

Inclusion Tools for After School Professionals

SPECIAL NEEDS INCLUSION PROJECT, SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES, 1663 MISSION STREET, 7TH FLOOR, SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94103 415.282.7494

SNIPPET # 16: Communicating with Families

Communicating with families is a fundamental component of an effective out-of-school time program. In fact, the San Francisco Expanded Learning Collaborative's Quality-Self Assessment Tool (QSA) notes that two important indicators of high quality programs are staff who regularly communicate constructive feedback (concerns, accomplishments, etc.) about youth with caregivers in a respectful, confidential way and who can refer them to resources they may need. Communicating with families effectively is especially important when creating environments that are welcoming to all children. The following are tips that will help programs respectfully communicate with families.

Develop positive relationships with families early on.

- Create an environment where parents and families feel welcomed and comfortable.
- Take the time to get to know the parent and/or key family members. This can be done during registration and the daily drop-

off and pick-up times as well as during field trips, celebrations, or other program events. Relationship building takes time.

- Create opportunities for the families of your program to get to know each other (for example, at field trips, fundraisers, holiday or seasonal festivities, potlucks, etc.).

When a child is struggling in your program and/or not meeting his or her age appropriate developmental milestones, prepare for your conversation with the family.

- Make a list of the child's strengths.
- Make objective notes about the challenges the child is experiencing.
- List specific examples from your observations. For example, "During Read Aloud time, Maria has difficulty sounding out words."
- Role-play with a colleague. Practice exactly how you will present your concerns to the family.
- Schedule a meeting with the family early on;

don't wait for time to pass.

- Consider approaches that are culturally and linguistically appropriate.
- Know your community resources. Be prepared with suggestions about where the family can go for answers to their questions. (Like Support for Families!)
- Gather your thoughts; stay calm and focused.

Meet with the family to share your concerns.

- Choose a private and comfortable setting for your conversation and do not have this conversation in front of the child nor other children.
- Assure the family that your conversation is confidential.
- Listen first
 - Start with the family's stories, visions, dreams, concerns and priorities.
 - Ask the family to talk about their child. For example, "What does he like to do at home?" "Does she like to play with her sister?"
 - Provide specific, non-judgmental examples of your concerns. For example, "By four o'clock every day, Lisa falls asleep at her desk."
- Share the positive aspects of children with their family members.
- Focus on the child and family strengths.
- Be open to new ideas and different viewpoints from the family and others.
- Express empathy and compassion.
- Remember that this may be difficult for families and that they may express a variety of emotions. For example, they may express shock, relief, anger, disbelief, etc.
- Listen with respect and be nonjudgmental.
- Try to put yourself in their shoes.

Use people first language.

- When speaking about a child that you have concerns about, always address the child by his/her name first and then address the child's needs. For example, Peter has special needs versus the special needs child.



Collaborate with families when there are concerns.

- Meet with families early to address concerns and follow up regularly to monitor progress.
- Create a communication system to keep track, monitor and check in (e.g., a communication log, email, text, daily or weekly updates, etc.).
- Ask parents: what works at home? What doesn't work at home? What suggestions do the parents have? Are there any changes going on at home that may be affecting their child's mood and behavior in your program?

Be a bridge for Families. Provide information and resources.

- Collaborate with programs and agencies such as SNIP, SF Inclusion Networks and Support for Families to keep your staff informed of resources, trainings, community events and supports for families and professionals. Visit www.supportforfamilies.org.
- Share resource and referral information and ideas that may provide added support for the child or be useful for the family.



This document was contributed by the San Francisco Inclusion Networks, another program of Support for Families, and adapted with permission from Special Quests' "Communicating with Families-Tips for Success," SpecialQuest Multimedia Training Library.