, with some cultures having a broader or different definition of
disability than that accepted in American schools (Linan-Thompson & Jean, 1997). This may
be one reason minority parents tend to be less involved and less informed about their child’s
school life than mainstream parents. It is important to learn from family members how their
beliefs and practices will affect programs for children with special needs. Educational con-
sultants who work with families must be aware of the family’s perceptions of disability.
Linan-Thompson & Jean (1997) suggest taking time to learn about family perceptions of spe-
cial needs, carefully and thoroughly explaining the whole special education process, using
informal assessments in addition to formal assessment tools (which helps explain the dis-
able in other than formal terms), and discovering and using parents’ preferred forms of
communication (written, informal meetings, video- or audiotapes).

Traditional approaches to reaching out to families are not always appropriate for fami-
lies from cultural and noncultural minority groups. Research reveals cultural differences in the
utilization of services and the stated needs of families having children with disabilities or other
risk factors (Arcia, Keyes, Gallagher, & Herrick, 1992; Sontag & Schacht, 1994). Educators
must develop cultural competence (Anderson & Goldberg, 1991; Cross, 1996; Lynch & Han-
son, 1992; Mason, 1994). Cultural competence means accepting, honoring, and respecting cul-
tural diversity and differences. Then individualization of educational programs for students
can be done in a manner that respects the family’s culture. Cross (1996) suggests that profes-
sionals learn about cultures they serve by observing healthy and strong members of the dif-
ferent groups. Other recommendations include spending time with people of that culture,
identifying a cultural guide, reading the literature (professional as well as fiction) by and for
persons of the culture, attending cultural events, and asking questions in sensitive ways.

Bruns and Fowler (1999) recommend that educators give special recognition to cul-
tural preferences in transition planning. Traditional parental roles of teacher, information
source, decision maker, and advocate for transition planning may not be appropriate for or
sensitive to all families. They suggest transforming these roles to guide, information spe-
cialist, decision maker, and ally. They also recommend inviting extended family members,
friends, and community members to take part in education-related decisions as a way to
meet diverse beliefs, values, and traditions of cultural groups. As educators develop cross-
cultural competencies and increasingly collaborate with families culturally or linguistically
different from themselves, they should remember that one approach does not fit all ranges
of diversity (Parette & Petch-Hogan, 2000).

Lynch and Hansen (1992), Huff and Telesford (1994), and Cross (1988) suggest that
school personnel use these strategies when collaborating with families from diverse cul-
tural groups:

1. Acknowledge cultural differences and become aware of how they affect parent–
teacher interactions.

2. Examine one’s own personal culture, such as how one defines family, desirable life
goals, and behavior problems.
3. Recognize the dynamics of group interactions such as etiquette and patterns of communication.

4. Explore the significance of the child’s behavior in relation to his or her culture.

5. Adjust collaboration to legitimize and include culturally specific activities.

6. Learn about the families. Where are they from and when did they arrive? What cultural beliefs and practices surround child rearing, health and healing, and disability and causation?

7. Recognize that some families may be surprised by the extent of home–school collaboration expected in the United States.

8. Learn and use words and forms of greetings in the families’ languages.

9. Work with cultural mediators or guides (relative, church member, neighbor, or older sibling) from the families’ cultures to learn more about the culture and facilitate communication between school and home.

10. Ask for help in structuring the child’s school program to match home life, such as learning key words and phrases used at home.

Well-publicized policies at the district level encouraging home–school collaboration are vital in providing opportunities for minority family members to become full partners with teachers, but effective structures and strategies often do not exist (Chavkin, 1989; Lynch & Stein, 1987). Lightfoot (1981) suggests that traditional methods of parent involvement such as PTA meetings, open house, or newsletters permit little or no true collaboration, constructing instead a “territory” of education that many parents are hesitant to invade. Concern, awareness, and commitment on the part of individuals in the educational system are beginning steps in challenging the limitations that inhibit collaboration between teachers and families who have language, cultural, or other basic differences.

**Historical, Attitudinal, and Perceptual Factors in Partnerships**

The success of family collaboration activities is based on partnerships developed and maintained by using the relationship and communication skills to be described in Chapter 4. However, other barriers overshadow the need for effective communication. They surface as formidable challenges to educators even before lines of communication with parents are established. Such barriers can be classified as perceptual, attitudinal, or historical. Examples are time limitations, anticipation of negative or punishing interactions, denial of problems, blaming, or a personal sense of failure in parenting and teaching (Swap, 1987).

Parents of children with learning and behavior problems can be effective change agents for their children; therefore, the question is not whether to involve them, but how to do it (Shea & Bauer, 1985). Although family members may want very much to play a key role in encouraging their children to succeed in school, they may be inhibited by their own attitudes or circumstances. Many parents, while very concerned about their child’s education, are fearful and suspicious of schools, teachers, and education in general (Hansen, Heimes, & Meier, 1990). They may fear or mistrust school personnel because of their own
negative experiences as students. Or they may have experienced a history of unpleasant experiences with other professionals, so that current school personnel fall heir to that history.

Parents of children with special needs face many economic and personal hardships. Work schedules and health concerns prevent some parents from participating in school activities (Leitch & Tangri, 1988). Low-income families may have difficulty with transportation and child care, making it hard to attend meetings or volunteer in school, even when they would like to do so (Thurston & Navarette, 1996).

The single parent, already burdened with great responsibilities, is particularly stressed in parenting a child with special needs. The role can be overwhelming at times. When working with the single parent, school personnel will need to tailor their requests for conferences and home interventions, and to provide additional emotional support when needed (Conoley, 1989).

Many types of disability are very expensive for families, and the impact on the family budget created by the special needs of a child may produce new and formidable hardships. Sometimes families arrive at a point where they feel their other children are being neglected by all the attention to the special needs child. This adds to their frustration and stress. In addition, children with special needs and their families are vulnerable to stereotypes of society about physical, learning, or behavioral disabilities. They feel the impact of their family’s dependence on others for services (Schulz, 1987). The ways in which families cope with the frustrations and stress influence their interaction with school personnel. Providing support networks can help them cope with the situation (Morsink, Thomas, & Correa, 1991).

