

DIALOG FROM THE FIELD

Involving Families in the Assessment Process

Julia H. Rutland
Morehead State University

Anna Hall
Clemson University

Although grounded in theory and philosophy, and mandated by federal legislation, there is often a gap in research to practice when it comes to involving families in the assessment process. As family involvement through the continuum of early childhood education is recognized as “best practice” in the field, the assessment process must not be excluded. However, teachers in early childhood programs may need additional strategies to invite families to join in the process. Strategies for parent participation as consumers, informants, team members, and advocates are discussed as well as outcomes for children and families.

Keywords: early childhood, family involvement, assessment

Family involvement has been found to be a key element to providing what is now considered best practice in the field of early childhood education (Copples & Bredekamp, 2009; Dunst, 2002; Sandall, Hemmeter, Smith, & McLean, 2005). Head Start mandates involving families as partners in the education of their children by promoting the family’s ability to support their child’s cognitive, social, emotional and physical development (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). Within the mandatory preschool component, there are expectations of family involvement throughout the child’s education and services. Undergirding such mandates is the knowledge that involving families as full partners throughout the continuum of their child’s education must include the *assessment process*.

In gaining a better understanding of the importance of family involvement in the assessment process, it is necessary to begin with the ideology that has contributed to current recommended practice in the field of early childhood education. Early childhood education is grounded by a strong theoretical and philosophical foundation (Baird & Peterson, 1997; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Knowles, 1984). Theories and philosophies that are the basis for early childhood education focus not only on the child as the learner, but the child within a family, and the systems and factors that impact their lives. These theories and philosophies explain how children grow and develop within the context of

the family, how adults and children are motivated by what is important to them, and how the family is the expert on their child. However, families often play limited, if any roles in the assessment process. This gap in research to practice spurs professionals to consider how they might encourage families to participate.

INVITING FAMILIES

There are many ways in which families can be encouraged or “invited” to participate in assessments. Partnerships are created by selecting strategies that make families feel comfortable throughout the assessment process. Some of these strategies include: (1) providing various opportunities for families to receive important information regarding their child’s strengths and needs by allowing families to be *consumers*, (2) asking families to provide information on the ecology of their family in order to be *informants* throughout the assessment process, (3) *teaming* with families as they assist with the assessment tools, and (4) allowing them to be *advocates* as they describe hopes and dreams for their child (Hall, Rutland & Grisham-Brown, 2011). Teachers’ increased understanding of these strategies and how to use them will likely increase family involvement thus increase child outcomes.

Consumer

To further understand the concept of families as consumers, it is necessary to understand that all families have the *right* to receive important information about their child’s education. As mentioned earlier, families, as adult learners, want to consume information that is meaningful and pertinent in their lives. As professionals, we must consider how to best meet this precept. It is crucial that issues related to curriculum framework design, implementations, and evaluations are discussed with families in order for them to understand what is meaningful and pertinent to their child’s education. Families need to understand the underlying philosophy of what is being taught. It is also important that families receive information that will support their child’s development when their child is not in school (Grisham-Brown, Hemmeter & Pretti-Frontczak, 2005) as families will spend more time with their children than any single teacher.

A good starting point for professionals is to clearly explain the school’s philosophy of early childhood education. Many families do not understand how children are achieving important concepts while engaged in play. One specific way to share this information with families is to communicate how content and individualized goals are being addressed. Furthermore, identifying contexts and strategies to address learning goals in home and community will enhance a family’s understanding. The use of visual representations of learning opportunities, or embedding schedules (Grisham-Brown, Hemmeter & Pretti-Frontczak, 2005; Hemmeter & Grisham-Brown, 1997; Pretti-Frontczak & Bricker, 2004) related to targeted behaviors and/or standards may prove to be helpful when communicating this information. Embedding schedules may include target behaviors that will be addressed for the child, activities that occur throughout the

school day, and examples of specific behaviors that the child can demonstrate/practice within a designated activity.

Lesson planning forms are another strategy used by teachers to help families understand how important concepts and standards are being addressed through play. These forms include the daily classroom schedule with accompanying activities that will occur throughout the day, standards or broad outcomes for all children that will be the focus of each activity, and suggestions for how the family can promote the identified outcomes at home.

