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Fostering Family-Professional Collaboration Through Person-Centered IEP Meetings : The "True Directions" Model

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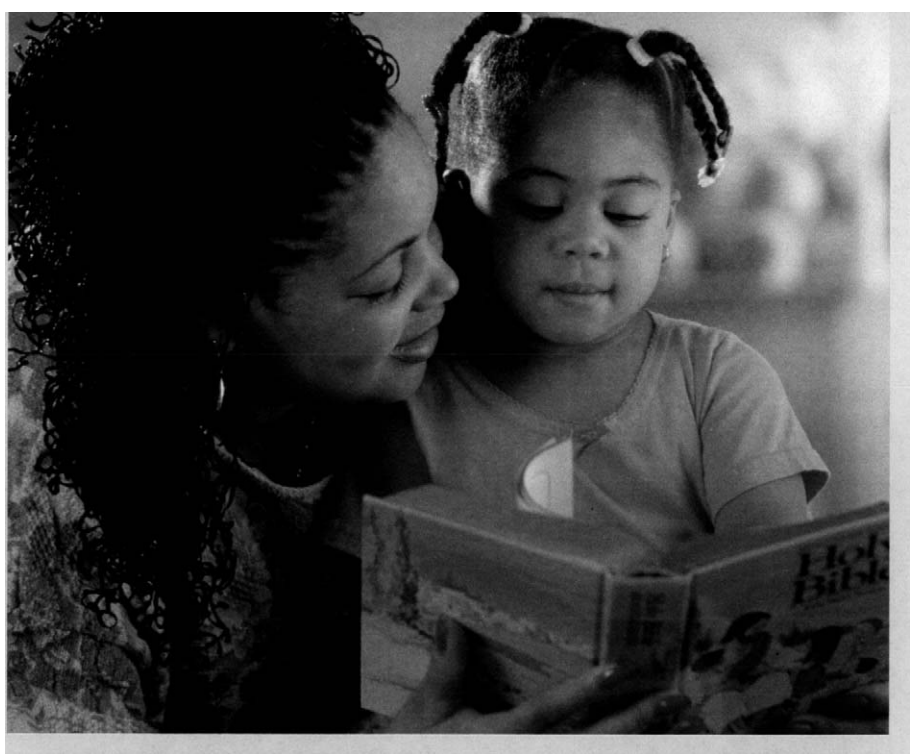
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**Fostering
Family-Professional
Collaboration
Through
Person-Centered
IEP Meetings:**



The “True Directions” Model

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Family-professional partnerships have been recognized through research and supported through legislation as critical components contributing to the positive development of children with disabilities, yet current practices and services need significant improvement (McWilliams, Maxwell, & Sloper, 1999). Ideally families’ roles within schools involve collaborative efforts with professionals, however, there is a gap between actual practice and what professionals consider desirable practice. In practice families and service providers often experience difficulty in collaborating through a true partnership approach (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). This difficulty can be attributed to a number of issues including professionals’ negative past experiences, differing expectations, and lack of time and opportunity to collaborate (Stineman, Morningstar, Bishop, & Turnbull, 1993). These difficulties are particularly evident in the individualized education plan (IEP) development process and child evaluation and assessment. It has been reported that professionals exhibit limited “family-centered” practices as they complete these components of educational planning (McWilliams, Maxwell, & Sloper, 1999).

Generating quality services for young children is challenging, particularly when the children and their families are not central to the planning process. Given that the children’s life outcomes are affected by the services they receive across the school years, it is critical that educational services are meaningful for the children and their families and incorporate learning opportunities beyond the school environment. Unfortunately, frequently IEP development falls short of targeting meaningful outcomes. IEP goals and objectives for young children may be written by professionals with little regard for best practices (e.g., not based on family values and priorities, not meaningful or functional) (Pretti-Frontczak & Bricker, 2000) and often fail to address pertinent areas of need (e.g., social competence)

(Michnowicz, McConnell, Peterson, & Odom, 1995). Given these concerns about educational planning, there is a clear need for family-professional collaboration that supports child success through the development of child goals that are based on family values, priorities, and concerns.

