



**Harvard Family  
Research Project**



# **Family Engagement and Children with Disabilities: A Resource Guide for Educators and Parents**

**Harvard Family Research Project  
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## Introduction

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One of the most effective means of ensuring academic success is to engage families in their children's education. While family engagement confers benefits on all students, those with disabilities often require a greater degree of parental involvement and advocacy than their peers without disabilities in order to be assured of receiving the same level of instruction as the general student population. Children with disabilities often face multifaceted classroom challenges requiring special attention from instructors and active engagement from their families. Their families play a number of supporting roles, including as their advocates and as people who can provide valuable insight into their specific needs to instructors, who may at times feel pressed by trying to meet the needs of diverse groups of students. There are rarely any simple answers to balancing the needs of each individual child with disabilities with others' needs, with competing structural, bureaucratic, pedagogical, and emotional factors often adding extra layers of effort and complexity for everyone involved. But when families and educators work together as partners, it enhances the likelihood that children with disabilities will have positive and successful learning experiences.

The U.S. Department of Education has categorized a wide range of special education needs, in part, for the purpose of determining the scope of classroom instruction and funding requirements necessary to ensure academic achievement for all children with disabilities. But these classifications don't adequately capture the complex nature of special needs represented in schools, which vary in each classroom depending on each student's unique circumstance.

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), originally passed in 1975, all children are entitled to a "free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment required to meet their needs." As written, the law requires that parents and families be involved in the creation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), which help to determine appropriate settings and services for their children. Beyond this legal mandate, IDEA also acknowledges the unique importance of home-school partnerships for students with disabilities throughout their time in school.

### **Families and home-school partnerships**

Although vital to the learning experience of children with disabilities, home-school partnerships are nonetheless often hampered by multiple hurdles facing each person involved, frequently leaving families and instructors not knowing how to negotiate appropriate and effective means of ensuring an optimal learning experience for the children in their care. The complexity of the law can make it difficult for families to fully understand all of their rights or the rights of their children, so as to effectively act as advocates and partners during the evaluation or service provision decision-making process. The referral and evaluation processes in and of themselves can be intimidating and discouraging to families, who are often already overwhelmed by a variety of concerns related to their children's overall care. Many parents express that they feel excluded from

important discussions about and decisions made related to their children's education. These perceptions are a significant factor in parents' development of meaningful, ongoing partnerships with their children's schools.

### **Educators and family engagement**

Educators also face challenges when considering how best to engage families in serving children with disabilities. Even though many educators are aware of the value of family engagement, they may lack training in how to go about it, particularly when trying to involve families in the daily instructional or Individualized Education Program (IEP) process.<sup>1</sup> Another factor that can hinder educators' efforts to build strong working relationships with families is not having adequate time to do so. Fulfilling IEPs and making other necessary special accommodations add to the demands on educators' time and energy. These demands are of course even greater for those who have more than one child with disabilities under their care.

The challenges are numerous but by no means insurmountable. Strong home-school partnerships based on ongoing dialogue and engagement can help alleviate many of the concerns of both families of children with disabilities and educators. Productive working relationships can help demystify for families what, at times, may feel like daunting bureaucratic processes. These same partnerships may lessen parents' anxieties and bolster their confidence about working with instructors on behalf of their children. Effective partnerships also help educators feel supported in their efforts to balance the needs of students with disabilities with other students' needs. Ultimately, it is the children with disabilities themselves who benefit the most from feeling that there is continuity of communication, support, and caring between home and school.

### **Resources**

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This annotated bibliography describes resources that can help parents and educators facilitate a comfortable and supportive partnership in the interest of successful outcomes for children with disabilities. The research reports, journal articles, and examples of best practices and practical tools included in this guide suggest methods of developing positive, timely, and productive collaboration between schools and families so that they can work together to ensure better services for students in their care.

The resources in this guide are grouped into the following categories, which reflect common areas of focus that concern families and educators while striving to meet the needs of children with disabilities:

- Families as advocates
- Family roles in assessment and intervention
- Families as partners in student learning

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<sup>1</sup> The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that schools provide Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) to all students identified as needing special education services. These IEPs are legal documents, typically revised annually, that include important information about a student's disability and needs in order to instruct teachers and service providers about what is required in order for them to provide the student with an appropriate education to each student. Amended most recently in December 2004, under President George W. Bush, IDEA is now recognized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA).

