

# Reaffirming Key Early Childhood Practices During a Pandemic

updated September 23, 2020

Debbie Cate, Penny Dell, Ruth Littlefield, Benjamin Riepe and Kathy Whaley

This article appears online at: <https://ectacenter.org/topics/disaster/coronavirus-key.asp>

The challenges of providing services to young children with disabilities during the **COVID-19** pandemic has pushed us all to work in new ways to ensure improved outcomes for children. These new challenges reinforce what we already know about the principles and **evidence-based practices** that are foundational to the field of early childhood.

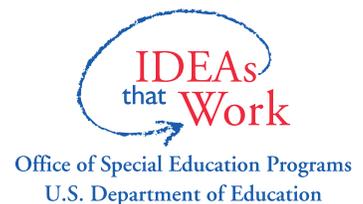
The pandemic has had significant impact on all aspects of our society. Teachers and professionals are using **Remote Service Delivery and Distance Learning** to provide services, meet student's goals, evaluate newly referred children, and effectively communicate with families and other team members. Young children have had to learn from home, away from their peers. Family members are taking on simultaneous roles of parent and teacher, and many are doing this in addition to working.

ECTA Center hosted a series of discussions between Spring-Summer 2020 with teachers, providers, administrators, and families from across the country and gathered supporting research. In listening to their stories, it became apparent that these times are *not* about new practices. Rather, they are about expanding strategies to emphasize many practices that have already proven to be effective.

These key practices are presented here in four broad areas: **Partnering with Families, Family-Centered Service Provision, Effective Teaming and Collaboration**, and **Maximizing the Use of Technology**. Each area also includes a set of questions for group discussion or self-reflection.

---

The ECTA Center is a program of the FPG Child Development Institute of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, funded through cooperative agreement number H326P170001 from the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education. Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily represent the Department of Education's position or policy. Project Officer: Julia Martin Eile



# Partnering with Families

---

## **Relationships are paramount.**

- Listen to families share the dreams they have for their children.
- Visit the family's home routines and activities to gain insight into what is most important to the family in terms of a child's development and skills (Turnbull et al., 2007).
- Provide care and support.
- Build relationships through the creative use of technology.

## **Intentional ongoing connections are possible and impactful.**

- Building communication leads to better partnerships.
- Foster a spirit of connection by routinely checking in with families (Summers et al., 2007).
- Guide conversations carefully and respectfully, seek family input, and share concerns and goals with all team members.

## **Families are experts about their child, practitioners bring expertise in child development.**

- Approach families as their child's first teacher, and a partner in planning and implementing strategies.
- Acknowledge that families know their child best, and collaborate optimistically with them as experts of their child (McWilliam, 2010).
- Children learn in natural settings through participation-based services (Campbell & Sawyer, 2007).

## **Partnering with the entire family is beneficial.**

- Partner with all members of the family. They can provide a wealth of context, information, and support.
- Providing coaching and support to all members of the family increases the success of interventions.
- When all family members are working on the same goals in the same ways, opportunities for the child to master skills are increased.

## **Children progress when families embed strategies into home routines.**

- Plan strategies for activities to be embedded in the home. This shifts the functionality of what children are learning to their everyday activities and routines.
- Embedded instruction and intervention fosters the child's inclusion in family and community activities and routines and provides more authentic opportunities for mastering skill (Campbell & Sawyer, 2007; McWilliam, 2010).

### Questions on Partnering with Families

1. What have you learned as you adapted how you partnered with families during COVID-19?
2. What key policies and practices for partnering with families do you believe are working well and should be maintained in future work practices?
3. What do you need to do to make that happen?
4. What advice or key take-aways do you have for others on partnering with families?

See also: [Family Engagement](#), [Practice Improvement Tools: Family](#)

## Family-Centered Service Provision

**Successful service provision relies upon agreed upon principles, and the use of evidenced-based practices.**

- Apply [Key Principles Underlying the IFSP and IEP processes](#), [DEC Recommended Practices](#), and [National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations \(NCPMI\)](#) tools in classrooms and with families.
- Maintain the requirement for the least restrictive environment (LRE) and include children in family and community.

**Families benefit from family-centered practices.**

- Embed activities to address functional needs the family has identified as priorities into family routines (McWilliam, 2010).

**Social connections can be made, and services delivered effectively using remote technology.**

- Create new opportunities for children to connect with peers.

**Coaching can occur across many levels.**

- Teachers, practitioners, families, and coaches, all benefit from coaching.
- Consider reducing direct service provision and increasing coaching.

**By providing in-home services remotely, families can build confidence and skills to reinforce key learning opportunities for their child throughout daily routines.**

- Providing in-home services is still optimal, especially for children under 3.

### Questions on Family-Centered Service Provision

1. What have you learned as you had to adapt how services were provided during COVID-19?
2. What key policies and practices for family-centered service provision do you believe are working well and should be maintained in future work practices?
3. What do you need to do to make that happen?
4. What advice or key take-aways do you have for others on family-centered service provision?

See also: [Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion](#), [Practice Improvement Tools: Interaction](#), [Practice Improvement Tools: Instruction](#)

# Effective Teaming and Collaboration

---

## **Schedule regular planning time among team members.**

- Include all team members: service providers, early childhood educators and family members.
- If meeting in person is not possible, find a way to meet remotely.