The focus of this article is on enhancing the IEP development process through the use of person-centered planning to promote family-professional partnerships. A person-centered model, "True Directions" (Childre, 1998), that has at its center such a collaborative partnership, is described. To illustrate the impact of "True Directions" on family participation and the IEP planning process, a vignette featuring "True Directions" in practice is shared.

Traditional IEP Meetings

Traditional IEP meetings present several potential barriers to creating effective partnerships with families and the development of meaningful educational plans (Keyes & Owens-Johnson, 2003). Meetings are primarily held at the professionals' convenience and are typically led by the professionals. In this arrangement families are typically assigned the role of passive recipients of information. Participation of families is further limited by the widespread practice of professionals preparing the IEP document prior to the planning meeting, even though this is contrary to legal guidelines and recommended practices (Keyes &

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Owens-Johnson, 2003). Furthermore, assessment information shared at IEP meetings is often formal and deficit-focused and does not consider informal types of assessment such as play-based assessments, observations, and family member interviews that would provide greater insight into the child's strengths and interests. Finally, traditional IEP meetings seldom account for cultural or linguistic differences between families and professionals. Consider the following vignette to see if you can identify some of the barriers that the Phillips family experiences in developing a partnership with their son's school.

When Jamar was born, Shante and Torrence Phillips dreamed of the basketball scholarship he would receive, the fine physician he would become, and the wonderful grandchildren he would bring to their lives. Now, six years later, those dreams are a part of their past. When Jamar was three years old, the Phillips began to notice characteristics in him that they had not seen in their nieces and nephews.

Jamar was withdrawn. He primarily sat with his fire truck rolling the wheels around and around, watching the wheels intently. Jamar's parents were also concerned with his violent outbursts, which occurred when something new happened or when they tried to get him to play with something other than his fire truck. While the Phillips recognized these problems and worried about them, they thought that preschool would help Jamar overcome his problem behaviors.

Upon entering preschool, Jamar was immediately identified by his teachers as a child who was developmentally behind, antisocial, and behaviorally difficult. The Phillips were called in for a meeting. Looking back on that day, the Phillips still cringe. The room was full of professionals who spoke to them with legal jargon, listed their child's inadequacies, and ultimately delivered a message that said, "Your child is hopeless!"

Later, when the Phillips received notice of Jamar's IEP meeting to determine his program for kindergarten, they were hopeful that Jamar would be included with his peers in a regular kindergarten class so that he could learn from them. However, at the meeting Jamar's special education teacher, Mrs. Wheat, led the meeting while all the

professionals filling the table nodded their heads in agreement. When Mrs. Wheat addressed the extent to which Jamar would participate with children without disabilities, she stated that Jamar's behavior inhibited inclusion from happening. The Phillips were disheartened. Yet not knowing that their concerns should be considered or that their input was relevant, the Phillips sat silently. Mrs. Wheat finished her comments, handed over her prewritten documents for the Phillips to sign, and ended the meeting.

This vignette illustrates one case in which a family of a child with a disability is inhibited in assuming a meaningful role in educational planning and decision making. This is not to say that professionals intentionally deny families the right to be involved, but professionals may need to acquire the necessary tools to facilitate meetings that encourage collaborative and empowering relationships with families.

Person-Centered Planning

Person-centered planning (PCP) has been proposed as an approach to building partnerships between families and professionals. The PCP approach is integrated into various materials, including "The McGill Action Planning System (MAPS)" (Vandercook, York, & Forest, 1989); "Personal Futures

... [P]rofessionals may need to acquire the necessary tools to facilitate meetings that encourage collaborative and empowering relationships with families.