Teachers can also share valuable information with families by extending learning opportunities to the home. This can be achieved by providing in-home learning activities to promote the child's development and by suggesting ways to promote the child's individualized targeted behaviors within their daily routines. For example, if a child is working on alphabet knowledge skills as a targeted behavior, the teacher may suggest that the family read to their child each night before bedtime and have their child help find familiar letters within the text. The teacher may also provide the family with developmentally appropriate literacy activities that will further develop the child's alphabet knowledge skills such as playing with magnetic letters and writing letters on a dry erase board.

Although it is vitally important for families to receive information about school policies, curriculum design, and targeted behaviors, teachers should be careful not to make the role of "consumer" the only role that families play in the assessment process. Teachers must keep in mind that families are their child's first teacher and that they know their child best. Therefore, families should be active in other roles throughout the assessment process including that of an informant, team member, and advocate.

Informant

Families can provide critical information from their very unique perspectives; however, there is often difficulty in understanding just how to obtain this information. Current guidelines and practices recommend that families be involved in early childhood programs as receivers *and* providers of information (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997; Sandall, Hemmeter, Smith, & McLean, 2005). Families are recognized as the constant in a child's life, with interactions taking place in a variety of contexts (Vangalder, 1997). These experiences lend families an opportunity to provide various types of information to teachers that can help in the design and implementation of valid assessments (Grisham-Brown, Hemmeter & Pretti-Frontczak, 2005). Such unique information can not be found elsewhere.

Families can share information about their child's temperament and physical needs which may help professionals understand a child's reaction to different assessment situations. For example, a child that tends to be anxious might perform better on curriculum-based assessments than on structured assessments. A child who has poor fine-motor skills may struggle with pen and paper assessments, but do well on assessments using oral questioning.

Families can also share information about their child's daily routine and preferences. Understanding how families encourage and limit their child at home can

give insight into a child's behaviors and reactions in the classroom (Grisham-Brown, Hemmeter & Pretti-Frontczak, 2005). Previous knowledge about child preferences or what "works" with their child can assist teachers in developing assessments that are more tailored to each student's individual needs. If a student prefers working in a quiet setting, a teacher may allow the child to move to the hallway to be assessed. Students that have strong interests, such as sports or a love of animals, may perform better on assessments that are developed with their interests in mind.

It is helpful for teachers to learn about the ecology (e.g., who makes up the family, resources and supports, what they enjoy doing, and where they enjoy going) of a family to better understand the child and their behaviors in the classroom (Jung, 2010). Important family relationships and varying types of social-emotional interactions and support can impact the child's performance on class work and assessments. Gaining information from families about their history and the child's life experiences can help teachers provide a more accurate assessment. For example, if the child has recently lost an important family member, the child may feel reserved and be more reluctant to answer open-ended questions on an assessment. In contrast, this child may perform well on an assessment that allows the child to draw freely and express their feelings without words. Understanding a family's ecology will give insight into community involvement, culture, strengths, and resources. All of this information supports teachers in providing appropriate resources needed during the assessment process (Grisham-Brown, Hemmeter, & Pretti-Frontczak, 2005). For example, if the teacher is aware of a language barrier, he/she can make sure to have an interpreter available for the family and child during the assessment process.

Finally, understanding the family's priorities and goals for their child along with the family's strengths, needs and resources allows teachers to plan, implement, and evaluate each child as an individual (Grisham-Brown, Hemmeter, & Pretti-Frontczak, 2005; Vangalder, 1997). The family can inform teachers with this valuable information and help ensure that the assessment process is accurate and valid for each child. For example, the family may be more focused on their child's ability to learn language than on their child's numeracy skills. This would be important information for the assessor when focusing on curriculum development and individual goals for the child.

Team member

Families can be instrumental in identifying strategies and approaches for assessment that will work best for their child by becoming a collaborative member of the assessment team. In order to do this, families must be involved in all aspects of the assessment process (Boone & Crais, 1999). This should include planning the assessment, participating in interviews, observations, testing, and helping to determine if the information collected is representative of the child's actual abilities.