Family members may avoid school interactions because they fear being blamed as the cause of their children’s problems. Sometimes teachers do blame parents for exacerbating learning and behavior problems: “I can’t do anything here at school because it gets undone when they go home!” But blaming does not facilitate development of mutually supportive relationships. Family members are very sensitive to blaming words and attitudes by school personnel. A teacher, who is also part of a therapeutic foster family, reported that he felt “blame and shame” after a school conference regarding the child with emotional and behavior problems who had been his foster child for two months.

Judging attitudes, stereotypes, false expectations, and basic differences in values also act as barriers and diminish the collaborative efforts among teachers and families. It is difficult to feel comfortable with people who have very different attitudes and values. Families and teachers should make every effort not to reproach each other, but work together as partners on the child’s team. Educators, including teachers and parents, must abandon any posture of blaming or criticism, and move on to collaboration and problem solving. It is important to remember that it does not matter where a “fault” lies. What matters is who steps up to address the problem.

Collaboration requires respect, trust, and cooperation. However, as noted in Chapter 1, with respect to individual differences, and, as will be addressed in Chapter 4, regarding rapport-building, collaboration need not require total agreement. Educators cope with value differences in positive ways when they:

1. Remember that a teacher’s place is on the parent’s side as a team member working for a common goal, the child’s success.

2. Become aware of their own feelings of defensiveness. Taking a deep breath and putting the feelings aside will help to continue building positive relationships. If that is not possible, they should postpone interactions until the defensiveness can be handled.
3. Remember that the focus must be on the needs and interests of families and their children, not on their values. It is important to attack the problem, not the person.

4. Accept people as they are and stop wishing they were different. This applies to parents as well as to their children.

5. Remember that most families are doing the best they can. Parents do not wake up in the morning and decide, “I think today I will be a poor parent.”

6. Respect families’ rights to their values and opinions. Different values do not mean better or poorer values. It is not possible to argue family members out of their values, and teachers do not have the right to do so.

7. Demonstrate the qualities of open-mindedness and flexibility.

8. Remember that parents develop a deeper commitment to schools when they are included in a way meaningful to them (St. John, et al., 1997).

BRIDGE BUILDING FOR SUCCESSFUL HOME–SCHOOL COLLABORATION

Friendly, positive relationships and honest, respectful communication can help bridge the barriers that might exist in home–school collaboration. The goal of collaboration is to promote the education and development of children by strengthening and supporting families. Keeping this in mind, consultants will remember that collaboration is not the goal but the means to the end. Strategies that have proven to be sturdy bridges to circumvent barriers are: Focusing on family strengths; using appropriate communication skills; and promoting positive roles for family members.

Focusing on Family Strengths

The traditional emphasis of education in past years has been a pathology- or deficit-based model. The philosophy of family-focused services and collaboration emphasizes the empowerment approach rather than focusing on what is going wrong. Instead of focusing on the child’s or family’s problem, collaborators focus on family members and the strength acquired through their experiences. This encourages the developmental progress of the child as well as healthy reactions to problems and crises and competent life management (Waters & Lawrence, 1993).

Using Appropriate Communication Skills

Bridges to circumvent language and communication barriers are difficult to construct. Chapter 4 describes communication skills that are important in building and maintaining collaborative relationships with adults in the lives of students with special needs. Consultants will want to use rapport-building skills to build trust and confidence in the collaborative relationship, and to recognize and reduce their own language and communication barriers. Those who communicate with family members should use these guidelines:
Be aware of voice tone and body language.
Be honest and specific.
Give one’s point of view as information, not the absolute truth.
Be direct about what is wanted and expected.
Do not monopolize the conversation.
Listen at least as much as talk.
Do not assume one’s message is clear.
Stay away from educational or psychological jargon.
Attack the problem, not the person.
Focus on positive or informational aspects of the problem.
Have five positive contacts for every negative one.
Always be honest; do not soft-pedal reality.

Providing Social Support
Families rely on informal and formal social support networks for information and guidance they need to carry out responsibilities for child rearing, children’s learning, and child development. Schools can provide a rich array of child, parent, and family support in the form of information and environmental experiences to strengthen family and child competence and influence student outcomes. Parenting supports include information and advice that can strengthen existing parenting knowledge and skills and facilitate acquisition of new competencies (Dunst, 2000).

For families of children with disabilities, supports are a crucial aspect of family-focused collaboration. Workshops, newsletters, informational meetings, provision of emotional support, and multigenerational gatherings are examples of formal supports needed by families. Schools are instrumental also in promoting informal support systems for families. According to extensive research by Dunst (2000) and his colleagues, informal support demonstrates a stronger relationship to many child, parent, and family outcomes than does formal support. Thus, consultants should encourage activities that help families develop informal support networks such as parent-to-parent groups and informal multiple-family gatherings.

Promoting Positive Roles for Family Members
Family members play a range of roles from purveyor of knowledge about the child to advocates for political action. No matter what role is taken by individual family members, educational consultants should remember that families are:

- Partners in setting goals and finding solutions;
- The best advocates and case managers for the child with special needs;
- Individuals with initiative, strengths, and important experiences; and
- The best information resource about the child, the family, and their culture.

Within any role along the wide continuum of family members, the consultant must respect and support the courage and commitment of family members to struggle with the challenges of daily living faced by all families. Recognizing, supporting, and reinforcing interventions on behalf of the child with special needs will promote an increased sense of
competency and help create a safe, nurturing environment for children, while maintaining the unique cultural and ethnic characteristics of their family unit (Berg, 1994; Waters & Lawrence, 1993).

Supporting and reinforcing families in their chosen roles is not always easy. Members in multiproblem families often are viewed as having defective or faulty notions of parenting, no problem-solving skills, and an array of psychopathology (Berg, 1994). Even for families having different values and expectations, and risk factors such as poverty or drug/alcohol involvement, Waters and Lawrence (1993) recommend that professionals focus on strengths. Figure 3.1 lists other suggestions for developing bridges to overcome potential or real barriers in collaboration.