Planning" (Mount & Zwernick, 1988); and "Planning Alternative Tomorrows With Hope (PATH)" (Pearpoint, O'Brien, & Forest, 1993). Although each of these programs has its own unique style, they share some common components: (1) the individual is placed at the center of the planning process; (2) all team members, including the student and the family, are involved as contributors in the planning process; (3) all members take a positive and proactive view of the student by focusing on strengths and abilities rather than the disability; (4) consideration of the student's strengths, interests, and dreams are central to the process and form the basis for understanding the student and determining educational needs; and (5) current plans and goals developed are viewed as a stepping stone for reaching dreams and plans for the future.

A number of positive outcomes for participants in a PCP process have been reported in the literature (e.g., Childre, 1998; Flannery et al., 2000; Miner & Bates, 1997). Both students and their family members have reported higher levels of satisfaction with a PCP approach than with traditional IEP meetings (Childre, 1998; Flannery et al., 2000).

Additionally, reports (e.g., Miner & Bates, 1997) have shown that parents/guardians show increases in participation and preparedness for IEP meetings after participating in a PCP process prior to IEP meetings.

The PCP approach, in its current form, has been used minimally at the school level despite the evidence for positive outcomes (Miner & Bates, 1997). This lack of application at the school level may be the result of several issues. First, PCP has been used as an additional form of planning for individuals with disabilities outside the context of the educational setting and often without school personnel. This results in a disconnection between the planning at PCP meetings and IEP planning. Second, the PCP approach omits aspects of legal requirements typically addressed during IEP meetings (Childre, 1998). Third, the PCP approach often calls for the use of resources that are not easily obtained by public school personnel. For example, many PCP materials require a facilitator, additional training requirements, or a graphic component (i.e., visual representation of planning information and goals).

"True Directions"

In an effort to integrate PCP ideals and IEP requirements, Childre (1998, 2004) designed a person-centered tool (i.e., "Student-Centered IEP Planning") that can be more easily utilized by practitioners and families in schools.

Utilization of “Student-Centered IEP Planning” (SCIEP) has been reported to result in increases in family-professional collaboration, in ability-focused views of students, and in goals that assist students and families in realizing future dreams (Childre, 1998). This article presents an adaptation of this model known as “True Directions.”

“True Directions” is a multi-component tool that employs specially designed forms for families, students, and team members in order to maximize the involvement of participants and to capitalize on the relevant information that all key players have to offer. An array of forms is offered to meet the varying needs of diverse families and students of differing ages (i.e., four- to 21-years old). Service providers choose the forms that best meet the needs of their individual situations. These forms and the information obtained serve as a basis for developing the student’s IEP during the regularly scheduled IEP meeting as well as aid in the development of partnerships between families and professionals.

Family Forms

Before the IEP meeting, forms are shared with the family in an attempt to gather information that will assist the team in designing a meaningful plan for the child. These forms (see Table 1 for descriptions) give the family an opportunity to consider issues and information prior to the meeting just as service providers do. For

Table 1

Family Forms

<p>“Life Connections”</p> <p>Identify people involved with your child and the role they play in your child’s life. Include family, individuals in the community, service providers, and others. What are the most important relationships for your child? Are there relationships that your child does not have that you would like developed?</p>
<p>“Dreams”</p> <p>What dreams do you or your child have for your child this year, next year, or for far in the future? Share dreams about any area from friendships to academic skills or anything you want your child to be able to do.</p>
<p>“Goals”</p> <p>We need to set goals to help your child achieve the dreams your family has identified. What skills will help us reach those dreams? What needs does your child have now? Identify what is important for your child to learn now. Consider skill areas such as social/behavioral, self-help, academics, communication, motor, or other.</p>

some families, the forms alone may be enough to foster their participation. With other families, service providers may want to use the forms to guide informal conversations to obtain family input. Service providers must also be aware of cultural issues and determine whether additional support, such as an interpreter, should be utilized.

