

A PEATC

Do You Know....



Fact Sheet for Virginia's Professionals Working with Families of Students with Disabilities

Families of Students with Disabilities Have Unique Needs

Families of students with disabilities or medical conditions are not different from other families. **They have hopes and dreams for their student.** However, they also may experience **unique challenges** and **increased stress** and may need additional support, understanding, and assistance. **Families can be overwhelmed by constant appointments and recommendations, by having to navigate complex service systems and by worries about their student's future.**

Teachers, therapists, and other professionals play a significant role in supporting families of students with disabilities so that their students can reach their potential. Starting with early intervention and continuing throughout the student's school career, **communication and collaboration are vital** and result in better overall outcomes for children at home and in school.

Establishing Relationships

Establishing meaningful relationships with families is critical. When working with families of students with disabilities, recognize that that family may be working with numerous other professionals from multiple agencies in varying disciplines.

The first step is to find out **what is important to them.** What are their wishes, and dreams for their child and what are their concerns? **Take time to find out what skills their student demonstrates** in their home environment and discuss the skills that are seen in the school environment.

Good two-way communication is key to building family and school partnerships and results in increased student success. Parents of students with disabilities need to feel they are being heard, and they need to know they have someone they can go to with questions. Since each family's needs are unique, **educators may need to use a variety of ways to communicate**, such as parent conferences, newsletters, open houses, home visits, phone calls, emails, etc.

When talking with parents of students with disabilities, **ask questions** to learn about strategies that work at home and consider using them in your classroom. At the same time, **share your thoughts about the student's strengths and challenges.**

Take time to explore own assumptions about working with families of children with disabilities. What do you already do to engage those families?

- Create an environment that is **welcoming and respectful.**
- **Consider families a key member of the team.** Understand their concerns and priorities.
- Recognize and support family **cultural, language, and faith,** traditions, and experiences
- **Be cognizant of the child and family's well-being** beyond just the school setting (for example, if they are experiencing financial or medical issues)



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Fact Sheet for Virginia's Professionals

You will learn more about the student's needs and will be better to meet those needs by having these types of conversations with parents, even when they are difficult.

When students have challenging behavior, creating, developing, and maintaining collaborative relationships is critical to ensuring there is consistency between school and home with regards to setting goals, using strategies, and effectively dealing with challenging behaviors. It is important to remember, that families don't want to be seen as "bad parents" and talking about behaviors can be stressful. Reassure parents that you are there to help support them and their student.

Many students with disabilities will qualify for early intervention and/or special education services. These processes are complex and can be overwhelming and confusing to parents. Professionals can help families by explaining these processes in parent-friendly language and by creating an atmosphere in which parents feel at ease. Professionals can also provide easy to understand resources to parents to help guide them through early intervention, special education and other related programs and processes.

The Virtual Lab School (VLS) provides the guidelines for family-centered practices.

- ✓ Recognize the family as a constant in the student's life; caregivers and service systems may come and go.
- ✓ Facilitate collaboration between families and professionals.
- ✓ Honor and respect family diversity.
- ✓ Recognize family strengths and different approaches to coping with difficulties
- ✓ Encourage family-to-family support and networking.
- ✓ Acknowledge and integrate the developmental needs of the student and other family members in all that you do.
- ✓ Design and implement services that are accessible, culturally and linguistically respectful/ responsive, and based on family-identified needs

<https://www.virtuallabschool.org/preschool/family-engagement/lesson-4>

How to Make Families Feel Valued

Here are some examples:

- Engage families as equal partners.
- Share knowledge, ask for information, and include parent ideas into learning activities
- Keep open communication and communicate in the parent's native language
- Include families in leadership roles.
- Be attentive to family stress or change; talk about challenges they may be experiencing and any help that can be provided.
- Conduct home visits and outreach into the community
- Provide information on resources that families can use at home and in the community.
- Provide mentors to families to help teach skills or involve families in activities they may not have done before.

<https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/legacy/resources/MD%20family%20engagement%20toolkit.pdfv>

PEATC's mission focuses on building positive futures for Virginia's children by working collaboratively with families, schools and communities to improve opportunities for excellence in education and success in school and community life.

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