**Family Partners in IEP and IFSP Planning**

The Individual Education Plan (IEP), Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP), or Individual Transition Planning (ITP) conference can be a productive time or a frustrating experience. Parents may be emotional about their child’s problems, and teachers apprehensive about meeting with the parents (Reynolds & Birch, 1988). A number of researchers have found that too little parent involvement in team decision making, particularly relating to IEP, IFSP, and ITP development, is a major problem in special education programs (Boone, 1989; Pfeiffer, 1980).

School consultants will improve school–home collaboration in these areas if they provide family members with information and preparation for the meeting. Consultants can communicate with family members by phone, letter, or informal interview to inform them about names and roles of staff members who will attend, the typical procedure for meetings, ways they can prepare for the meeting, contributions they will be encouraged to make, and ways in which follow-up to the meeting will be provided.

**FIGURE 3.1 Suggestions for Building Bridges to Successful Home–School Collaboration**

- Keep in mind that the family usually has concerns and issues that have nothing to do with you personally and that you may not know about.
- Be sensitive to the language levels, vocabularies, and background of the family and adjust your language, but be yourself.
- Get enough information, but not more than you need. You don’t want to appear “nosy.”
- Focus discussions on factors you can control.
- Find out what has been tried before.
- Listen so that you are completely clear about the family’s concerns.
- Honor confidentiality.
- Remain open to new approaches and suggestions. Each family is different.
- Set concrete, measurable goals. Communication is clearer and measures of success are built in and promote collaboration.
- Wait until the family asks for help or until a good relationship is established before making suggestions.
- Help families solve their own problems and allow them to become, or develop the skills to become, their child’s own case manager.

(Adapted from PEATC, 1991b)
Turnbull and Turnbull (1997, p. 233) list eight components that an IFSP/IEP conference should include:

- Preparing in advance
- Connecting and getting started
- Sharing visions and great expectations
- Reviewing formal evaluation and current levels of performance
- Sharing resources, priorities, and concerns
- Developing goals and objectives (or outcomes)
- Specifying placement and related services
- Summarizing and concluding

Figure 3.6 (Dettmer, 1994), presented on page 91, outlines specific ways parents can be involved in IEP, ITP, or IFSP development and implementation before, during, and after the IEP conference. These lists could be printed in the school handbook and shared again with participating families before conferences.

Osborne and deOnis (1997) suggest five actions for schools to take to involve families in the education of students:

- Actively welcome families in overt ways, such as posting friendly signs.
- Invite and support a range of involvement activities.
- Break down existing barriers, such as negative school recollections.
- Educate parents and the community about school policies and procedures.
- Keep parents informed with all the communication formats available.

When parents and teachers work together as equals, they have more opportunities to express their own knowledge and can come to respect each others’ wisdom. Siblings need information about disabilities, opportunities to talk about their feelings, time to hear about the experiences of other siblings of children with disabilities, people with whom to share their feelings of pride and joy, and ways to plan for the future (Cramer, et al., 1997).

Kay and Fitzgerald (1997) suggest that parents and teachers collaborate on action research to systematically explore a problem or issue. They believe this partnership helps parents and teachers learn more about the others’ perspectives and can lead to alliances that result in making improvements in programs and schools. Project DESTINY in Vermont used monthly parent support groups, enhancing teachers’ attitudes and skills at working cooperatively with parents, and involving parents in weekly planning meetings at school to empower parents of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities (Cheney, Manning, & Upham, 1997). Timberland Elementary School in Fairfax County, Virginia, used multilingual parent liaisons to build a bridge between the school and neighboring families in need (Halford, 1996). The parent liaison begins with home visits with the goal of helping families address their problems and foster an environment that is supportive of their children’s learning. The Best Practice Project in Chicago (Daniels, 1996) generated genuine teacher–parent partnerships that supported learning for children and leadership development for parents and teachers. Whether collaborative efforts are ongoing communication or complex family involvement programs, underlying all types of involvement are the efforts of trusting and respecting educators.
DEVELOPING HOME–SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

There is great variation in individual practices for home–school collaboration. Effective collaboration efforts depend on attitudes of teachers, their beliefs about the family role and the efficacy of family involvement, and their comfort level and communication skills. Educators may believe in family partnerships, but they may not know how to involve family members in a systematic and egalitarian manner.

Family involvement is usually conceptualized from family member perspectives (Wanat, 1997). In her study with 57 parents, Wanat found that parents did not distinguish between involvement at school and at home and they had specific ideas about what constituted meaningful involvement. One parent in her study summarized legitimate parent involvement as “everything you do with the child because education involves a lot more than just sitting at school.” It would be well for education consultants to remember this statement when they work collaboratively with parents.

Citing the growing body of empirical and theoretical literature on the importance of school and family relationships, Conoley (1989) notes that educators wanting to collaborate with families must determine whether the family has an intact decision-making system. If it does not, a successful outcome is doubtful. Single-parent families place stress on the decision-making system, and for collaborative efforts to produce results, the interactions must fit the single parent’s time and energy level. Also, families stressed by poverty or substance abuse will be less available to consult and collaborate with school personnel.

The crucial issues in successful learning are not between home or school, and parent or teacher, but the relationship between each pair of variables (Seeley, 1985). When school personnel collaborate with family members, they nurture and maintain partnerships that facilitate shared efforts to promote student achievement. The more that family members become partners with teachers and related services personnel, the smoother and more consistent the delivery of instruction to the student can be (Reynolds & Birch, 1988). As families and teachers plan together and implement plans of action, they find that working as a team is more effective than working alone (Shea & Bauer, 1985). Each can be more assured that the other is doing the best for the child (Stewart, 1978).

