



## Effective Communication in Family-Centred Service

### FCS Sheet #8

This FCS Sheet is #8 of an 18 part series on family-centred service.

If you are interested in this FCS Sheet, you may also want to read:

- FCS Sheet #9: Using respectful behaviours and language
- FCS Sheet #11: Negotiating: Dealing effectively with differences

Key definitions and a list of the topics in this series can be found at the end of this FCS Sheet.

Joanne, a speech-language pathologist, and Mr. and Mrs. Brown met at a mutually arranged time to discuss the results of a recent assessment of their 4-year old son, Kyle. Joanne told the Browns about the severe language delay Kyle was showing and talked about his strengths in motor and cognitive development. Joanne then listened as the Browns expressed concern at this news. They were upset, but not surprised to learn Kyle was delayed in language. Joanne acknowledged the parent's feelings. She also talked about Kyle's prognosis for language gains if he received intervention. Kyle's parents asked many questions about the causes of language delay, how quickly Kyle would make progress, and what the intervention would involve. Joanne answered the family's questions and gave the Browns some information about language development to take home. Joanne and Mr. and Mrs. Brown agreed to meet the following week to discuss possible intervention options. Everyone felt that this had been a good meeting.

## Relevance

Effective communication between families and service providers is key to the success of a family-centred approach to service. Communication is the way we establish and build relationships. Communication reflects the value and the respect we hold for the person with whom we are communicating, or the “communication partner”. We communicate with others to convey important information, feelings, and plans for the future.

What we do as parents or service providers to support effective communication begins with our very first meeting. Our communication then evolves as we become familiar with each other and plan for the child’s future together. Effective communication supports positive relationships, while poor communication can easily unravel partnerships between families and service providers. Parents have rated having a helpful clinician who was available to answer questions and who included families in planning intervention as important aspects of family-centred service (King et al., 2000). Although the importance of good communication is readily agreed upon, how to achieve and maintain effective communication is not always clear.

## Facts and Concepts

### Common Sense Principles of Communication

Effective communication is guided by a number of common sense principles. As speakers and listeners, we may not be consciously aware of the principles we follow to allow conversations to flow smoothly. Four major principles of effective communication include (Grice, 1975):

1. Being precise: use the right amount of information and don’t talk too much or too little.
2. Being truthful: do not knowingly lead the listener astray.
3. Being relevant: make contributions to the conversations that are related to prior comments. This helps the communication partner to follow easily.
4. Being direct: speak clearly and try not to be ambiguous or vague.

### Good communication is also influenced by the following three areas (Walker & Singer, 1993):

1. Developing a climate that fosters communication.
2. Tailoring the communication environment to the partner’s needs.
3. Using and monitoring basic communication skills.

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The environment in which communication occurs includes the physical setting, regularity of communication, and accessibility of parents and service providers. One must also consider the purpose of communication, as well as the perspectives, attitudes, and values of the communication partners. Moment-to-moment communication includes attending to the mechanisms of communication (such as speaking clearly and using eye contact), the awareness of communication events as they unfold, and the communication skills of the partners.

### **Why Does Communication Go Astray?**

Most of us have good intentions of being effective communicators and treating others in a positive and respectful way, but there are important reasons why effective, positive communication may not occur. These reasons include, but are not limited to:

### **Attitudes and Perspectives**

- Parents and service providers may not clearly establish the purpose of the partnership.
- Parents and service providers may not understand each other's role and what can be realistically accomplished by each partner.
- Parents and service providers may hold perceptions based on prior experiences.
- Services providers may not view families as equal partners and as decision-makers.

### **Communication Environment**

- A system for communicating regularly is not established.
- Parents and service providers do not exchange adequate information about the child, the family, the child's condition, and/or the intervention options.
- The physical setting, people involved, time of day, and time allotted for discussion are not carefully considered.
- Communication is not adapted to meet the language and cultural needs of all partners.

### **Communication Skills**

- Service providers/parents don't communicate their needs accurately and fully.
- Service providers are not skilled at facilitating smooth communication.

## Strategies for Effective Communication Within a Family-Centred Context

The following strategies are organized according to principles of communication to show how each strategy contributes to the overall communication process.

Principles of Communication	Strategies based on Characteristics of Effective Communication (Briggs, 1998; Brandt, 1993; Rosin, 1996; Tuchman, 1996; Winton, 1996)
Partners communicate as equals (Brandt, 1993)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage open discussion.</li> <li>• Allow everyone an opportunity to share his/her ideas and views.</li> <li>• Service providers and parents take equal turns in the giving and receiving roles of communication.</li> <li>• Do not judge or devalue the ideas put forward by the person with whom you are communicating.</li> </ul>
Partners communicate clearly to share information (Brandt, 1993)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make your contributions clear and brief.</li> <li>• Use language that is understandable. Avoid or explain uncommon words or phrases.</li> <li>• Service providers: Share information about a child's condition and about service options that are clear and straightforward.</li> <li>• Service providers: Acknowledge and talk about the family's feelings.</li> <li>• Parents: Share information about your child.</li> <li>• Parents: Talk about the strengths and needs of your family.</li> </ul>
Partners really listen to each other (Dunst, Trivette & Johanson, 1994)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Service providers: Listen with care and empathy to the family (establish eye contact, show relaxed manner).</li> <li>• Service providers: Paraphrase the parent's message to let them know you understand what they have told you. Clarify issues.</li> <li>• Parents: Listen with courtesy to the service provider.</li> <li>• Parents: Ask questions when you don't understand. Let service providers know when information is incomplete.</li> </ul>
Partners communicate openly so parents can make informed decisions about their child (Dunst, Trivette & Johanson, 1994)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents: state your wishes clearly.</li> <li>• Service providers: help families to talk openly about their needs.</li> <li>• Service providers: Help the family with strategies for identifying their needs (for example, completing questionnaires, and writing out positive/negative outcomes of decisions).</li> <li>• Service providers: Believe in the parents and support their decisions.</li> </ul>

