

An EITP interview with Kristen Schraml-Block....

What motivated you to write this article?

I have been an early interventionist for over a decade in both IL and VA. During my time partnering directly with families and professionals, I have encountered what I considered difficult or uncomfortable conversations throughout my experiences (and, of course, difficult is relative). I have a temperament style that is conflict-avoidant, but differences and conflict at times are a part of life and certainly our work in EI. I realized that avoiding conversations because they felt uncomfortable to me does not solve problems and often makes situations worse. That said, I had to figure out a way to broach difficult conversations with families and professionals that was effective and felt comfortable for me given my style. I came across the Skilled Dialogue framework in graduate school and have since implemented its corresponding strategies during everyday conversations, not just uncomfortable ones, to strengthen partnerships. Dr. Ostrosky and I wrote this article so that we could share this framework with other professionals in the field.

Are the vignettes woven throughout the article based on situations you encountered as an early interventionist?

Yes, they do represent a combination of families and experiences I have encountered. Since the article contains a vignette based on a culmination of actual experiences, my hope is that other professionals can relate to this example and the application of the Skilled Dialogue framework.

Who did you look to for support as an early interventionist when you were “stuck” on how to handle uncomfortable or difficult topics with families?

Since the beginning, I have always relied on my colleagues for support. Teaming and collaboration with professionals has been one of the most valuable aspects of my work in EI. Sharing my struggles with other professionals has allowed me opportunities to process “difficult” experiences, consider alternative perspectives and, of course, problem-solve and strategize – these things together help me avoid feeling “stuck.” Generally, learning from others through teaming and collaboration has significantly broadened my knowledge and skills related to partnering with families.

In the article you talk about 6 strategies that convey respect, reciprocity, and responsiveness. Respect is conveyed through welcoming and allowing. How do professionals go about changing their behavior if they have created a context where they are the “experts” versus sharing viewpoints and opinions with families?

In the article, Dr. Ostrosky and I mention the mindset and approach in the literature called “power-shared” partnerships (versus “power-over”). A “power-shared” mindset recognizes that families bring power and expertise to the family-professional partnership and professionals’ behaviors reflect that mindset. Professionals interested in shifting to a more “power-shared”

approach might first consider having open, honest conversations with families, setting the stage for the partnership just as Robyn did with Michelle in the article. Robyn acknowledged Michelle's important role in the development of her child and how they could work together equally to address the family's priorities. At any time in the partnership, professionals can invite caregivers by having open conversations. For instance, I had a colleague who had been working in EI for many years and had been operating as the "expert" for so long with families, she didn't even know where to begin. After brainstorming with her, she decided that she felt most comfortable picking one family to start with so that she didn't feel overwhelmed by drastically changing her approach with every family. She started by explaining the family-centered nature of EI to the family, acknowledged the important role that the family plays in their child's development and EI, and invited the family to participate in services that aligned with a balanced partnership. This approach seemed to work for her, enhancing her confidence to implement new power-shared practices with one family at a time. In my experience, parents often don't know what to expect or how to partner with professionals, and it's our responsibility to set the stage for respectful, reciprocal and responsive interactions.

Reciprocity is conveyed through sense-making and appreciating. How can one "truly understand a caregiver's unique perspective and experiences" if one has never been in such a situation (i.e., never been a parent, never had a child with a disability, never been homeless)?

Even if professionals have been through similar situations as families with whom they partner, they are not the same. Individuals process, interpret and cope with their situations and experiences differently. Although one's similar experience can provide some sense of understanding, I think it's most important for professionals to consider each family's individual context and try to imagine what the experience might be like for THAT parent. I think it is more important for professionals to keep an open mind, refrain from making judgments and assumptions (and if professionals do, really examine where those judgments/assumptions are coming from), and try to approach their work with empathy and compassion, than to have the direct experience.

Responsiveness is conveyed through joining and harmonizing. What happens if you are not able to bring a professional and caregiver's perspectives together (i.e., a caregiver believes in spanking and a professional has strong opposition against it)?

So Skilled Dialogue is not about picking one idea over another, it can involve jointly creating a third choice that both the caregiver and professional are comfortable with and agree upon. Naturally, there will be differences in parenting views and behaviors between parents and professionals, and parenting behaviors can take time and intentionality to change. In the instance you mentioned, the professional could explore the caregiver's perspective more deeply (without judgment) and ask the caregiver's permission to talk about other preventative strategies to help teach the child behavioral expectations. This creates an opportunity for the professional to share some of their child development expertise, but in a way that is nurturing and non-judgmental. Sometimes parents don't know other ways to support their child's

behavior and it's our responsibility as professionals to strengthen parents' understanding to ensure the child's well-being.