# Effective Strategies for Communicating With Parents Who Immigrated to the U.S. and Are Raising Children With Disabilities

Maryland Center for Developmental Disabilities at Kennedy Krieger Institute

Building Partnerships. Changing Lives.

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Strategies

Language Interpretation

recommendations.

#### Background

Between 1994 and 2014, the percentage of children living in the U.S. whose parents immigrated to the U.S. increased from 18 percent (12.2 million children) to 25 percent (18.7 million children) (Child Trends, 2014). As the rate of immigration to the U.S. continues to increase, state and local education agencies need to be prepared and trained to meaningfully interact with these children and their parents. In particular, a child whose parents immigrated to the U.S. and who receives special education and related services presents specific challenges to his or her school system.

These challenges can include communication between school staff members and the child's parents, and implementation of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for the child. It is important for school personnel and parents to collaborate to ensure that each child receives an appropriate educational program and placement. It is crucial to understand the barriers that affect communication between schools and parents who have immigrated to the U.S., as well as strategies that can bridge the gap of understanding.

#### Barriers

#### **Linguistic Diversity**

When parents do not speak English, they rely on interpreters to understand their child's academic progress and procedural safeguards.

While interpreters are required by law to be present during IEP meetings for families who do not speak English, there is often a lack of available translation services, and other school-related documents are often not translated.

Interpreters are often unfamiliar with disabilities, IEP terminology, or the special education process, which further complicates communication.

#### **Cultural Differences**

- Cultural differences may affect the way parents interact with school staff members, and what role parents may feel they have in these conversations.
- Parents who have immigrated to the U.S. may also have different perceptions of disability than individuals living in the West.
  These perceptions can make them feel more negatively or more optimistic toward disabilities, or they may not even consider their child as having a disability at all.
- Cultural differences may affect the way parents perceive their role.
- Parents may rely on these cultural beliefs when making decisions for their child, and they should be listened to and respected.
- While these different perspectives exist, ethnocentrism often prevents these perspectives from being understood, or even considered.

## Difficulty Understanding the Special Education Process

The special education process is multi-faceted and incredibly detailed.

If parents are unaware of services, or of what their child's rights are, they won't be prepared to bring their suggestions or concerns to IEP meetings.

Federal law requires parents be considered equal participants in educational decisionmaking, but this is not possible if parents do not understand the process itself.

every effort to ensure parents are included in this complex process.

## education process and have basic knowledge of disabilities, in order to be familiar with the terminology.

 All documents related to a child's education should be translated into his or her parents' language.

Interpreters must be non-biased and neutral, and must

not try to persuade parents to agree to the IEP team's

Interpreters should also understand the special

- As interpretation changes the natural flow of conversation, the IEP team should take pauses to allow the interpreter to accurately translate the discussion.
- Lack of availability of an interpreter or lack of resources is not an excuse—schools must ensure interpreters are available and can provide translation services when needed.

#### **Building Relationships With Parents**

- One of the best ways to build relationships with parents is to ask questions.
- Through questions, the IEP team can discover:
  - The parents' knowledge of the special education process.
  - The parents' knowledge and perception of their child's disability.
  - The parents' concerns about, and aspirations for, their child's education.
  - Other cultural and linguistic differences that may affect communication between parents and the IEP team.
- It is also important to engage in conversations about the family's history, and how the family immigrated to the U.S.
- While individuals who are refugees may be sensitive to these topics, having these conversations is crucial to developing a relationship with the parents and understanding their background.

#### • Learning about the home life of the family can also give the team insight into what the child needs in his or her educational setting, and can lead to better outcomes for the child.

- As the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004) emphasizes, family engagement is a critical element in effective special education for a child with disabilities (Rossetti, 2018).
- Family involvement has been shown to be a critical factor in the special education process, and has been linked to more positive outcomes (Ryndak, D.L., et al., 2012).

### Effective Communication Through Collaboration



#### Six Themes of a Collaborative Family-Professional Partnership

Blue-Banning (2004) identified six themes of a collaborative partnership between parents and professionals that can be applied to families who have immigrated to the U.S. and who have children receiving special education services.



#### Conclusion

It is important to recognize that no community exists in a vacuum. Particular attention must be paid to children who have disabilities and come from a culturally diverse background. The educational system should be inclusive of the disability and the culture. The best way to create an inclusive environment is through collaboration. Parents play a vital role in the life of a child with a disability. If the parents feel misunderstood or not heard, there is no way to create an IEP that will enable the child to succeed. Parents and IEP team members need to be able to communicate and work together to ensure that every child receives educational benefit. To ensure every child makes progress in light of his or her circumstances, state and local educational agencies must increase their understanding of other cultures, collaborate with parents, and ensure proper resources are available for parents who do not speak English.

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