Within each category, educators will find a selected list of resources that can guide their work with families of children with disabilities, and families will find resources to help them ensure due process and positive educational experiences for their children with special needs.

This guide focuses on resources published since 2004, the last time IDEA was reauthorized and amended, acknowledging that the fields of special education and family engagement evolve rapidly. Most of the publications listed are publically accessible.

### Families as Advocates

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Boeltzig, H., Kusminsky, M.N., Foley, S.M., Robinson, R., Popper, B., & Guitierrez-Wilson, M. (2009). *Advancing parent-professional leadership: Effective strategies for building the capacity of parent advisory councils in special education. The Institute for Community Inclusion–The Institute Brief (27).*

This brief presents proven strategies for increasing the efficacy of special education parent advisory councils (SEPACs) in Massachusetts, where every school district is required to have a SEPAC. Based on interviews with parents involved with the Advancing Parent-Professional Leadership in Education (APPLE) Project, the brief identifies ways in which SEPACs and other parent groups can improve their organizational capacity to maximize their collaborative efforts with educators, including capitalizing on parents' leadership skills, providing input on school policy and programs relating to special education, and raising disability and special education awareness at schools and in the community. While arising out of a Massachusetts initiative, the recommendations may benefit similar parent groups in all areas.

Canter, A. (2004). *Psychological evaluations: What every parent should know.* National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). Retrieved from <http://www.nasponline.org/families/psycheval.pdf>

This guide for parents provides an overview of the reasons for and uses of psychological evaluations, which are often conducted as part of a comprehensive evaluation for special education services or used to create behavior modification plans. Because the reports generated by these evaluations are often difficult to understand, however, it is important for parents to know the right questions to ask during follow-up meetings. The author provides families with both a useful overview of the psychological evaluation process and tips to help them understand how the reports can be used to ensure that their children receive the appropriate educational and support services.

Dabkowski, D. M. (2004). *Encouraging active parent participation in IEP team meetings.* Retrieved from <http://www.casenex.com/casenex/cecReadings/encouragingActive.pdf>

In this selection, the author provides processes and tools that can help parents gain confidence as equal partners in their children's education through meaningful participation in IEP team meetings. She notes that the degree to which these meetings represent significant opportunities for parents to exercise their right to participate in decision making largely depends on team culture—the attitudes and beliefs that a particular team values. She looks at the various ways in which these are demonstrated in IEP team

meetings, illustrates the powerful impact that team culture has on family participation in these meetings, and offers ways of strengthening team practices to ensure optimal outcomes.

Hyatt, K. (2004). *IEP team meetings: A guide to participation for parents*. National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). Retrieved from <http://www.nasponline.org/families/iep.pdf>

This document provides tips for parents about how to best prepare for Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings for their children. The author describes the steps in developing the IEP, which is used to determine an appropriate classification and necessary services for a student. This publication is a resource for parents who may be overwhelmed by the formal and complicated nature of the IEP documents developed during these meetings. Familiarity with the structure of the meetings can help parents better advocate for their children during this process.

MPACT—Resources. (n.d.). *MPACT—Parent Training & Information*. Retrieved from <http://ptimpact.org/eSource/eSource.aspx>

The Missouri-based parent training and information center, MPACT, provides training, information, sample letters, and forms to parents of children with disabilities to assist them in the process of advocating for their children according to the rights guaranteed to all students with disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Topics range from understanding the components of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) to addressing issues of inclusion in the classroom setting. Resources from this center are available in English, Spanish, Hmong, and Somali. Although many resources are tailored to Missouri districts, parents from all areas may find the fact sheets useful in obtaining proper special education services and ensuring due process.

New Jersey Department of Education (2009). *Parental rights in special education*. Retrieved from <http://www.state.nj.us/education/specialed/form/prise/prise.pdf>

The New Jersey Department of Education developed this guide in order to communicate all steps of the special education referral, evaluation, and service provision processes to parents. While some of the steps are specific to the state, many of the processes and rights described hold for all states under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This document—also available in Spanish, Arabic, Korean, and Portuguese—provides a useful starting point for states or districts looking for a clear way to help parents understand their rights and the rights of their children.