APPLICATION 3.1
READING CENTER FOR FAMILIES

Visit a school library, or revisit your own school library, and find a corner that could be outfitted as “Parent/Family Reading Center.” (Try to find a quiet, pleasant place but not too out-of-the-way.) Display an attractive painting, a plant, perhaps a snapshot display of recent school events, along with a small table, comfortable chairs, and, of course, books and periodicals. These should be focused on interests and needs of families, parents, day-care providers, grandparents, and home–school projects. Promote the center at parent–teacher meetings and parent conferences. Perhaps meet with a group of parents there on a nonconfidential matter (planning the yearly social event, initiating a coupon drive for playground equipment, and so forth). Work into the plan the school personnel who would be responsible for upkeep, checkout and returns, and materials acquisition. Some of this might even be accomplished by students.
Five Steps for Collaborating with Families

Five basic steps will assist school personnel in developing successful home-school partnerships:

Step 1: Examining one’s own values
Step 2: Building collaborative relationships
Step 3: Initiating home-school interactions
Step 4: Individualizing for parents
Step 5: Evaluating home-school collaboration

Step 1: Examining One’s Own Values

Value systems are individualistic and complex. They are the result of nature and the impact of experiences on nature. People need to apply information and logic to situations that present values different from their own. Kroth (1985) provides an example. He notes that a significant amount of research indicates a positive effect on children’s academic and social growth when teachers use a daily or weekly report card system to communicate with parents or guardians. This information provides logical support for interaction among teachers and family members on a regular, planned basis.

School personnel must guard against setting up a climate of unequal relationships. It is vital to recognize that parents are the experts when it comes to knowing about their children, no matter how many tests educators have administered to students, or how many hours they have observed them in the classroom. If professional educators are perceived as the experts, and the only experts, false expectations may create unrealistic pressure on them. Some family members find it difficult to relate to experts. So a beautiful “boulevard of progress” becomes a one-way street of judging, advising, and sending solutions.

The first step in collaborating with families is to examine one’s own values. Figure 3.2 is a checklist for examining one’s values and attitudes toward parents and other family members.

Communicating messages of equality, flexibility, and a sharing attitude will facilitate effective home-school collaboration. The message that should be given to parents of students with special needs is, “I know a lot about this, and you know a lot about that. Let’s put our information and ideas together to help the child.”

The checklist in Figure 3.3 serves as a brief self-assessment to test the congruency of attitudes and perceptions with the two-way family collaboration discussed earlier. Inventorying and adjusting one’s own attitudes and perceptions about families are the hardest parts of consulting with them. Attitudes and perceptions about families and their roles in partnerships greatly influence implementation of the consulting process.

School personnel also must keep in mind that family members are not a homogeneous group; therefore, experiences with one family member cannot be generalized to all other parents and families. There is evidence that mothers and fathers react differently to their exceptional children (Levy-Shiff, 1986). Furthermore, parental stress seems to be related to the child’s developmental age and parental coping strengths (Wikler, Wasow, & Hatfield, 1981).

Step 2: Building Collaborative Relationships

The second step in collaborating with families is building collaborative relationships. As will be emphasized in Chapter 4, basic communication and rapport-building skills are essential
Instructions: Rate belief or comfort level, from 1 (very comfortable or very strong) to 5 (very uncomfortable or not strong at all).

**FIGURE 3.2 Examining Own Values**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How comfortable do you feel with each?</th>
<th>How strongly do you believe the following?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>parents or others who are overly</td>
<td>Family members should be able to call</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>protective</td>
<td>you at home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teachers who think they are never</td>
<td>Newsletters are an important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wrong</td>
<td>communication tool.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>families who send their children to</td>
<td>Family members should volunteer in the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school without breakfast</td>
<td>classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teachers who get emotional at</td>
<td>General classroom teachers can teach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conferences</td>
<td>students with special needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teachers who do not want mainstreamed</td>
<td>All children can learn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>students</td>
<td>Family members should come to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>open discussions at family meetings</td>
<td>conferences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parents who have lost control of their</td>
<td>Resistance is normal and to be expected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>children</td>
<td>in educational settings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>volunteers in the classroom</td>
<td>Children in divorced families have</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conflict</td>
<td>special problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>being invited to students’ homes</td>
<td>Family resistance is often justified.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>using grades as a behavior management</td>
<td>Teacher resistance is often justified.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tool</td>
<td>Family influence is more important than</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>family members who call every day</td>
<td>school influence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teachers who do not follow through</td>
<td>Medical treatment should never be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>students attending conferences</td>
<td>withheld from children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>principals attending conferences</td>
<td>Children with severe disabilities are part</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parents who do not allow their children</td>
<td>of a supreme being’s plan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to be tested</td>
<td>Sometimes consultants should just tell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>different racial or ethnic groups</td>
<td>others the best thing to do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>family members who do not speak</td>
<td>Consultants are advocates for children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>Teachers should modify their</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>others who think special needs children</td>
<td>classrooms for children with special</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>should be kept in self-contained</td>
<td>needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>classrooms</td>
<td>It is a teacher’s fault when children fail.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teachers who think modifying</td>
<td>Consultants are experts in educating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>curriculum materials or tests is</td>
<td>special needs children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>watering down the lessons</td>
<td>Some people do not want children with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>special needs to succeed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>family members who drink excessively</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or use drugs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>administrators who do not know your</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>name</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>criticism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do you think all teachers, administrators, counselors, psychologists, parents, grandparents, social workers, and students would have responded as you did? What happens when members of the same educator team have different views?
for establishing healthy, successful relationships with family members. To briefly preview, these are the most important skills for educators in interacting with families:

- responsive listening
- assertive responding
- mutual problem solving

Prudent teachers avoid words and phrases that may give undesirable impressions of the children or the special needs with which they are concerned (Shea & Bauer, 1985). They listen for the messages given by parents and respond to their verbal and nonverbal cues.

In communicating with families, school personnel must avoid jargon that can be misunderstood or misinterpreted. Parents often feel alienated by professional educators and one common cause is words (program, site) and acronyms (IFSP, ITBS,) that pepper the conversation without explanation of their meaning (Soodak & Erwin, 1995). Some professional educators seem unable, or unwilling, to use jargon-free language when they communicate with lay people (Schuck, 1979). Choices of words can ease, or inhibit, communication with parents, and professional educators must respect language variations created by differences in culture, education, occupation, age, and place of origin (Morsink, Thomas, & Correa, 1991).