Student Forms

Forms to be completed by the student with teacher and/or family assistance are included so that the student can provide input in his or her educational planning (see Table 2 on the following page). Of course student contribution to the process will vary according to the

child’s age and disability level. The goal is to obtain as much input as possible from the student at the level that he or she is capable of contributing. Due to attention span and other issues, younger students’ participation and sharing during meetings may need to be limited to portions of the meeting during which their participation and contributions can be maximized (e.g., portions such as “Dreams,” “Goals”). In addition, observing students in their natural environments as well as providing students with choice-making opportunities can provide valuable information.

Table 2

Student Forms

<p>Who I Am</p> <p>My friends are _____.</p> <p>I like to _____ with my friends.</p> <p>I (do/do not) want more friends.</p> <p>For fun away from school (or at school) I like to _____.</p> <p>_____.</p> <p>To help at home (or at school) I get to _____.</p> <p>_____.</p> <p>I really want to do _____ at home (or at school), but I do not get to.</p> <p>At school I am learning to _____.</p> <p>I would like to learn to _____.</p> <p>When I grow up, I want to _____.</p> <p>_____.</p>
<p>Preferences</p> <p>I like to spend time with _____.</p> <p>Things I like (do not like) to do are _____.</p> <p>_____.</p> <p>I get happy (mad, sad, or frustrated) when _____.</p> <p>_____.</p> <p>I am afraid of _____.</p> <p>My favorite thing about myself is _____.</p> <p>I am good at _____.</p> <p>All on my own I get to do (or decide) _____.</p> <p>_____.</p>

a desired number of friendships. The "Community Survey" supplies information with respect to places in the community the child and family frequent. "Now" provides a basis for identifying the child's present level of performance across settings. "What Works" is a form for acknowledging practices or strategies that are currently effective for the child or have been in the past. "Dreams" provides a means for team members, including the family, child, and service providers, to describe their hopes and desires for the child. "Goals" facilitates identification of IEP goals based on information gathered from all the team members. "Where, Who, & When" not only identifies where services will take place, but also clarifies the roles and responsibilities of each team member. This form also enables team members to develop a time frame for when the goals are to be attained and provides a format for follow-up on team members' progress in accomplishing responsibilities.

Service providers should keep in mind that these forms can be adapted and modified to meet the child and family's unique needs. Teachers who have utilized the "True Directions" process support adapting the process to match their unique interaction styles and the needs of individual students (Childre, 1998). These teachers share that allowing modifications (e.g., reordering steps, omitting a step) gives them more comfort in using the process so that it becomes their own, which in turn supports further use.

Team Forms

At the meeting, the team chooses from among a variety of forms designed to guide the IEP development process (see Table 3). These forms serve as steps for the team to walk through as they consider all aspects of the child's life. The steps allow the service providers and family to share information related to the child that could facilitate each team member's understanding

of where student goals should be focused (Childre, 1998).

Each of the "True Directions" team forms has a unique purpose. "Life Connections" is designed to gain information regarding the child's support network and to identify areas to be further developed. For example, a completed "Life Connections" form may show that a child's social and support network is primarily comprised of family members and lacks

Table 3

Team Forms

<p>“Life Connections”</p> <p>Consider relationships the family identifies. Share any additional relationships not identified by the family. Who/what are important persons, services, or organizations that currently support the child? Are there relationships to expand or to minimize?</p>
<p>“Community Survey”</p> <p>Identify skills that need to be targeted in natural or community environments. Determine places in the community that the family frequents that may be potential teaching environments (e.g., restaurants, parks).</p>
<p>“Now”</p> <p>Generate an ability-focused present level of functioning. What are the child’s strengths, abilities, and preferences? What are the child’s accomplishments? Do not focus on problems or weaknesses, but do problem solve how to address any issues that do exist.</p>
<p>“What Works”</p> <p>Prompt team members to share information from their experiences about what supports child learning and creates a positive educational experience. Consider areas specific to the child’s need (e.g., instruction, communication, adaptive equipment, behavior).</p>
<p>“Dreams”</p> <p>What are the family’s and child’s dreams? Create a picture of the future. If a dream seems unrealistic, discuss to discover the motivation behind the dream. This step can be used to identify attainable goals.</p>
<p>“Goals”</p> <p>Utilizing information from the prior forms, determine goals to target. Consider: (1) What knowledge does the child need to acquire? (2) What skills does the child need to develop? and (3) What relationships does the child need to maintain or build?</p>
<p>“Where, Who, & When”</p> <p>Determine: Where will services take place? Who are the individuals involved in the child’s educational program and what are their responsibilities? What is the child’s role? When will each team member accomplish and report on identified responsibilities?</p>