New York City Department of Education (2009). *A parent's guide to special education services for school-age children: Participating in your child's education*. Retrieved from [http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/34463799-FCA8-43C0-8559-5B95A82B6578/0/Parent\\_Guide\\_English.pdf](http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/34463799-FCA8-43C0-8559-5B95A82B6578/0/Parent_Guide_English.pdf)

This comprehensive guide from the New York City Department of Education outlines the steps of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process for parents of children with disabilities and explains their rights. Additionally, it presents important questions that parents can ask to make sure that the

school is providing the necessary services to their children. Parents who are attempting to navigate the special education system, as well as states or districts looking for ways to effectively communicate with parents about special education services, will benefit from this guide.

*Parent Technical Assistance Center Network*. [Website] (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.parentcenternetwork.org/>

The Parent Technical Assistance Center Network is a national network that provides resources, up-to-date information, and innovative technical assistance to regional and local programs working with parents and families of students with disabilities. The resources provided help parents participate as informed advocates for their children's education. Educators and service providers may also find the training resources valuable guides in effectively engaging families of students with disabilities.

Pierangelo, R., & Giulian, G. (2007). *Understanding, developing, and writing effective IEPs: A step-by-step guide for educators*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

In this overview of significant considerations and legal mandates involved in developing an Individualized Education Program (IEP), the authors underscore both the legal and practical importance of involving parents as equal partners in the IEP process. The guide could be a valuable resource for educators responsible for writing IEPs, as well as school administrators seeking to understand the IEP development process.

Reiman, J., Beck, L., Coppola, T., & Engiles, A. (2010). *Parents' experiences with the IEP process: Considerations for improving practice*. Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (CADRE). Retrieved from <http://www.directionservice.org/cadre/pdf/Parent-IEP%20Process.pdf>

This report summarizes the findings of a series of research studies that investigated parents' experiences at Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. It explores ways of improving the IEP process and helping parents feel like valued participants in decisions regarding their children's education. Participants in the IEP process can receive valuable insight and advice to help them ensure meaningful parental engagement in special education service decisions.

Trainor, A. (2010). Diverse approaches to parent advocacy during special education home-school interactions: Identification and use of cultural and social capital. *Remedial and Special Education, 31*(1), 34-47. doi: 10.1177/0741932508324401

This article examines a study on parent advocacy during special education home-school interactions and describes a variety of roles that parents and families assume when advocating for their children with disabilities. The author describes four major approaches that members of the study adopted during their efforts to seek support for their children: the Intuitive Advocate, the Disability Expert, the Strategist, and the Change Agent. The findings suggest that parents' socio-economic, educational, and linguistic backgrounds factor strongly into their decisions about how to advocate for appropriate special education

services. This resource gives parents of students with special needs strategies that they might find useful in order to engage effectively with schools. Parents in the study often expressed dissatisfaction with the reception that they had received in schools, and their testimonies may help school-based support teams and those responsible for service provision think about appropriate ways of engaging families and encouraging collaboration.

Wright, P. W. D., & Wright, P. D. (2006). *Wrightslaw: From emotions to advocacy: The special education survival guide (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.)*. Harbor House Law Press, Inc.

This book provides parents with a step-by-step guide to navigating the special education referral and service provision process. The authors provide strategic advice on how to best advocate for a child's needs, beginning by providing parents with a thorough overview of the evaluation process and the rights guaranteed under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The authors unpack the components of an effective Individualized Education Program (IEP), including ways in which parents can monitor progress toward their children's individual goals. Parents will find the practical suggestions and accompanying resources valuable as they seek appropriate services for their children.

### Family Roles in Assessment and Intervention

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Cortiella, C. (2008). *Parent advocacy brief: A parents' guide to universal design for learning (UDL)*. National Center for Learning Disabilities. Retrieved from <http://www.ncl.org/images/stories/Publications/AdvocacyBriefs/ParentGuide-UDL/ParentsGuidetoUDL.pdf>

This brief provides parents with an overview of the principles of universal design for learning (UDL) and suggestions for how these principles can effectively accommodate all learners—particularly those with learning disabilities. Used for years as a means of certifying that buildings are accessible to all people, the principles behind universal design are now being translated into a research-based framework for designing curricula within the classroom. The brief includes key information for parents about how these methods may help their children and how these principles can be implemented in schools. The brief also provides educators with recommendations about how to apply these principles without modifying the intent of a lesson, so that all learners can reach their desired objectives.

Garfinkel, L. (2010). Improving family involvement for juvenile offenders with emotional/behavioral disorders and related disabilities. *Behavioral Disorders*, 36(1), 52–60.