Teachers and administrators often find that one of the most important, but difficult, aspects of developing relationships with parents is listening to them. The challenge lies in listening to parents’ messages even though they might disagree strongly with family members, and their attitudes and values might differ significantly from those of the families. Although the quality of the interaction should be a primary focus in parent relationships, the numbers and variety of initiated communications are important as well. Hughes and Ruhl (1987) found that most teachers averaged fewer than five parent contacts per week, but 27 percent averaged from 11–20 parent contacts per week. Phone calls, introductory and welcoming
PART I CONTEXTS FOR WORKING TOGETHER IN SCHOOLS

FIGURE 3.4 Ascertaining Family Interests

Families! We want to learn more about you so that we can work together helping your child learn. Please take a few minutes to respond to these questions so your voice can be heard. It will help the Home–School Advisory Team develop programs for families, teachers, and children.

Check those items you are most interested in.

____ 1. Family resource libraries or information centers
____ 2. Helping my child learn
____ 3. Support programs for my child’s siblings
____ 4. Talking with my child about sex
____ 5. Helping with language and social skills
____ 6. Mental health services
____ 7. Talking with another parent about common problems
____ 8. Respite care or babysitters
____ 9. My role as a parent
____ 10. Classes about managing behavior problems
____ 11. Making my child happy
____ 12. Managing my time and resources
____ 13. Making toys and educational materials
____ 14. Reducing time spent watching television
____ 15. What happens when my child grows up
____ 16. Recreation and camps for my child
____ 17. State-wide meetings for families
____ 18. Vocational opportunities for my child
____ 19. Talking to my child’s teacher
____ 20. Talking with other families
____ 21. Learning about child development
____ 22. Things families can do to support teachers
____ 23. Home activities that support school learning
____ 24. Information about the school and my child’s classes
____ 25. Helping my child become more independent
____ 26. Others?

____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

Thanks for your help!

Name of family member responding to this form:

____________________________________________________________________

Child’s name: _________________________________________________________
letters, newsletters, parent-to-parent calendars, and note pads with identifying logos all have been used effectively by educators to initiate partnerships. Each note, phone call, conversation, or conference, whether taking place in a formal setting or on the spur of the moment at the grocery store, should reflect the willingness and commitment of school personnel to work with parents as they face immense responsibilities in providing for the special needs of their child.

An effective partner—educator provides support and reinforcement for family members in their family roles. In addition to listening to family members and recognizing their expertise, it is crucial to support parents by giving them positive feedback about their efforts toward the child’s education. Many parents spend more time with their children who have disabilities than with those who do not (Cantwell, Baker, & Rutter, 1979). Families often get very little reinforcement for parenting, particularly for the extra efforts they may expend in caring for children with special needs. They should be encouraged and commended for providing three types of parental engagement at home that are consistently associated with student performance at school:

- organizing and monitoring the student’s time;
- helping with homework; and
- discussing school matters with their child (Finn, 1998).

Too many families hear very few positive comments about their children. They may feel guilty or confused because of their children’s problems. Examples of support and reinforcement that teachers use include thank-you notes for helping with field trips, VIP (Very Important Parent) buttons given to classroom volunteers, supporting phone calls when homework has been turned in, and happygrams when a class project is completed. It is important for teachers to arrange and encourage more regular, informal contacts with parents. Family members often report being put off by the formality inherent in some scheduled conferences, particularly when they are limited to ten minutes, as they often are, with another child’s family waiting just outside (Lindle, 1989).

Ask parents for preferred modes of communication. Phone calls are appropriate for positive reports, but should not be used to discuss weighty concerns. Notes sent home can promote consistency in expectations and help teachers and family members develop a common language (Bos, Nahmias, & Urban, 1999). Some consultants have found e-mail and school Web site access an effective way to communicate with families. However, many families do not have access to this technology.

One innovative program is the TransParent Model (Bauch, 1989) in which teachers use a computer-based system called Compu-Call that stores messages in a computer. It directs the autodialer to place calls either to all families or to specific groups. The purpose of these calls can be to describe learning activities, explain homework assignments, or suggest ways that families can support the child’s home study. Parents call any time from anywhere and get the information they need. The system helps families help their children who are having problems or on extended absence from school keep up with the schoolwork.

Family members often become frustrated when they do not understand the subjects their children are attempting to master. A program of Family Math encourages parents and children to work together as a team in evening sessions involving a “hands-on” approach to learning math concepts and logical thinking (Lueder, 1989). Family literacy programs that are established in some communities enable parents to help children with their schoolwork.
Step 3: Initiating Home–School Interactions
Parents want their children to be successful in school. Even parents who are considered “hard to reach,” such as nontraditional, low-income, and low-status families, usually want to be more involved (Davies, 1988). Most, however, wait to be invited before becoming involved as a partner in their child’s education. Unfortunately, many have to wait for years before someone opens the door and provides them the opportunity to become a team member with others who care about the educational and social successes of their children. Parent satisfaction with their involvement is directly related to perceived opportunities for involvement (Salisbury & Evans, 1988). They are more motivated to carry on when they are aware that the results of their time and energy are helping their child learn. School personnel who are in a position to observe these results can provide the kind of reinforcement that parents need so much.

When parents are welcome in schools and classrooms, and their child’s work and experiences are meaningful to them, parents often experience new aspirations for themselves and for their children (St. John, et al., 1997).

Step 4: Individualizing for Families
Special education professionals are trained to be competent at individualizing educational programs for students’ needs. Nevertheless, they may assume that all parents have the same strengths and needs, thereby overlooking the need to individualize parent-involvement programs (Schultz, 1987). By using the assessments discussed earlier, and taking care to avoid stereotypes and judgments, they will be more successful in involving parents as partners in their child’s learning program.

