

Early Intervention Consultants in the Classroom

Simple Steps for Building Strong Collaboration

Patricia W. Wesley

We have come a long way in understanding how to provide inclusive early care and education. With this understanding has come new terminology and new ways of working with adults and children alike. When early childhood programs enroll children with special needs, the classroom teacher often teams up with other professionals serving the child and family. New professional relationships can start right in the classroom when the early childhood teacher and early intervention specialists combine experience and expertise to create meaningful learning opportunities for the child with disabilities.

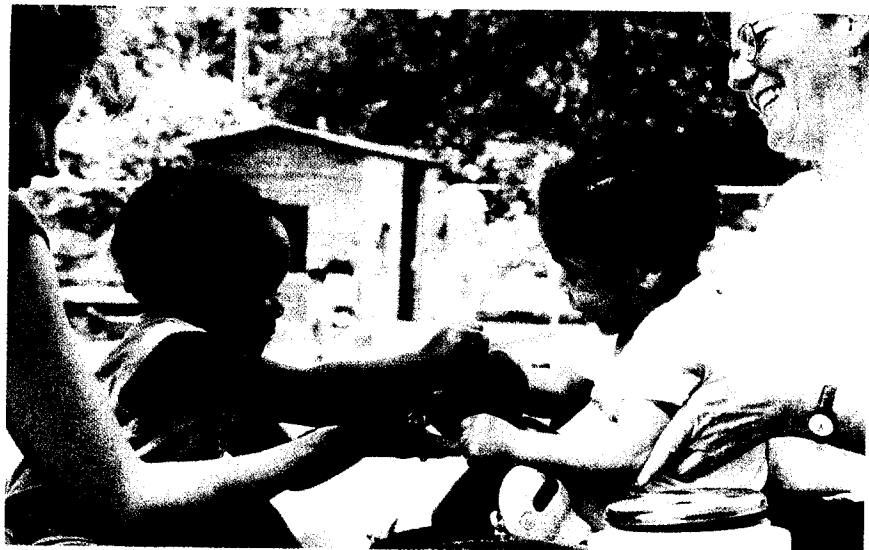
Collaboration has been a hot topic in the early intervention and education fields for many years, yet our dialogue sometimes lacks concrete steps for working productively with other adults. Recent research examining the comfort of early childhood professionals and early intervention consultants serving children with disabilities in inclusive classrooms reveals that the groups did not share a common understanding of effective strategies for working together

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(Wesley, Buysse, & Keyes 2000; Wesley, Buysse, & Skinner 2001). Consultants often operated under the assumption that the early childhood teachers automatically understood the consultant role and approach. The process of collaboration sometimes proceeded without either group discussing their experiences with inclusion or the actual logistics of how they could make the most of their time together.

This article provides a brief look at the evolution of new professional rôles and relationships in early childhood inclusion. Key questions for the early childhood professional are designed to stimulate discussion and effective practice throughout the consultation process, from the initial stage of getting acquainted through the implementation of strategies to meet the individual needs of children.



Early Intervention Consultants

Early intervention specialist: An early childhood teacher or consultant who specializes in helping children with special needs learn and develop. The specialist is often available to visit the child in the early childhood setting, where she gives teachers and other early care and education providers helpful tips.

Speech-language pathologist: A person who specializes in communication disorders concerning voice articulation (pronunciation), oral motor skills, language (vocabulary), and hearing. *Oral motor skills* refers to the use of the muscles of the mouth and face. A speech and language pathologist helps a child use language and offers suggestions for the child's teacher and family.

Physical therapist (PT): A person who specializes in large motor function related to coordination, balance, muscle strength, endurance, range of motion, and mobility. A physical therapist helps a child move the large muscles of the body, for example, those used to walk. The PT also will have many good ideas for others who work with the child throughout the day.

Occupational therapist (OT): A person who specializes in fine motor (small muscle) skills, oral motor skills, and activities of daily living. An OT might help a child learn to use a spoon, get dressed, or manipulate a toy. OTs can offer many suggestions for helping a child become fully involved in classroom activities.

How inclusion has evolved

Back when *mainstreaming* (sometimes called *integration*) was the term of choice, children with special needs "earned" their way into regular classrooms by demonstrating social and academic skills that showed they were ready for the typical environments and routines enjoyed by children without disabilities (Salisbury 1991). In most cases the children participated in the mainstream on a part-time basis, returning to separate classes to work with special educators on their individualized goals. Although special and regular educators may have planned together for children with special needs, opportunities for the professionals to work side by side usually were limited.

