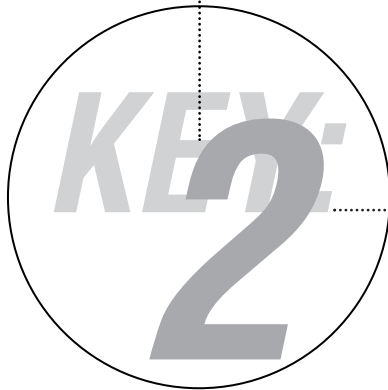


Key Components of Programming for Students with Learning Disabilities



Meaningful Parent Involvement

There is now a large body of research linking parent involvement in their children's education with greater student achievement in terms of grades, student attitudes and behaviour. Meaningful parent involvement also leads to greater parental satisfaction with the educational programming provided for their children. For these reasons, building relationships to encourage meaningful parent involvement is considered one of the hallmarks of best practice among educators.

Encouraging meaningful parent involvement refers to the process of developing collaborative partnerships among parents, teachers and school administrators. Parents are key stakeholders as they know their children better than anyone, and are in a good position to reinforce the concepts and processes children learn in school. Parents should be involved in planning, problem solving and decision making where their children's education is concerned.

Barriers to Meaningful Parent Involvement

The following barriers may hinder the development of meaningful parent involvement.

- **The attitudes, emotional reactions and abilities of parents**

Parents' abilities to become involved in their children's education may be limited by time constraints due to employment, language barriers, or lack of knowledge or skills which may lead parents to doubt their ability to contribute. Parents may feel intimidated by educators or minimize the importance of education due to their own negative experiences. Parents who are struggling to understand their children's learning disabilities or why they are experiencing difficulty in school may deny the problem or blame the teacher. These reactions can make it difficult to develop a collaborative relationship. Parents who struggle with one or more of these factors may appear passive or reluctant to be involved.

- **The attitudes of teachers and administrators about the role of parents in the school**

Some educators remain uncomfortable with the idea of involving parents in the school's activities beyond those that have been traditionally acceptable.

- **Teachers may lack knowledge about strategies for involving parents and developing collaborative relationships**

Many teachers are unprepared when it comes to developing collaborative partnerships with parents. They report having little training in communication skills, how to help parents cope with their children's learning difficulties and how to work with parents who may be reluctant or difficult.

- **Often, the time allotted for parent-teacher interviews or conferences is not conducive to building relationships or developing effective communication skills**

It is difficult to develop a relationship based on trust and respect in a 15-minute parent-teacher conference, but this is often the only forum for parents and teachers to meet face-to-face.

Facilitating Collaborative Relationships with Parents

Educators have a responsibility to ensure they are doing all they can to facilitate collaborative relationships between home and school. The strategies below may be helpful in engaging all parents, including parents who may appear reluctant to be involved.

- Understand and empower parents.
 - Try to view the situation from the parents' perspective. Do factors like culture or employment issues represent significant barriers to their involvement?
 - Recognize parents' strengths and commend them for ways they support their children's education and the school.
 - Refer parents to support groups or community resources.
- Use these active listening skills to encourage communication with parents.
 - Maintain eye contact, nod and say "I see."
 - Wait until they are finished speaking before you reply.
 - When you reply, begin by rephrasing the parents' concern in your own words. This allows for clarification if you have missed a point.
 - Pay attention to body language and the emotional content of parents' messages.
- Use effective verbal communication techniques.
 - Monitor the balance between positive comments and comments about challenges.
 - Describe children's behaviours rather than making judgements.
 - Use "I" messages so parents don't feel blamed.
 - Explain jargon or concepts that may be unfamiliar. Describe tests and explain the results. Provide material on children's difficulties or diagnoses.

- Use strategies to deal effectively with situations in which parents are angry.
 - As parents speak more loudly, speak more softly.
 - Avoid arguing, becoming defensive or minimizing parents' concerns.
 - Try the following steps.
 1. Write down what the parent says.
 2. When the parent slows down, ask what else is bothering him or her and add to the list. Exhaust his or her list of complaints.
 3. Ask for clarification of complaints that are too general.
 4. Share the list and ask if it is complete.
 5. Write down suggestions for solutions.

- Maximize parents' involvement by frequently seeking their input.
 - Maintain regular, ongoing communication with parents through a communication book or telephone calls.
 - Invite parents to participate in the development of their children's individualized program plans and other key decision-making processes.
 - Arrange conferences and meetings at times that are convenient for parents. State the purpose of the meeting and the time allotted. Make sure there is enough time to facilitate problem solving.
 - Prepare for parent-teacher interviews by thinking about questions parents may have. (For Questions Frequently Asked by Parents of Children with Learning Disabilities, see Appendix 2, page 76.)
 - Share strategies for discussing with their child what a learning disability is. (For Tips for Parents on Explaining a Learning Disability to a Child, see Appendix 3, page 77.)

Outcomes

The outcomes below describe potential results from implementing the strategies, activities and practices in this section.

- Parents have access to the information needed to understand, make decisions and find resources.
- Parents are active participants in their children's education.
- Parents make meaningful contributions to decisions regarding their children's education.
- Children receive consistent messages from home and school regarding expectations for their academic performance and behaviour.
- There is ongoing communication between home and school.

Connections to Other Alberta Learning Resources

- See School Strategies, Parents, pages 139–141 in *Teaching Students with Emotional Disorders and/or Mental Illnesses* (Alberta Learning, 2000), Book 8 of the *Programming for Students with Special Needs* series.
- See the following pages in *Teaching Students who are Gifted and Talented* (Alberta Learning, 2000), Book 7 of the *Programming for Students with Special Needs* series:
 - Parent Involvement in the IPP Process, page GT.76
 - Tips for a Better Meet-the-Teacher Conference, page GT.77
 - Questions to Help Parents Communicate Effectively with the School, page GT.78
 - Involving Parents as Volunteers, page GT.79
 - Appendix 20: Tips for Parents, page GT.246.

- See the following pages in *Teaching Students with Learning Disabilities* (Alberta Education, 1996), Book 6 in the *Programming for Students with Special Needs* series:
 - Parents as Team Members, pages LD.51–LD.52
 - Communication in Home-School Team Building, pages LD.53–LD.54
 - Individualized Program Plan, pages LD.70–LD.71.