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# Adressing the Barriers to Family-School Collaboration: A Brief Review of the Literature and Recommendations for Practice

*Abstract*

*A child's education, both academic and social, is significantly improved through effective collaborations between families and schools. For young children with disabilities, partnerships between families and schools are especially critical. Increased family involvement in schools can lead to more positive long-term outcomes for students. Despite the benefits of family-school collaboration, the literature has identified a variety of beliefs and behaviors that act as barriers preventing families from being actively involved in the special education process. The barriers can be divided into four major categories: (a) parental knowledge and attitudes, (b) disparity between families and schools, (c) current family situations, and (d) logistical issues. This article provides a brief overview of the barriers, as well as solutions for reducing these challenges.*

*Keywords: Barriers, family-school collaboration, Early Childhood Special Education.*

## Introduction

A child's education, both academic and social, is significantly improved through effective collaborations between families and schools. For young children with disabilities, partnerships between families and schools are especially critical. Increased family involvement in schools can lead to more positive long-term outcomes for students. Parental involvement in schools has short-term and long-term benefits for children, families, schools, and communities. These benefits include (a) increases in parent-student long-term education planning (Epstein, 2008), (b) higher student achievement (Cooper, Crosnoe, Suizzo, & Pituch, 2010; Epstein, 2008), (c) decreased behavioral challenges (Fox, Dunlap, & Cushing, 2002), (c) increased student attendance (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004), and (d) improvements in school programs and school climate.

When schools and families interact and communicate frequently, students are more likely to receive common messages emphasizing the importance of school, hard work, creative thinking, and helping each other (Epstein, 1995).

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**Table 1.**
*Barriers Preventing Effective Collaboration between Schools and Families*

| Barrier | References |
|---|---|
| Concerns about children being segregated from peers | Boyd & Correa, 2005; Kirmani, 2007 |
| Cultural and class differences | Campbell-Whatley & Gardner, 2002; Koch, 2007; Soutullo, Smith-Bonahue, Sanders-Smith, & Navia, 2016 |
| Lack of understanding regarding special education process | Applequist, 2009; Boyd & Correa, 2005 |
| Parents feel disconnected from decision making process regarding interventions | Fox, Dunlap, & Cushing, 2002 |
| Parental denial of disability | Cartledge, Tam, Loe, Miranda, Lambert, Key et al., 2002 |
| Previous negative experiences with school system | Boyd & Correa, 2005; Cartledge et al., 2002; Obiakor, Algozzine, Thurlow, Gwalla-Ogisi, Enwefa, Enwefa et al., 2002 |
| Work schedules and other time restraints | Campbell-Whatley & Gardner, 2002; Hossain & Anziano, 2008; Yamauchi, Lau-Smith, & Luning, 2008 |
| Transportation | Yamauchi, Lau-Smith, & Luning, 2008 |
| Families in turmoil, including homelessness, unemployment spousal abuse, substance abuse | Dryfoos, 2003; Sommerville & McDonald, 2002 |
| Poor communication from the school | Soutullo, Smith-Bonahue, Sanders-Smith, & Navia, 2016 |
| Too much negative communication from the school | Epstein, 2008 |
| Teachers lack collaboration skills | Epstein, 2005; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Flanigan, 2007 |

When parents feel as though they are part of the school community, their expectations of their child also increase (Davies, 1996). Finally, by involving the family in planning and collaboration, the families' access to vital information relating to successful treatment outcomes and individual support systems increases (Arllen, Cheney, & Warger, 1997). Starting these partnerships early in a young child's education is crucial to their educational success in later years. Despite the benefits of collaboration between schools and families, this practice does not come without challenges. It is imperative that early childhood special educators are aware of these barriers to partnerships so that they can effectively address them using evidence-based practices.

In preparing this manuscript, the authors examined the literature from the EbscoHost database, including years 2000 to 2017, and used the search terms "family-school collaboration," "partnerships and schools," and "families and schools." Articles from the search were chosen for inclusion in this literature review based on their relevance to the topic and inclusion of specific barriers that prevent effective collaboration between families and schools. The themes presented in this article were created by the authors.