Christensen and Cleary (1990) confirm that successful home–school consultation includes mutual problem identification, mutual monitoring of effects of involvement, and active sharing of relevant information. Successful work with parents calls for establishing respectful and trusting relationships, as well as responding to the needs of all partners. The degree to which parents are placed in an egalitarian role, with a sense of choice, empowerment, and ownership in the education process, is a crucial variable in successful collaboration (Cochran, 1987; Peterson & Cooper, 1989).

Step 5: Evaluating Home–School Collaboration
Evaluation of efforts to provide opportunities for collaboration in schools can indicate whether or not families’ needs are being met and their strengths are being utilized. Evaluation also shows whether needs and strengths of educational personnel are being met. Assessment tools used after a workshop, conference, or at the conclusion of the school year allow school personnel to ask parents, “How did we do in facilitating your learning of the new information or accessing the new services?” Some teachers use a quick questionnaire, to be completed anonymously, to see if the activity or program fulfilled the goals of the home–school collaboration. If data show that the activity gave families the information they needed, provided them with the resources they wanted, and offered them the opportunities they requested, educators know whether or not to continue with the program or modify it.
Educators also should evaluate their own involvement with families. This means assessing the use of family strengths and skills to facilitate educational programs with children who have special needs. Did teachers get the information they needed from families? How many volunteer hours did parents contribute? What were the results of home tutoring on the achievement of the resource room students? What changes in family attitudes about the school district were measured? Chapter 6 contains information about procedures for evaluating collaboration efforts. Note again that the purpose of family collaboration is to utilize the unique and vital partnership on behalf of their children.

APPLICATION 3.2

Meet in groups of four or five teachers. Discuss the situation below and then make a list of things you would not want to have happen during the ensuing conference:

The parent of a fifth-grade girl is having difficulty with her schoolwork, especially math and spelling. The parent has tried hard to help, but both parent and child become frustrated when working on the homework. The parent feels she needs more attention at school to relieve the pressure of learning the material at home. The parent has requested a conference.

Next, regroup as parents. Make another list of what you as parents do not want to happen during parent conferences.

Then, compile both lists into overall “Do and Don’t” help sheets. Perhaps they might be embellished with illustrations.

Find practical uses for these help sheets.

Equal Partnership Model

Teachers use interviews, checklists, and more complex assessment instruments to solicit information about parent needs. Parents have much to communicate to school personnel about their children, the child’s needs within the family, and the “curriculum of the home” (Bevevino, 1988, p. 15). This can include parent–child conversation topics, how leisure reading is encouraged, deferral of immediate gratifications, long-term goals, how homework is assisted and assessed, what TV is watched and how it is monitored, how affection and interests in the child’s accomplishments are demonstrated. Bevevino stresses that this curriculum, just like the one in school, varies in amount and quality, with both home and school curricula functioning as important multipliers of the other’s effects.

If school personnel plan workshops, classes, and materials that are not based on family interests and needs, a message is communicated that educators know more about their needs than they do; then the family involvement is not a true partnership. An example of a needs and interests assessment is included in Figure 3.5.

The equal partnership model stresses the importance of providing opportunities for family members to use their strengths, commitment, and skills to contribute as full partners to the education of their children. This relationship is not based on a deficit model of blame and inequality. Families appreciate having their special efforts recognized, just as teachers do. Multiyear research by St. John and colleagues (1997) showed mixed results when parents were not treated as full partners in the education of their children.

Tools for assessing parent strengths are similar to those for assessing needs. Interviews and checklists are useful in determining what types of contributions families can bring
to the partnership. These assets can be conceptualized along four levels of involvement
(Kroth, 1985), from strengths which all family members have, to skills that only a few fam-
ily members are willing and able to contribute. For example, all parents have information
about their children that schools need. At more intensive levels of collaboration, some fam-
ily members are willing and able to tutor their children at home, come to meetings, help
make bulletin boards, and volunteer to help at school. At the highest level of collaboration,
only a few parents can be expected to lobby for special education, serve on advisory boards,
or conduct parent-to-parent programs. A number of parent advocates of children with learn-
ing and behavior disorders have made impressive gains in recent decades toward state and
national focus on the rights of children with special needs. They have formed organizations,
identified needs, encouraged legislation, spoken for improved facilities, and supported each

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FIGURE 3.5 Family Member Participation Checklist

Families! We need your help. Many of you have asked how you can help provide a high-
quality educational program for your children. You have many talents, interests, and skills
you can contribute to help children learn better and enjoy school more. Please let us know
what you are interested in doing.

____ 1. I would like to volunteer in school.
____ 2. I would like to help with special events or projects.
____ 3. I have a hobby or talent I could share with the class.
____ 4. I would be glad to talk about travel or jobs, or interesting experiences that I have had.
____ 5. I could teach the class how to ________________.
____ 6. I could help with bulletin boards and art projects.
____ 7. I could read to children.
____ 8. I would like to help my child at home.
____ 9. I would like to tutor a child.
____ 10. I would like to work on a buddy or parent-to-parent system with other parents whose
children have problems.
____ 11. I would like to teach a workshop.
____ 12. I can do typing, word-processing, phoning, making materials, or preparing resources
at home.
____ 13. I would like to assist with student clubs.
____ 14. I would like to help organize a parent group.
____ 15. I want to help organize and plan parent partnership programs.
____ 16. I would like to help with these kinds of activities:
   At school __________________________________________________________
   At home __________________________________________________________
   In the community __________________________________________________

Your comments, concerns, and questions are welcome. THANKS!

Name: ______________________________________________________________________

Child’s Name: _______________________________________________________________

How to Reach You: ______________________________________________________________________

---
other through crises. In many instances they have involved pediatricians, community agency leaders, and businesses in special projects for children with special needs.

By considering family member strengths as well as needs and interests, educators will be focusing on the collaborative nature of parent involvement. An example of an interest assessment form is provided in Figure 3.4 on page 86. As stated earlier, involvement is not synonymous with collaboration. Developing a workshop on discipline or a volunteer program without assessing strengths, needs, and goals demonstrates a failure to respect the partnership between school and home. True partnership features mutual collaboration and respect for the expertise of all parties.