“True Directions” in Action

Now that you have become familiar with the various forms and steps of the “True Directions” model, let’s explore how “True Directions” impacted the Phillips family during Jamar’s first grade annual IEP meeting.

As usual, the Phillips contemplate Jamar’s IEP meeting with trepidation and hesitation. What will make his first grade year any different? They receive notification of the meeting along with a note stating that Jamar’s new special education teacher, Ms. Henning, will soon contact them by phone. When they receive the call, Ms. Henning says that she wants to try a process called “True Directions.” She indicates that she wants their input during Jamar’s IEP meeting, and to better prepare them she will send home some forms for them to complete or consider regarding Jamar. The Phillips agree to participate, but with considerable caution because of their prior history.

The Phillips receive and complete three forms: “Life Connections,” “Dreams,” and “Goals.” (Their responses are shown in Table 4 on the following page.) Already the Phillips feel as though this IEP process has a different, more positive tone. They return their forms to Ms. Henning. Soon, the Phillips

Table 4
The Phillips' Responses on Family Forms

Jamar's Life Connections

Family	Friends	Service Providers
Dad Mom One set of grandparents living closeby	Do not know of any	Ms. Henning, spec. ed. teacher Mr. Fields, speech therapist
Family: Jamar gets lots of support from us and his grandparents. He doesn't really have any friends because he has never acted like he has wanted them. We would like to see him have some friends or at least want to play with other children.		

Parents' Dreams and Goals for Jamar

Dreams
First of all, we find this to be scary, yet at the same time it is new and exciting. Never before have we been expected to consider our dreams for Jamar. We will start by listing a few of our present dreams for him. We want Jamar to love us the way we love him. He likes to spend time alone. He doesn't like too much affection. We want to see that he loves us in return. We want Jamar to have friends. We want him to invite friends over and to be invited to play at other kids' homes. We want Jamar to have lots of interests. He seems to only like a few things. We want him to like many things. In thinking long-term, we want Jamar to live a normal life. We know that he has a lot to offer and we want him to be able to share his gifts with the world.
Goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We want Jamar to improve his behavior, so that he doesn't get so upset when changes happen. • We want Jamar to make friends. • We want Jamar to expand his hobbies and interests. • We want Jamar to show interest in others, including us!

receive another call from Ms. Henning, who wants to invite Jamar's grandparents to attend the IEP meeting since they are significant in his daily life. Additionally, Ms. Henning wants to know if the Phillips would allow Tony, a peer buddy from Jamar's kindergarten class, to attend the meeting and to be involved in completing the "Who I Am" form with Jamar. The Phillips agree.

At the meeting, the Phillips are joined by Jamar; Jamar's grandmother; Ms. Henning; Jamar's friend, Tony; the speech therapist, Mr. Fields; and a general education teacher, Mrs. Berry. Instead of being faced with insensitive, disengaged professionals, the Phillips feel they are joining a group of people with a vested interest in Jamar. Ms. Henning opens the meeting with introductions by each of the team members including Jamar's family and friend. The introductions lead to a discussion of Jamar's relationships ("Life Connections"). Shante Phillips indicates her concern about Jamar's lack of friendships. Ms. Henning agrees that Jamar does have difficulty fostering friendships, but has made a connection with Tony, his kindergarten peer. Tony says that he likes Jamar because he can draw. They enjoy drawing together in class. This surprises the Phillips, because they do

not know that Jamar is interested in drawing.