The term *inclusion* is based on the philosophy that no child should have to earn the right to belong. The assumption is that the diverse needs of all children can be accommodated within the regular classroom (Salisbury 1991). Policies supporting the inclusion of young children with special needs in early childhood programs have evolved in many ways. Building on federal legislation of 1975 that established the right to a free appropri-

ate public education for all children with disabilities, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (PL 101-476) and its 1997 amendments (PL 102-119 and PL 105-17) give young children with disabilities the right to receive early intervention services in the most natural or least restrictive environment—in other words, in settings typical for the child's peers with no disabilities. For many children with special needs, this means the early childhood classroom provides special services to ensure their success in that setting.

New roles

Professionals and families agree that early childhood inclusion means more than simply enrolling a child with special needs in a classroom with typical children; the classroom must provide the necessary supports for that child to progress developmentally and to be included in ongoing activities enjoyed by the other children.

Identification and implementation of such supports require collaboration among professionals serving the child with disabilities and the child's family. Consultation is one approach advocated to achieve collaboration between general early childhood personnel and disability specialists (File & Kontos 1992; Hanson & Widerstrom 1993; Palsha & Wesley 1998; Buysse & Wesley 2001).

Specialists who provide physical, speech, and occupational therapy and other early intervention providers often visit children with special needs in their early childhood programs. Rather than pulling a child out for therapies and instruction, specialists work with him right in the classroom, often including children without disabilities in the activities. These specialists also consult with the child's teacher and family about how best to help him learn and develop.

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Consultation is on the rise, yet research shows that early intervention specialists and early childhood professionals with whom they work experience uneasiness in their roles (Buisse et al. 1996; Wesley, Buisse, & Keyes 2000; Wesley, Buisse, & Skinner 2001).

Because consultation can be an unfamiliar process to classroom teachers, it may be helpful to consider the following tips for establishing a strong, positive, collaborative relationship with the consultant from the start. You may want to use these lists as talking points to guide your conversations with early intervention consultants.



What should I ask the consultant?

When a professional comes to your classroom to work with a child who has special needs, ask that person to explain her job to you. Finding out more about the early intervention consultant's job and experiences is a great way to kick off a trusting relationship.

- What is her job title?
- With what agency does she work?
- What does she consider her areas of expertise?
- What does she like most about her job?
- Has she known and worked with the child before (for example, in the home)?
- What does she do with the child?
- What are the consultant's goals for visiting the child in your classroom?
- When does she see the child's family? How does she work with them?

What does the consultant need to know about my classroom?

Tell the consultant about yourself and your approach to teaching. Take the time to help her get to know you. This initial period of orientation builds a strong foundation for the collaboration to follow.

- How long have you been in the classroom or program?
- What is a typical day in your classroom?
- What do you consider your areas of expertise?
- What do you like most about your job?
- What are your experiences with children who have special needs?
- How do you communicate with and involve families?
- What other adults visit or work in your classroom?
- Have you previously collaborated with an early intervention consultant?

Do I have any say in when and how the consultant works in my classroom?

Discuss with the consultant the best arrangement for coming to your classroom. Talk about what aspects of your typical day are most stable and acknowledge up front the many factors that make every day different in the early childhood classroom. Sharing initial expectations about the logistics of working together is the springboard for ongoing planning.

- When does the consultant want to come to your classroom?
- What times are best for you and the child?
- Will there be a dependable schedule? What obstacles can upset this schedule—in other words, what "unexpected" events might you both expect?
- What are the best ways for you to communicate with each other? Exchange phone and fax numbers, e-mail addresses, or set up "in" boxes.
- How does the consultant usually work in a classroom?
- What physical arrangement is needed (accessible storage, floor space, furnishings, and materials)?
- How do the consultant's time needs fit with the typical routines and activities of your class?
- How can disruption be minimized or avoided?
- How can you help the consultant make smooth transitions while she is in the classroom?

Discuss the child who will be seen by the consultant

The most effective collaboration occurs when the early intervention consultant and the early childhood teacher share their perspectives about the child from the start. Each may bring unique observations reflecting the context in which they know and spend time

with the child. The consultant needs the perspective of the caregiver who spends the most time with the child, just as the teacher depends on the consultant's view to inform decisions they make together about how best to support the child's early experiences and education. When professionals build on each others' ideas and coordinate their activities, the child is more likely to experience meaningful and effective intervention.