**FIGURE 3.6  Checklist for Families in Developing IEPs**

*Throughout the year:*  
- Read about educational issues and concerns.  
- Learn about the structure of the local school system.  
- Observe your child, noting work habits, play patterns, and social interactions.  
- Record information regarding special interests, talents, and accomplishments, as well as areas of concern.

*Before the conference:*  
- Visit the child’s school.  
- Discuss school life with the child.  
- Talk with other families who have participated in conferences to find out what goes on during the conference.  
- Write down questions and points you would like to address.  
- Review notes from any previous conferences with school staff.  
- Prepare a summary file of information, observations, and products that would further explain the child’s needs.  
- Arrange to take along any other persons that you feel would be helpful in planning the child’s educational program.

*During the conference:*  
- Be an active participant.  
- Ask questions about anything that is unclear.  
- Insist that educational jargon and “alphabet soup” acronyms be avoided.  
- Contribute information, ideas, and recommendations.  
- Let the school personnel know about the positive things school has provided.  
- Ask for a copy of the IEP if it is not offered.  
- Ask to have a follow-up contact time to compare notes about progress.

*After the conference:*  
- Discuss the conference proceedings with the child.  
- Continue to monitor the child’s progress and follow up as agreed on.  
- Reinforce school staff for positive effects of the planned program.  
- Keep adding to the notebook of information.  
- Be active in efforts to improve schools.  
- Say supportive things about the schools whenever possible.
STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN CONFERENCES

The student has the greatest investment and most important involvement in deciding on and constructing an individual education plan for learning. Indeed, it is counterproductive to formulate goals and objectives without involving the student in the conference as a member of the planning team.

Shea and Bauer (1985) stress several benefits from having students participate in conferences for their individualized programs:

- Awareness that parents and teachers are interested in them and working cooperatively;
- Information from teachers and family members about their progress;
- Feeling of involvement in the efforts toward personal achievement;
- A task-oriented view of improving their performance.

Shea and Bauer recommend discussing advantages of the student’s participation with family members and encouraging their support. If there are strenuous parental objections, the issue should be explored for reasons and possible impact on the student’s success in school.

Turnbull and Turnbull (1997) offer a four-step I-PLAN to enhance student participation. The steps in the plan for which the students are trained are:

- **Inventory** to show perceived strengths, areas of improvement needed, and goals and choices for learning. This information is provided in an inventory sheet that the student takes to the conference.
- **Provide Your Inventory** Information includes learning how and when to provide the information during the conference.
- **Listen and Respond** includes development of effective listening and responding skills.
- **Name Your Goals** has the student name the goals agreed on before the conference ends.

Parent partnerships can be particularly difficult to cultivate at the secondary level. Much of the reluctance stems from attitudes of teen-age students who would just “die” of humiliation if their parents were seen at school. Other teens might counter a teacher’s efforts to have family members involved with “Go ahead, but they won’t care/come/participate,” “They have to work,” “They don’t care,” and so on. Parents pick up on these attitudes and acquiesce to them, and teachers are hard-pressed to find the time for changing these attitudes (McGrew-Zoubi, 1998).

In some middle-school settings, where traditional parent–teacher interactions and conferences have been perceived as more problematic than problem solving, an innovative student-centered model for conferencing has been developed and tried. In this model, a structure is developed, students are helped to prepare for their own conferences, this new format is communicated to parents and colleagues, and procedural operations are developed (Countryman & Schroeder, 1996). In the planning, development, and evaluation phases of this new approach, teachers found that students should have more participation in developing conference scripts, they needed a log to help them organize their products, and they must not overlook including such classes as art, family and consumer science, and modern languages or those subjects would not get discussed. One additional finding was students’ expressed need to see how teachers evaluated them before it was revealed at the conference.

Hanna and Dettmer (2004) provide a ten-step plan for getting students ready to guide their parent–student–teacher conference. Student and teacher should discuss these steps and prepare for them, even rehearse them, in advance of the scheduled conference.

1. Determine the purpose(s) of the conference.
2. Formulate goals for the conference and prepare the invitation to family members. In the invitation, family members should be clued as to what to expect and ways to contribute.

3. Develop an agenda and determine location, seating plan, introductions format, and possible opening and closing remarks.

4. Select samples of work and pertinent information that focus on accomplishments, interests, and any major concerns. Consider responses in anticipation of questions or concerns that parents might bring up.

5. Rehearse a simulated conference.

6. At conference time, explore ideas for further learning and achievement.

7. Set reasonable goals.

8. Adhere to the time schedule, summarize, and close on a positive note.

9. Determine follow-up and follow-through procedures for attaining the planned goals.

10. Evaluate the event with rubrics designed specifically for the purpose.

A student-guided conference must not be hurried. A thirty-minute segment of time might be reasonable. Busy teachers, particularly those at the secondary level with dozens of students, will need strong administrator support and innovative scheduling ideas to make student-guided conferences effective. But for a courageous, energetic, and innovative school staff, student-guided parent conferences can promote meaningful ownership by students in their own learning. Students and other participants also can benefit from an assessment of the conference outcomes by using rubrics designed for the purpose (see Hanna & Dettmer, 2004) that has parallel forms for teacher/convenor and parent/family member. This triangulation of data adds richness and depth to the evaluation process concerning the conference experience.

**MAINTAINING HOME–SCHOOL COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIPS**

Home–school collaboration is mandated; it is challenging; it is rewarding. Students, schools, and families are strengthened with appropriate outreach efforts and partnership activities when they are based on the values and practices of the family-focused approach.

Family-centered interventions, support, and advocacy are suggested by several researchers who have looked at diverse families and students with disabilities. One recommended model is the family empowerment model in which schools recognize that the family is the child’s first teacher, that learning is a life-long endeavor, and that all families want the best for their children and can have a positive, significant impact on their children’s education.