A deductive coding approach was used to organize the literature data, with initial themes chosen by the authors before beginning the review of literature and changes to the categories being made throughout the process. Some of these categories were directly noted in the literature and others were named by the authors. This article provides early childhood special educators with an overview of the existing literature regarding the barriers to effective collaboration with families, as well as practical recommendations for addressing those barriers in their classrooms.

**Barriers cited in the literature**

While it is clear that family-school collaboration has numerous benefits for all stakeholders, the literature has identified a variety of beliefs and behaviors that act as barriers preventing families from being actively involved in the special education process. The barriers, found in Table 1 below, can be divided into four major categories: (a) parental knowledge and attitudes, (b) disparity between families and schools, (c) current family situations, and (d) logistical issues. Within each of these categories are specific barriers that prevent effective teaming between schools and families.

**Parental Knowledge and Attitudes**

Parental knowledge and attitudes barriers include: (a) concerns about segregation, (b) parental denial of the disability, (c), a lack of understanding regarding the special education process, and (d) a previous negative experiences with the school system. Parents believe that an education with peers is a basic civil right and may feel that their children are the victims of discrimination when they are provided separate special education services. Boyd and Correa (2005) report that African American parents are often uncomfortable with special education, because they believe that it leads to both academic and physical segregation for their children that is reminiscent of the school system before the Civil Rights movement. In addition, the literature reports that parents want their children to feel like they belong in their school; separate classrooms and programs prevent a sense of belonging (Kirmani, 2007).

Secondly, unsuccessful home-school collaboration may result from parents' denial about their children's disabilities. Parents may experience feelings of mourning, grief, or depression that will impede their involvement in the school system (Cartledge et al., 2002).

Additionally, parents may not understand the school system or the special education process (Applequist, 2009; Boyd & Correa, 2005). Many parents report not knowing that early intervention services existed until their children were diagnosed with a delay (Applequist, 2009). Parents of children in smaller, rural communities tend to have less understanding of the education system and fewer resources that can aid in their understanding (Boyd & Correa, 2005).

In addition, many parents of special education students have had prior negative experiences with schools, either as students or as parents (Boyd & Correa, 2005; Cartledge et al., 2002; Obiakor, Algozzine, Thurlow, Gwalla-Ogisi, Enwefa, Enwefa et al., 2002). Some parents of special education students were in special education themselves as children. They may have had bad experiences with special education teachers or other professionals in the field and do not want their children to have similar experiences. If parents correlate school with negative experiences, they may not be receptive to opportunities for collaboration with special education professionals (Obiakor et al., 2002).

Fox and colleagues (2002) note that, as children transition from early intervention programs into the public school setting, parents often feel disconnected from the decision making process regarding interventions for meeting their children's unique needs. Because early intervention services are focused on the entire family, the change to services that focus on the needs of the child as a student can be a difficult transition for parents.

**Disparity**

The second category of barriers to home-school collaboration is centered around the disparity between families and schools. This category includes two major barriers: (a) educational and economic differences and (b) differing languages. According to Campbell-Whatley and Gardner (2002), educators tend to view families and education through their own personal experiences. However, the students that they teach often come from families that have less education and fewer financial resources than the teachers. When teachers

assume that families' experiences are similar to their own, they make it difficult to connect and have a hard time understanding students and their families. Additionally, parents who have less education than school personnel may feel uncomfortable in the school and choose to avoid interaction with teachers (Campbell-Whatley & Gardner, 2002; Koch, 2007).

**Current Family Situation**

The next category of barriers to effective collaboration is family life situations. Some families are in turmoil and are unable to be actively involved with the school because they are more focused on the needs of their family. Families may be facing unemployment, substance abuse, spousal abuse, or homelessness (Dryfoos, 2003; Sommerville & McDonald, 2002).

**Logistical Issues**

The final category to effective collaboration between schools and families is logistical issues that make it difficult for parents to get to the school or attend meetings and events. The first barrier is parental work schedules and other time issues (Campbell-Whatley & Gardner, 2002; Hossain & Anziano, 2008; Yamauchi, Lau-Smith, & Luning, 2008). When parents' work schedules interfere with their abilities to be present in their children's school, teachers often assume that the parents do not care about their children; however, this sentiment is not true (Campbell-Whatley & Gardner, 2002). Secondly, families may not have adequate transportation to get to the school (Yamauchi, Lau-Smith, & Luning, 2008). These logistical barriers serve to alienate families from the school, thus preventing involvement and collaboration.