This article discusses the importance of family involvement in keeping students in school and out of the juvenile justice system, especially for students with emotional or behavioral disorders (E/BDs). The author provides suggestions to parents of youth with E/BDs who face criminal charges or have already been placed in juvenile facilities to help them become involved in their children's rights. It also notes ways of ensuring that appropriate information related to these children's diagnoses can be shared with all necessary parties so that all relevant accommodations noted on an Individualized Education Program

(IEP) are upheld. The author profiles several successful models used to help maintain family engagement with schools, the courts, and policy in order to support students with E/BD.

Georgia Department of Education (2009). *Impacting education family engagement strategies: Georgia parent mentor partnership*. Retrieved from

[http://public.doe.k12.ga.us/DMGetDocument.aspx/Ga\\_Parent\\_Mentor\\_Partnership\\_Toolkit.pdf?p=6CC6799F8C1371F61644459880B40C298399B0F7A0AD2D95ED002C0D534D2853&Type=D](http://public.doe.k12.ga.us/DMGetDocument.aspx/Ga_Parent_Mentor_Partnership_Toolkit.pdf?p=6CC6799F8C1371F61644459880B40C298399B0F7A0AD2D95ED002C0D534D2853&Type=D)

Created by the Georgia Department of Education, this report outlines the success of the state's Parent Mentor Partnerships Initiative for engaging and supporting parents of students with disabilities. Initiated in 2002, the program has grown significantly and has positively impacted thousands of families by connecting them with mentors who are also parents of children with disabilities. The report's overview, based on the demonstrated success of the program, may be valuable in assisting schools, districts, or states looking to establish support systems for these families.

Klotz, M. B., & Cantor, A. (2007). *Response to intervention (RTI): A primer for parents*. National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). Retrieved from

<http://www.nasponline.org/resources/handouts/revisedPDFs/rtpimer.pdf>

This guide provides parents with an overview of response to intervention (RTI) and illustrates the ways in which it can be used to meet the needs of all students. The authors present background about the approach, outline the ways that it relates to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and suggest possible questions that parents can ask when inquiring about how their schools are using RTI. This guide may be useful for parents whose children are in the early stages of being referred for evaluation for special education services so that they can request the use of RTI before any further recommendations are made.

McCloskey, E. (2010). What do I know? Parental positioning in special education. *International Journal of Special Education*, 25(1), 162-170.

This case study of a parent undergoing the process of obtaining special education services for her child illustrates the procedures involved and the roles that she must assume throughout the pre-referral, evaluation, and service provision stages of securing these services. The case provides useful examples of the challenges that parents face and the opportunities for involvement that exist due to the mandate that parents be involved in the special education process under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). By examining the skills required to navigate the legal and school systems, this article may provide important considerations for families and school special education teams about what is required to develop and maintain strong partnerships to support student learning.



Schwartz, D. (2005). *Including children with special needs: A handbook for educators and parents*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

This handbook is presented in three parts: Part I describes the contemporary landscape of policy and regulations in special education; Part II targets schools and special educators; and Part III addresses the needs of parents and families of students with special needs. A comprehensive resource for those involved in special education, this publication serves as a useful reference that thoroughly addresses a wide range of issues related to inclusive education.

### Families as Partners in Student Learning

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Brandon, R. R., & Brown, M. R. (2009). African American families in the special education process: Increasing their level of involvement. *Intervention in School & Clinic, 45*(2), 85–90.  
doi:10.1177/1053451209340218

This study notes that, despite the fact that African American students are disproportionately identified as being in need of special education services, their families appear to be less involved with the special education needs of their children than many other ethnic groups. The authors argue that, if schools and educators are to improve educational outcomes for African American children placed in special education, research must focus on the characteristics of African American family involvement, their perceptions about special education, and the factors that contribute to their low levels of participation. The authors look at a variety of factors that may explain why many African American parents are reluctant to engage with school administrators and teachers, and they offer practical solutions for schools to encourage family participation. The strategies presented address the academic needs of these students, the concerns of their parents, and the challenges facing schools.

Coots, J. J. (2007). Building bridges with families: Honoring the mandates of IDEIA. *Issues in Teacher Education, 16*(2), 33-40.

This article provides valuable lessons about the potential challenges that educators and schools may face when attempting to fulfill the mandates of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), which is the most recent version of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, amended in 1994. IDEIA provides federal funding to states and local communities for special education opportunities for students with varying degrees of disability. IDEIA requires parental participation in decision making about special education services provided to a child. The author notes that meaningful compliance with these regulations requires a deep understanding of family circumstances on a case-by-case basis. Teachers and teacher educators alike may find these lessons helpful when thinking about how to effectively engage families as partners for service provision.

