

Collaborating with Families: Six Practices for Trust and Impact

A Practical Guide for Building Strong, Productive Relationships with Families

Why Collaboration Matters

Collaboration with families is a cornerstone of effective special education. Research consistently shows that when schools and families work as true partners, students experience stronger academic growth, improved social-emotional skills, and higher postsecondary success. This is especially critical in special education, where trust, transparency, and shared decision-making directly influence IEP quality and implementation fidelity.

True collaboration goes beyond compliance. It is about building authentic, reciprocal partnerships. Families bring expertise about their child's strengths, needs, and lived experiences, while educators contribute instructional knowledge, intervention strategies, and systems-level supports. When these perspectives are combined, teams can design more meaningful IEPs, increase consistency between home and school, and foster a sense of shared ownership for student success.

This partnership approach is also backed by decades of research on family engagement. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) emphasizes family involvement as a right and as a driver of equitable outcomes.

Frameworks like Epstein's Six Types of Parental Involvement and Dual Capacity-Building stress that strong home-school connections enhance both student and system performance.

In practice, this means...

- Shifting "telling" to "listening"
- Shifting from "informing" to "collaborating"
- Shifting from "school-centered" to "student- and family-centered."

When educators intentionally invest in family partnerships, they are not only building trust, they are also laying the foundation for student independence, confidence, and lifelong success.

The 6 Core Practices for Building Trust & Partnership with Families

Practice	Why It Works	How to Implement Tomorrow
Proactive Communication	Builds trust before challenges arise and keeps families informed.	Send a positive update or progress note before the next meeting.
Active Listening	Ensures families feel heard and valued, reducing defensiveness.	Use reflective statements during meetings (e.g., 'What I hear you saying is...').
Transparency About Data	Clarifies decisions and reduces misunderstandings.	Share progress data in clear, jargon-free terms with visuals where possible.
Shared Goal Setting	Aligns school and home priorities, increasing buy-in.	Invite families to suggest goal ideas before drafting the IEP.
Consistent Follow-Up	Shows accountability and keeps momentum.	Send a short follow-up email summarizing next steps within 48 hours of meetings.
Inclusive Meeting Practices	Encourages full participation from all members of the IEP team.	Explain acronyms, pause for questions, and check for understanding regularly.

Quick Conversation Starters for Sensitive Topics:

<i>Sample Phrases</i>
• “I’d like to hear more about how things are going at home from your perspective.”
• “I noticed [<i>specific observation</i>]. Can you share what you’ve seen in similar situations?”
• “What strategies have worked well for your child in the past that we might try here?”
• “I understand this is frustrating. Let’s look at the data together and see what it tells us.”
• “We might have different perspectives, but our goal is the same: your child’s success.”

Collaboration Planning Checklist

Before Interaction:

- Review student data and relevant history.
- Identify 1–2 strengths to highlight early in the conversation.
- Prepare clear, jargon-free explanations for any technical terms.

During Interaction:

- Begin with a warm greeting and positive observation.
- Actively listen and avoid interrupting.
- Check for understanding before moving to the next point.

After Interaction:

- Send a summary email within 24 hours.
- Note any follow-up tasks and deadlines in your calendar.
- Check in periodically, not just before meetings.

Navigating Disagreements or Conflict

- Stay student-focused: return to data and the agreed goal of supporting the child.
- Acknowledge emotions without escalating: 'I can see this is important to you.'
- Offer multiple options when possible to create a sense of choice.
- If tensions rise, suggest a short break & reconvene with a clear plan to continue.

Common Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them

- Only contacting families when there is a problem: try to schedule regular positive outreach.
- Using excessive and/or academic jargon: instead, explain terms in everyday language.
- Failing to follow up after meetings: always close the loop with a summary.
- Making assumptions about family priorities: ask directly instead.

Action Starter: Try Tomorrow

- Reach out to one family with a positive update unrelated to a meeting or concern.
- Review your upcoming IEP meetings and add a 'family input' section to the agenda.
- Practice one conversation starter from this worksheet in your next parent interaction.