

INVOLVING PARENTS IN THE IEP/IFSP PROCESS

SHORT TIPS

1. Make sure parents know there is a meeting. Use non-traditional means of communication. Send notes with the bus driver. Have a social worker or teacher visit the child's parent before the meeting and talk to the parents for a few minutes.
2. Provide transportation. Arrange for a bus driver to pick up the parent and take him or her to the meeting. Maybe the parent can just ride the bus in to the meeting when the child comes to school. If so, make sure the parent gets a ride home, too!
3. Provide child care. This may be as simple as having the meeting during the school day when other children are in school. You may need to pay an aide to stay after school and watch small children, or arrange for drop-in day care on site.
4. Provide refreshments. If you are asking a parent to come during the lunch hour or bring her children around dinner time, don't expect them to go without eating.
5. Do NOT immediately assume the parents are not interested if you are not sure that they know about the meeting, have transportation and child care.
6. Sending a note home in a child's backpack is not sufficient to guarantee communication with the home, as anyone who has ever taught school or raised several children can tell you.

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Information from research and practice

Programs serving students with disabilities are mandated to have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for children in school and an Individual Family Service Plan for early childhood. Parental participation in these plans is mandatory. In reality, most schools in Native American communities experience a very low level of involvement of parents in the IEP/IFSP process. Parents often do not attend the meetings, and when they do, participation is often limited to signing a plan prepared by the school personnel.

Some exceptional programs serving reservation communities have active participation of 100% of the families. How do they do it?

You sent a note home to Rachel Longie's mother three weeks ago notifying her of her daughter's Individual Education Plan meeting. She does not have a telephone listed to follow-up, but two days before the meeting you send a reminder home in her daughter's backpack, asking her to please notify you if this time is inconvenient. You do not hear from her, so you plan for the meeting. At 4:00, you, a psychologist and a speech pathologist are waiting in the classroom. Ms. Longie does not show up, doesn't call. You hold the meeting without her and make a note that the parent could not be reached. The next day, you are complaining about the lack of interest shown by parents.

Let's hear Ms. Longie's comments on this to her neighbor in Tokio.

“So, I got this paper from the school yesterday saying they wanted me to go to a meeting at 4:00 tomorrow. My other three kids get off the bus at 3:30. Who do they think is going to watch them while I am at this meeting, the dog? And then there is something in it like ‘We sent you a note three weeks ago’. You would think somebody with all that education would be smart enough not to count on a child like Rachel to bring a note home. It’s not like Rachel can talk. Those teachers just don’t care about these kids at all. They just come in here on the reservation, collect their paychecks and get out of here as soon as they can.”

From the teacher’s perspective, she has done everything within reason. She tried to contact the parent by phone but found she had no telephone. She sent two notes home. She arranged a meeting at the school. What more could she have done?

Programs with exceptional participation rates recognize the context in which they work. Many families do not have a home telephone. Reservations do not, as a rule, have public transportation, and many families do not own a reliable vehicle. Child care is limited and most families have more than one child.

COMMUNICATION: Before a parent can attend a meeting, she must know it is being held. For her to want to attend, she must know why her participation is important.

One study of effective parent communication in a minority community found that the most common method of communication with parents of children with severe disabilities was the **bus driver**! Due to the nature of their disabilities, the children were never just dropped off in front of the house. A parent, aide or driver had to assist the child into the house. Similarly, someone from the classroom was needed to assist the child on to the bus. During these twice daily interactions, the teacher would provide information to the busdriver, who would pass it on to the parents. Some schools went so far as to formalize this with a clipboard for the driver. Each student would have a sheet on the clipboard that the busdriver would hand to the parent as he dropped off each child. Teachers could also request that the driver specifically ask a parent for information and write down the response, returning the paper to the teacher in the morning.

While several schools with low parental participation rates send a social worker to the home after the IEP meeting to collect the signature, schools with high participation rates send the social worker in advance. The social worker explains the purpose of the meeting and asks the parent what she would like to have discussed in the meeting.

Schools with high participation rates do not accept anything less. They may have a procedure that looks like this:

1. Call home and speak with parent.
2. If parent does not have a phone, call on the message phone (i.e., a number, usually of a friend or family member, where messages can be left) and leave a message.
3. Send a note home with the child.
4. Call again or send another note.

5. Speak with another member of the same family and ask that the message be passed along that you would like to speak with the parent.
6. Ask the bus driver to deliver a message to the parent.
7. The school social worker, teacher or aide drives out to the home.
8. If no one is home, the staff member leaves a note asking to be contacted and leaves a phone number as well as times he or she will be at the school.
9. If there is no response, a staff member goes to the home again.

Regardless of the specific procedure, the programs we reviewed expected to contact the families multiple times to involve them in the programs.

Respect the family's time and constraints.

Programs with high rates of family involvement assumed that parents wanted to be involved with their children and were prevented from doing so by lack of knowledge or obstacles outside of their control. All of these programs did two things:

1. PROVIDED TRANSPORTATION, and
2. PROVIDED CHILD CARE

Many of them also provided meals when they scheduled meetings over lunch hour or during dinner.

Build Relationships

Programs with high parental involvement build relationships in two ways. First, they have one or more staff members who have demonstrated personal interest in the family. This may be through conversations with a Parent Educator during home visits for developmental activities for the child or parent education. It is often through going to the home to invite the parent to the IEP meeting, taking her to lunch or stopping for two minutes in the grocery store to ask the mother's brother how the family is doing and to tell them 'hello'. Frequently, what non-Indian staff consider professional relationships many Native Americans may consider unfriendly and uncaring. From the mother's perspective, a teacher who asks her to lunch to discuss her child is demonstrating a personal interest and caring. The second way in which relationships are built is through showing the family respect in action as well as in name. A good example of genuine respect for family involvement occurs when a meeting between parent and teacher is held before the IEP meeting. The purpose of this meeting is to be sure that the parent has an opportunity to discuss with the teacher her goals and concerns for her child. The parent and teacher can then discuss how they are going to present the parent's input during the IEP meeting.