*Suggestions for Improving Collaborative Relationships*

While the barriers mentioned earlier may seem discouraging, we offer a variety of evidence-based practices for addressing these barriers and improving the collaborative relationships between schools and the families of preschoolers with disabilities. These strategies include (a) person-centered planning, (b) intentional and positive communication, (c) home visits, and (d) wraparound services.

**Person-Centered Planning**

Our first recommendation for overcoming the barriers to family-school collaboration is the use of person-centered planning (Fox et al., 2002), which is a system of coordinated sharing of information regarding the child that allows all stakeholders to understand his/her individual needs (Wells & Sheehey, 2012) and is designed lead intervention teams in utilizing unique and individualized strategies for meeting the unique needs of children and families (Kincaid, Knab, & Clark, 2005). While person-centered planning is currently the norm for students in the process of transition to adulthood, we recommend its usage for all students with disabilities. The process of person-centered planning leads to a shared vision for the child's future and the services needed to reach those goals. As a team, the stakeholders first discuss the history of the child, his/her strengths and interests, and finally his/her needs. Based on that discussion, both short-term and long-term goals for the child are discussed and an action plan is created to help achieve those goals (Wells & Sheehey, 2012).

**Intentional and Positive Communication**

A second practice that helps to overcome the barriers to effective partnerships is intentional and positive communication. Fontil and Petrakos (2015) report that immigrant families appreciate communication that demonstrates the teacher genuinely cares about the student and family. Examples of this include smiling while talking to parents and asking about the needs of the family in addition to the child's needs. The quality of communication can also be improved when schools outline the expectations for communication with parents and provide them ideas regarding how the communication may occur (Fishman & Nickerson, 2014). When the communication from schools specifically invites parents to participate in school events and in their children's education, parents are more likely to do so (Fishman & Nickerson, 2014).

Schools and families should also have regularly planned times to communicate; this may include meetings scheduled on a regular basis (Fontil & Petrakos, 2015).

**Home Visits**

Third, collaborateon between schools and homes can be enhanced through the utilization of home visits, which involve professionals visiting the homes of children with disabilities and providing services and supports in the natural setting (Rosenberg, Robinson, & Fryer, 2002; Stanley, 2011). Home visits have been shown to increase parenting abilities (Rosenberg et al., 2002; Stanley, 2011), as well as reduce stress for parents of children with disabilities (Rosenberg et al., 2002).

**Wraparound Services**

Finally, schools and community agencies should work together to provide services for children and families. A vital service within the Individual Family Service Plan is the coordinated effort between school and community agencies. However, once a child transitions into public school requiring an Individualized Education Plan, coordinated efforts are no longer required at the same level and are often difficult to build and maintain.

In order to increase students' chances of success, community-based programs should support schools while assisting families. This support should include programs with essential elements like teamwork, goal-oriented plans, focus on the needs of the participants, and on-going evaluation. It should also include programs that are connected to the schools because ultimately, students must succeed in school to advance into adult life. Educators, families, and community leaders have an obligation to work together to provide support to students to help them achieve this goal. It is essential that community-based programs focus on being goal-oriented. Exchanges with community organizations should evidence collaboration with the community (Epstein & Hollifield, 1996; Ziegler, 2001).

**Conclusion**

Young children develop in three different contexts simultaneously and continuously: (a) home, (b) school, and (c) community (Epstein, 2001). These contexts are interconnected and students travel across these contexts for many years to learn who they are and where they are going. With this in mind, it is important to understand that families care about their children's success, but despite this, most parents will not remain involved in their children's education without more and better information. In addition, it is important to note that children learn more than academics in all three contexts; they are influenced either positively or negatively by their peers, families, and the organization of activities in their schools and classrooms.

Given the obvious need for collaboration, education professionals must ensure that building successful partnerships becomes a priority in their schools. The burden to provide all services to all children with disabilities falling solely on the school is not feasible nor necessary when partnerships with other organizations and agencies could provide equal or better services to these children. School officials must find time to step outside their school buildings and look into their communities to fully realize the potential of all their students, including those with disabilities.

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