Next, Ms. Henning asks the family about places that Jamar visits. On the "Community Survey" form, Ms. Henning notes that the family indicates Jamar goes to school, his grandparents' house, Sunday school, and the grocery store. Next, the team discusses Jamar's abilities and skills in those environments ("Now"). Shante Phillips indicates that Jamar always knows where to find his favorite foods in the grocery store, even when she forgets their locations. Jamar's grandmother says that Jamar helps her in the kitchen. Torrence Phillips shares that Jamar enjoys listening to music with him. Academically, Ms. Henning finds Jamar to be a visual and hands-on learner, especially in math and reading. Mrs. Berry relates that Jamar takes pleasure in playing on the computer in her room. Looking at the list on the "Now" form created by the team, the Phillips are astonished by all the things their son can do.

In addition to Jamar's strengths, the team discusses their concerns about Jamar's behavior. He continues to have difficulties when changes in the schedule occur and often hits others when changes take place. Shante Phillips agrees that life would also be less stressful if Jamar did not overreact to different activities at

Sunday school or when going to new places. To the Phillips, these problems are important, but even more important, they have learned that their child also can do many things right!

Next, the team discusses practices in the classroom and at home that currently work for Jamar ("What Works"). Instructionally, the team identifies musical and visual materials that are preferred by Jamar. Ms. Henning adds that Jamar really enjoys using hands-on materials such as blocks when learning and practicing math skills. Additionally, Ms. Henning notes that Jamar seems at ease when following a picture schedule, which helps him anticipate the different activities and routines he is to follow in her class.

After the "What Works" form, the team begins to explore their dreams for Jamar. The Phillips begin by sharing their dream that Jamar will show them love (see Table 4). They talk about how difficult it is to have a son who is different from other people's children, and who does not show affection towards them. Mr. Fields hopes that Jamar will use his interest in music to do something great. Ms. Henning wishes that Jamar could have more opportunities to interact with and make friends with students without disabilities.

The team now feels that they have learned a great deal about

Jamar and what is desired for him, information to be used in developing meaningful goals for his IEP. Together, the team designs goals to meet Jamar's social needs, including interacting with children without disabilities in a variety of natural settings, initiating interactions, and responding to others' social attempts. To address Jamar's interests in music and art, goals are developed to build on his skills in both of these areas. Goals also are designed to assist Jamar in becoming more flexible with his schedule and tolerating changes when they occur.

The final step of this "True Directions" process is using the form "Where, Who, & When" to determine where Jamar's services will take place, who will assist Jamar in accomplishing his goals in his typical environments, and when services will occur. The team agrees that Jamar needs more access to the general education classroom. At school, Ms. Henning will teach peer buddies like Tony to help Jamar with his social goals while she monitors, and at home, his family will support him with these goals. Jamar's teachers and parents will all assist him with his behavior-related goals. Music and art will be integrated into Jamar's activities collaboratively between his special education and regular education teachers, with the support of his music and art teachers.

Conclusion

As is evident from the vignette, "True Directions" is a shared process. Each team member, including Torrence and Shante Phillips, assisted in creating a more meaningful plan for Jamar. No longer did the decisions rest solely in the hands of professionals. Jamar's parents, grandmother, and friend Tony were an integral part of bringing pertinent information to the table and creating a meaningful educational plan for Jamar. Follow-up meetings and contact, which will ensure that Jamar is receiving the best possible services and support, can foster the continued development of this family-professional partnership.

"True Directions" offers a feasible method for developing person-centered IEPs. Each step of the "True Directions" model (i.e., "Life Connections," "Community Survey," "Now," "What Works," "Dreams," "Goals," and "Where, Who, & When") integrates person-centered ideals and the legal requirements of IEP planning. "True Directions," however, is also a flexible method rather than a static process. Individual programs may use the "True Directions" process with or without adaptations, combine this process with other practices, or use portions of the process to best meet individual personalities, interaction styles, and particular needs (Childre, 1998).

Note

You can reach Cynthia R. Chambers by e-mail at crchambe@ku.edu

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