## Summary

Effective communication is an essential part of a family-centred approach to service. Service providers need to learn about and practice communication skills. Such skills will allow them to listen effectively, monitor communication, build warm relationships, and support parents. Parents should communicate effectively to gather information from service providers about their child and service options. Parents need to be clear and honest about what they want for their child and the role they want to play in their child's intervention. Successful family-centred service is built on successful communication.

## Resources

Brandt, P. (1993). Negotiation and problem solving strategies: Collaboration between families and professionals. *Infants and Young Children*, 5 (4), 78-84.

Briggs, M. H. (1998). Families talk: Building partnerships for communication change. *Topics in Language Disorders*, 18 (3), 71-84.

Dunst, C. J., Trivette, C. M. & Johanson, C. (1994). Parent-professional collaboration and partnerships. In C. J.

Dunst, C. M. Trivette and A. G. Deal (Eds.) *Supporting and strengthening families*. Vol. 1. Methods, strategies, and practices (pp. 197-211). Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books.

Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole and J. Morgan (Eds.) *Syntax and semantics Volume 3*. New York: Academic Press.

King, S., Kertoy, M., King, G., Rosenbaum, P., Hurley, P. & Law, M. (2000). *Children with disabilities in Ontario: A profile of children's services. Part 2: Perceptions about family-centred service delivery for children with disabilities*. Hamilton, ON: McMaster University, CanChild Centre for Childhood Disability Research.

Rosin, P. (1996). Parent and service provider partnerships in early intervention. In P. Rosin, A. Whitehead, L. Tuchman, G. Jesien, A. Begun and L. Irwin (Eds.) *Partnerships in family-centered care: A guide to collaborative early intervention* (pp. 65-80). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.

Tuchman, L. I. (1996). Team dynamics and communication. In P. Rosin, A. Whitehead, L. Tuchman, G. Jesien, A. Begun and L. Irwin (Eds.) *Partnerships in family-centered care: A guide to collaborative early intervention* (pp. 145-185). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

Walker, B. & Singer, G. (1993). Improving collaborative communication between professionals and parents. In G. Singer and E. Powers (Eds.) *Families, disability and empowerment: Active coping skills and strategies for family interventions* (pp. 285- 313). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

Winton, P. (1996). Understanding family concerns, priorities and resources. In P.J. McWilliam, P. J. Winton and E. R. Crais (Eds.) *Practical strategies for familycentred intervention* (pp. 31-54). San Diego, CA: Singular Publishing Group, Inc.

## Key Definitions

**Family-Centred Service** – Family-centred service is made up of a set of values, attitudes and approaches to services for children with special needs and their families.

Family-centred service recognizes that **each family is unique**; that the family is the **constant in the child’s life**; and that they are the **experts on the child’s abilities and needs**.

The family works with service providers to make informed decisions about the services and supports the child and family receive.

In family-centred service, the strengths and needs of all family members are considered.

**Service Provider** – The term service provider refers to those individuals who work directly with the child and family. These individuals **may** include educational assistants, respite workers, teachers, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, speech-language pathologists, service coordinators, recreation therapists, etc.

**Organization** – The term organization refers to the places or groups from which the child and family receive services. Organizations **may** include community programs, hospitals, rehabilitation centres, schools, etc.

**Intervention** – Interventions refer to the services and supports provided by the person who works with the child and family. Interventions **may** include direct therapy, meetings to problem solve issues that are important to you, phone calls to advocate for your child, actions to link you with other parents, etc.

Want to know more about family-centred service?

Visit the CanChild website:  
[www.canchild.ca](http://www.canchild.ca)

or call us at 905-525-9140 ext. 27850

## FCS Sheet Topics

The following is a list of the FCS Sheets. If you are interested in receiving any of these topics, please contact CanChild or visit our website.

### General Topics Related to Family-Centred Service

- FCS Sheet #1 – What is family-centred service?
- FCS Sheet #2 – Myths about family-centred service
- FCS Sheet #3 – How does family-centred service make a difference?
- FCS Sheet #4 – Becoming more family-centred
- FCS Sheet #5 – 10 things you can do to be family-centred

### Specific Topics Related to Family-Centred Service

- FCS Sheet #6 – Identifying & building on parent and family strengths & resources
- FCS Sheet #7 – Parent-to-parent support
- FCS Sheet #8 – Effective communication in family-centred service
- FCS Sheet #9 – Using respectful behaviours and language
- FCS Sheet #10 – Working together: From providing information to working in partnership
- FCS Sheet #11 – Negotiating: Dealing effectively with differences
- FCS Sheet #12 – Making decisions together: How to decide what is best
- FCS Sheet #13 – Setting goals together
- FCS Sheet #14 – Advocacy: How to get the best for your child
- FCS Sheet #15 – Getting the most from appointments and meetings
- FCS Sheet #16 – Fostering family-centred service in the school
- FCS Sheet #17 – Family-centred strategies for waitlists
- FCS Sheet #18 – Are we really family-centred? Checklists for families, service providers and organizations