Through participation in the observation and rating of specific behaviors in their children, families have an increased awareness of their child's development (Dinnebeil & Rule, 1994) and increases in contributions when developing intervention plans and during decision making processes (Brinckerhoff & Vincent, 1987). The compilation of multiple

observations of a child (family, teacher, and specialist's observations) helps to develop a more accurate picture of the child (Vangalder, 1997).

Active family involvement does not mean professionals give up their responsibilities. It is still the responsibility of teachers and specialists to suggest and provide appropriate options for individualized goals (Berman & Shaw, 1995). Families are the most familiar with their child, but they are not always familiar with appropriate interventions or developmentally appropriate practices. It is the job of the teachers and specialists to share their expertise and to help guide families and facilitate teamwork when working together. When families are involved in the assessment process as team members, it will lead to sensible goals and plans that lead toward solutions and resources (Berman & Shaw, 1995) in which a family can live with the results.

Advocate

Although professionals in the field of early childhood education have a great interest in the children in which they serve and teach, families have the greatest vested interest in their children. As previously mentioned, *they* must live with the results derived from strategies that are developed from the assessment. Therefore, families need to feel comfortable in confirming or refuting assessment information, based on their knowledge and understanding of their child's abilities and characteristics. Professionals can encourage families to be advocates for their children by observing and commenting on their child's behaviors and performance during assessment, asking questions about the evaluation, and making sure families clearly understand the process (Berman & Shaw, 1995). In order for families to provide ongoing educational support, they must be advocates for their children through the continuum of early childhood education, including the assessment process. This may be as simple as assuring that time of day and length of observations are appropriate and in the best interest of the child. Families can provide a fresh perspective on how services should be delivered (Thegan & Weber, 2002) and must be supported in their efforts to develop skills to communicate concerns, goals, placement options, and many other types of key information that is relevant to the assessment process.

In the past, family involvement has been limited to that of passive recipients. However, we now understand the dynamic contributions of the family and how this can positively impact the assessment process. We have also discussed several ways families can be encouraged to participate: *consumer*, *informant*, *team member*, and *advocate*. But it is important to keep in mind the ultimate goal for this involvement is not simply for improved assessment, but for improved outcomes.

OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

The term "outcomes" refers to benefits that a child or family experiences as a result of services (ECO: Early Childhood Outcomes Center, n.d.). For young children in our classrooms, outcomes are the benefits children and families experience from the strategies that have been developed based on assessment. By involving families in the

assessment process we can empower families, increase family involvement, and improve the functionality of outcomes.

Functional Outcomes

Involving families in assessment increases the likelihood of selecting skills or behaviors that are meaningful to the child and family. Targeting meaningful skills or behaviors increases the likelihood of the family addressing the skills within their typical routines by using strategies that are developed from the information gained in the assessment process. It is important that outcomes are functional and meaningful to children in their everyday lives and routines, and across a variety of settings.

Family Empowerment

In addition to improved outcomes, using family-centered practices such as including families in assessment, leads to feelings of empowerment (Hanft & Pilkington, 2000) and a higher level of parents' well-being (Dunst, Bruder, Trivette, & Hamby, 2006). Parent involvement is a right and a much needed component to successful early childhood education; however, it must be respected as a choice for families. They may choose to participate at varying levels. It is important to welcome their involvement whether minimal or at high levels.

Enhanced Involvement

Finally, parent involvement also contributes to better attitudes about school (Epstein, 2000). Unfortunately, not all families have had positive past school experiences. By encouraging involvement in a variety of ways, families can develop new attitudes toward school. If Head Start parents have positive experiences participating in the assessment process during their child's preschool years, they are more likely to continue their involvement in kindergarten and beyond.

CONCLUSION

A child's development must be considered within the context of the relationships in the many environments in which the child lives and interacts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The interaction between factors in the child's immediate family, environment, and the society in which they live steers their development. With this in mind, it is crucial to include families as active participants in the assessment process.

Although involving families as consumers is an important role, teachers should also focus on the valuable information that families can provide and the unique perspectives that they can share. It is vital for teachers to take the time to encourage families to become active participants in the assessment process serving as informants, team members, and advocates along with their important role as consumers.

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