## **Increased communication among team members results in working more efficiently, promotes participation resulting in deepened understanding of each other's perspectives/expertise.**

- Use time effectively. For example, instead of three fifteen-minute meetings in different locations requiring travel, a single online meeting can be held in one hour.
- Promote the active participation of caregivers in home visits, by visiting the caregivers, not just the child (Campbell & Sawyer, 2007; McWilliam 2010).
- Increase teaming and coaching opportunities to ensure inclusive practices are rooted in evidence-based practices.

### **Questions on Effective Teaming and Collaboration**

1. What have you learned as you had to change how you teamed and collaborated with others during COVID-19?
2. What key policies and practices on effective teaming and collaboration do you believe are working well and should be maintained in future work practices?
3. What do you need to do to make that happen?
4. What advice or key take-aways do you have for others on effective teaming and collaboration?

See also: [\*Indicators of High-Quality Inclusion, Practice Improvement Tools: Teaming and Collaboration\*](#)

# Maximizing the Use of Technology

---

## Use a range of technology options to communicate effectively.

- Employ everything from telephone calls, texting and email to videoconferencing platforms (Hurwitz et al., 2015; Galinsky et al., 2017).
- Check in frequently with families. Use a variety of synchronous and asynchronous methods and establish which ones work best for the family.
- Ensure family [privacy](#) is respected and that all technology used meets legal requirements.

## Technology promotes communication and collaboration in new ways.

- Technology can enable new methods and opportunities for developing regular, close contact with families.
- Technology can help promote the practice of embedding children's goals into family routines, and can also encourage reciprocal collaboration and coaching.

## Authentic evaluation, observation and progress monitoring can be accomplished remotely.

- While not intended to be used to replace services, [remote service delivery and distance learning](#) can be used to meet family needs and can be used as a valuable tool to deliver family-centered practices (Baharav & Reiser, 2010; Behl et al., 2017).
- Using videoconferencing to conduct home visits can provide services with reported savings in travel time and mileage costs (Kelso et al., 2009).
- Consider new ways to use technology to promote authentic evaluation, observation and progress monitoring.

### Questions on Maximizing the Use of Technology

1. What have you learned about the benefits of using technology during COVID-19?
2. What key policies and practices for using technology do you believe are working well and should be maintained in future work practices?
3. What do you need to do to make that happen?
4. What advice or key take-aways do you have for others on maximizing the use of technology?

See also: [Remote Service Delivery and Distance Learning](#), [Provider and Educator Use of Technology](#), [Technology and Privacy](#), [Practice Improvement Tools: Assessment](#)

## References

---

- Baharav, E., & Reiser, C. (2010). Using telepractice in parent training in early autism. *Telemedicine and e-Health*, 16(6), 727-731.
- Behl, D. D., Blaiser, K., Cook, G., Barrett, T., Callow-Heusser, C., Brooks, B. M., ... & White, K. R. (2017). A multisite study evaluating the benefits of early intervention via telepractice. *Infants & Young Children*, 30(2), 147-161.
- Campbell, P. H., & Sawyer, L. B. (2007). Supporting learning opportunities in natural settings through participation based services. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 29, 287–305.  
doi:10.1177/105381510702900402
- Division for Early Childhood. (2014). DEC recommended practices in early intervention/early childhood special education 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.dec-spced.org/recommendedpractices>
- Dunst, C. J., Trivette, C. M., & Hamby, D. W. (2007). Meta-analysis of family-centered helpgiving practices research. *Mental retardation and developmental disabilities research reviews*, 13(4), 370-378.
- Dunst, C. J., & Trivette, C. M. (2009). Meta-analytic structural equation modeling of the influences of family-centered care on parent and child psychological health. *International journal of pediatrics*, 2009.
- Galinsky, E., Bezos, J., McClelland, M., Carlson, S. M., & Zelazo, P. D. (2017). Civic science for public use: Mind in the making and vroom. *Child Development*, 88(5), 1409-1418.
- Hurwitz, L. B., Lauricella, A. R., Hanson, A., Raden, A., & Wartella, E. (2015). Supporting Head Start parents: Impact of a text message intervention on parent–child activity engagement. *Early Child Development and Care*, 185(9), 1373-1389. doi:10.1080/03004430.2014.996217
- Kelso, G. L., Fiechtl, B. J., Olsen, S. T., & Rule, S. (2009). The feasibility of virtual home visits to provide early intervention: A pilot study. *Infants & Young Children*, 22(4), 332-340.
- McWilliam, R. A. (2010). *Routines-based early intervention: Supporting young children with special needs and their families*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.
- NECTAC Workgroup on Principles and Practices for the IEP Process, May 2012. Key Principles Underlying the IEP Process: Supporting Family Participation, Inclusive Practices and Positive Outcomes for Preschool Children with Disabilities. Retrieved from [https://ectacenter.org/~pdfs/knowledgepath/ifspoutcomes-iepgoals/Key\\_Principles\\_IEP\\_Process.pdf](https://ectacenter.org/~pdfs/knowledgepath/ifspoutcomes-iepgoals/Key_Principles_IEP_Process.pdf)
- Summers, J. A., Marquis, J., Mannan, H., Turnbull, A. P., Fleming, K., Poston, D. J., ... & Kupzyk, K. (2007). Relationship of perceived adequacy of services, family–professional partnerships, and family quality of life in early childhood service programmes. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 54(3), 319-338.