Dardig, J. (2008). *Involving parents of students with special needs: 25 ready to use strategies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

This resource for teachers provides 25 strategies for increasing the involvement of parents who have children with disabilities. Each chapter includes implementation checklists for the strategies discussed, and the author also includes multiple examples of aligned teacher-created materials. Teachers will find valuable and practical advice about how to establish positive communication and collaboration with families.

Hiatt-Michael, D. (2004). *Promising practices connecting schools to families of children with special needs*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.

This book provides historical context and current research supporting family engagement for students with disabilities. The author communicates the importance of maintaining collaborative communication with families and urges families to reach out to schools. A wide variety of disabilities, both cognitive and physical, are addressed. Above all, the author emphasizes the role of parents as experts when it comes to their children. This resource could be helpful to parents and schools looking for ways to cooperatively provide appropriate services to students throughout their entire time in school.

Mueller, T. G., Singer, G. H. S., & Draper, L. M. (2008). Reducing parental dissatisfaction with special education in two school districts: Implementing conflict prevention and alternative dispute resolution. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 18(3), 191-233. doi: 10.1080/10474410701864339

In a case study of two districts where schools and families are successfully collaborating in the interest of providing appropriate services for students with disabilities, the authors describe the policies and procedures necessary to establish such partnerships. Rather than simply depending upon due process procedures outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which costs families and schools valuable time and resources, the leaders of these districts have recognized the importance of meaningful family participation throughout the special education referral, evaluation, and service provision process. Schools and districts looking to reform their systems of dispute resolution and increase communication with families of children with disabilities will find this article a valuable resource.

Mulholland, R., & Blecker, N. (2008). Parents and special educators: Pre-service teachers' discussion points. *International Journal of Special Education* 23(1), 49-53.

Highlighting the importance of training in family partnership development for pre-service teachers, this article provides insights from teachers who engaged in pre-service teacher education coursework that connected them directly with families of students with disabilities. The article offers a unique model for teacher training that could prove useful to universities preparing new teachers, as well as new educators looking to improve their ability to understand and involve families.

Murray, M., & Curran, E. (2008). Learning together with parents of children with disabilities: Bringing parent-professional partnership education to a new level. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 31*(1), 59-63. doi: 10.1177/088840640803100106

This article reviews a new approach taken by one teacher education program, through which parents of students with disabilities are engaged as part of a teacher education course on parental involvement for students with disabilities. Comparing this course to other, primarily text-based versions of teacher preparation classes, the authors explore the advantages of making families a part of teacher education. The article includes important considerations for universities preparing new educators, as well as districts or schools looking for induction strategies to improve family engagement.

Olivos, E. M., Gallagher, R. J., & Aguilar, J. (2010). Fostering collaboration with culturally and linguistically diverse families of children with moderate to severe disabilities. *Journal of Educational & Psychological Consultation, 20*(1), 28-40. doi: 10.1080/10474410903535372

This article presents recommendations for ways in which educators can engage culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) parents of children with disabilities as partners in their children's education. Because tensions occasionally exist between CLD families and schools, the authors find that schools often involve families to the extent mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), but do not fully engage them as collaborators in the decisions about the appropriate special education services for their children. Educators working to build positive, respectful partnerships with families from a variety of backgrounds will find this article useful.

Staples, K., & Diliberto, J. (2010). Guidelines for successful parent involvement: Working with parents of students with disabilities. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 42*(6), 58-63.

This article describes the added importance of involving parents and families of students with disabilities in the daily activities of the classroom in order to ensure that students receive consistent support in school and at home to aid their learning. The authors provide key considerations and sample best practices to help educators involve families as an ongoing part of their practice. Additionally, the authors stress that maintaining communication throughout the year can play an important role in increasing parental feelings of efficacy when it comes to collaborating on the development of student Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

Van Haren, B., & Fiedler, C. R. (2008). Support and empower families of children with disabilities. *Intervention in School & Clinic, 43*(4), 231-235.

Focusing on family-centered support services, this article offers educators 20 tips as to how they can best engage families to support students with disabilities. The authors describe the importance of both supporting and empowering families to be part of their children's education. This resource could be of use to educators attempting to foster collaboration with families of students receiving special education services.