In proposing guidelines for educator collaboration, Melaville and Blank (1991) have several useful suggestions for successful home–school collaboration:

- Involve all key players.
- Choose a realistic plan or strategy.
- Establish a shared vision.
- Agree to disagree on some issues and processes.
- Make promises you can keep.
- Keep your “eyes on the prize.”
- Build ownership for all individuals and units.
- Avoid technical difficulties (language problems, getting hung up on paperwork or details).
- Share the success.
Educators have two choices in collaborating with families: to see school as a battleground with an emphasis on conflict between families and school personnel, or to see school as a “homeland” environment that invites power sharing and mutual respect, and with collaboration on activities that foster student learning and development (Epstein, 1995).

TIPS FOR HOME AND SCHOOL COLLABORATION

1. Establish rapport with families early in the year. Call right away, before problems develop, so that the first family contact is a positive one.
2. Invite families in to talk about their traditions, experiences, hobbies, or occupations.
3. Send home “up slips,” putting them in a different format from the “down slips” that families sometimes receive, and have conferences with families because the student is performing well in the classroom.
4. When sharing information with families, “sandwich” any necessary comments about problems or deficits between two very positive ones.
5. During interaction with families, notice how your actions are received, and adapt to that.
6. When interacting with families, never assume anything.
7. When several staff members will be meeting with family members, make sure each one’s role and purpose for being included in the meeting will be understood by the parents.
8. Introduce families to all support personnel working with the child.
9. Build interpersonal “bank accounts” with frequent deposits of goodwill to families. The “interest earned” will be better outcomes for students.
10. Send out monthly newsletters describing the kinds of things the class is doing, and school news or events coming up. Attach articles families would be interested in. Have a “Family Corner” occasionally, for which families provide comments or ideas.
11. Encourage volunteering in the classroom to read stories, help with art lessons, listen to book reports, or give a lesson on an area of expertise such as a job or hobby.
12. Invite families to help students find resource materials and reference books on research topics in the library.
13. Send follow-up notes after meetings. Put out a pamphlet about home-school collaboration in IEP planning conferences.
14. Provide classroom teachers with handouts that can be useful during conferences.
15. Have a Home Book notebook of pictures, activities, and stories about class that students take turns sharing at home.
16. Put a Family Board at the entrance of the building for posting ideas of interest to families, examples of class activities, and pictures.
17. Involve parents and siblings, babysitters, and grandparents to all class parties.
18. Write the right notes. Say thanks, confirm plans, ask for opinions, praise work, give good news, give advance notice of special events and classroom needs (see Figure 3.7).
19. Have families from other countries or culture groups talk to students about their customs and culture.
20. Ask families what their family goals are, and respond with how those goals are being met by the classroom curriculum.

CHAPTER REVIEW

1. The variable with the most significant effect on children’s development is family involvement in the child’s learning. Educational professionals are integral parts of children’s lives, but families are the link of continuity for most of them. Parents and other family members and caregivers are the decision makers for their children, whose futures are largely dependent on the continued ability of their parents to advocate for them. Numerous mandates and passages of legislation have recognized this relationship and provided for involvement by families in the educational programs of students who have special learning and behavioral needs. Educators must be partners with families of students with special needs. This is a demanding and challenging responsibility; however, educators are committed to such a partnership because it fulfills a legal right of families.

2. Research confirms the benefits of the partnership for children, families, and schools. Involvements mean teacher involvement as well as family involvement. This becomes collaboration and mutually respectful, committed teamwork. The No Child Left Behind legislation, with its goals of closing achievement gaps for students who are disadvantaged and closely monitored accountability systems, will be closely watched by involved parents in the years to come.

3. Educational consultants have begun to focus successfully on family strengths by broadening the concept of parent involvement to parent partnership, by using appropriate communication skills, and by promoting positive roles for family members. These enhanced perceptions recognize family needs and promote family competence.

4. Educators and families encounter numerous barriers to home–school collaboration, including underutilization of services, lack of organizational cultural competency, and differing attitudes, history, values, culture, and language. Examining their own culture and values as potential barriers to understanding will enable them to address the diversity they experience during collaboration.

5. Educators must clarify their own values in order to respect the values of others. Checklists, structured value-clarification activities, or thoughtful consideration help educators identify their specific values about education, school, and home–school collaboration.

6. Using rapport-building skills and communication skills such as responsive listening, assertive responding, inclusive conferencing techniques, and mutual problem solving will convey respect for family members and willingness to collaborate with them. Patience and quiet, calm persistence are needed.

7. Educators should provide a variety of opportunities for families to become involved with the school. These opportunities should be based on family strengths, expertise, and needs. Family strengths represent contributions that they can make to the partnership. The needs of parents are those interests and needs they have concerning their families.

8. Home–school collaboration is not complete without including students as partners in their learning programs. They can be involved in setting their own learning goals, assessing their progress, and guiding their student conferences for family members.
TO DO AND THINK ABOUT

1. Brainstorm to identify family characteristics that would be encouraging to a consultant or teacher who has students with learning or behavior disorders. Then develop plans for interaction and involvement with families that would cultivate those characteristics.

2. Identify problems inherent in the three interactions below. Then suggest what could and should have been said differently by the teacher in scene A, by the parent in scene B, and by the consultant in scene C.

Scene A.

Parent: What’s this about suspending my child from your class for three days? I thought you people were supposed to be teaching kids instead of letting them sit and waste time in the principal’s office.

Teacher: You’re being unreasonable. You don’t understand our rules and neither does your child. Your child needs to learn some manners and plain, old-fashioned respect!

Scene B.

Teacher: I’m calling to tell you that your son caused a disturbance again in my class. I would like you to meet with me and his counselor.

Parent: He’s always been an active kid. Can’t you people learn to handle active, curious children without always dragging us parents into it?

Scene C.

Parent: How can I get Bobby to settle down and do his homework without a battle every night? It’s driving us crazy.

Consultant: I’m glad you’re concerned, but I think he will be okay if you just keep on him. Don’t worry, he’s a bright kid and he’ll snap out of this phase soon. Just be glad your other three aren’t dreamers like he is.

3. Plan a booklet that could be used by consultants to improve home–school communication and collaboration. Report on what will be included, how it can be used, and how it will be helpful.

FOR FURTHER READING