- How does the child participate in activities throughout the day?
- What activities have you observed him especially enjoying?
- How does he get along with and play with others?
- Who are his friends?
- What other insights can you share with the consultant about him?
- How do you think he learns best? How does this fit in with the consultant's goals for visiting the child in your classroom?
- What questions do you have about the child or his special needs?
- How can you and the consultant work together to make sure the child is included and engaged in everything that is going on in your classroom?
- How can the consultant include other children in activities designed to help the child with special needs? Convey your enthusiasm for routinely incorporating work on the individualized goals of a child with special needs into the ongoing activities enjoyed by his or her classmates.

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How will I know what the consultant is planning and doing?

Develop a plan for spending time with the consultant every time she visits, even if only for a few minutes. Because it may be hard to find time for sustained dialogue in a busy early childhood classroom, many different methods of communication are recommended. Families benefit because services are smoother, and stress is reduced when professionals coordinate their communication with each other and the families.

- When is the best time for you to sit down together? What will it take to make that happen (for example, scheduling a classroom volunteer, meeting during naptime, scheduling longer meetings on teacher workdays)?
- What strategies will you both use to collaborate with the family?
- Can the consultant show you techniques for working with the child that you can try on your own?
- What "homework" assignments should you and the consultant have between visits? Is there information you need that the consultant can provide the next time she comes? Are there things you can try out in the classroom between visits?
- Are there other ways you can collaborate to enhance the classroom experiences of all children?
- Ask if she has seen or used ideas elsewhere that would work in your classroom. Share any observations and ideas that might benefit the consultant as she works with children in your room.

Conclusion

Building relationships with other adults takes work. Start the process in your classroom immediately. Communication is key! Asking questions and sharing ideas must be ongoing to keep up with the changing needs of the child and classroom.

Both the teacher and the early intervention consultant want the best possible experiences for children and families. Each has experiences and knowledge that the other needs. When consultation is a collaborative process, everyone involved has the best opportunity to benefit—the teacher, the consultant, and all the children in the classroom, especially the child with the special needs and his family.



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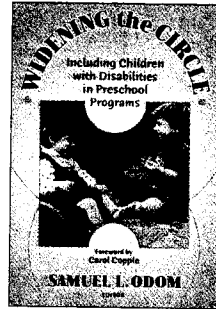
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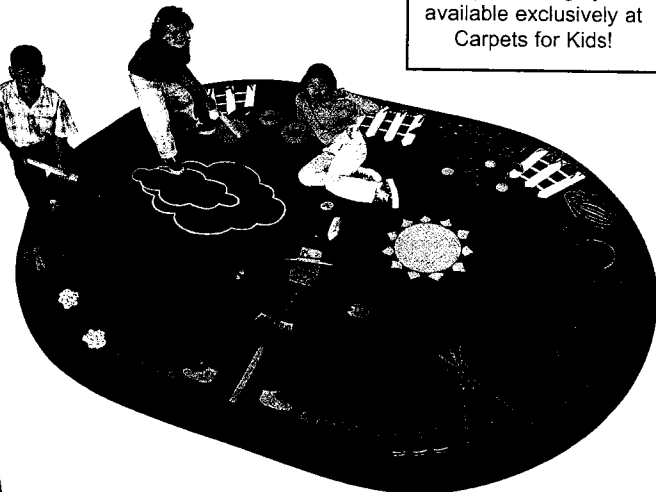
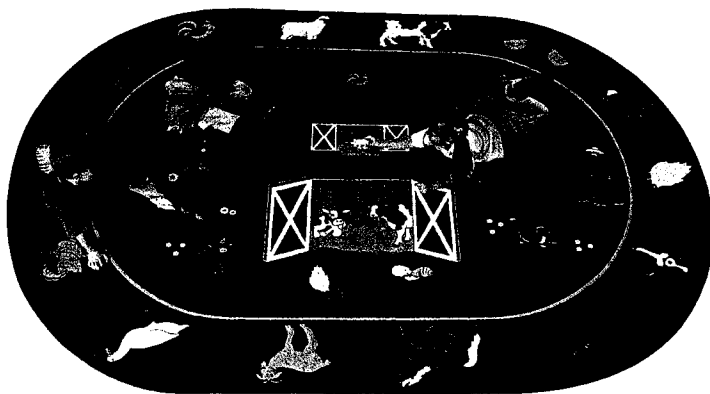
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