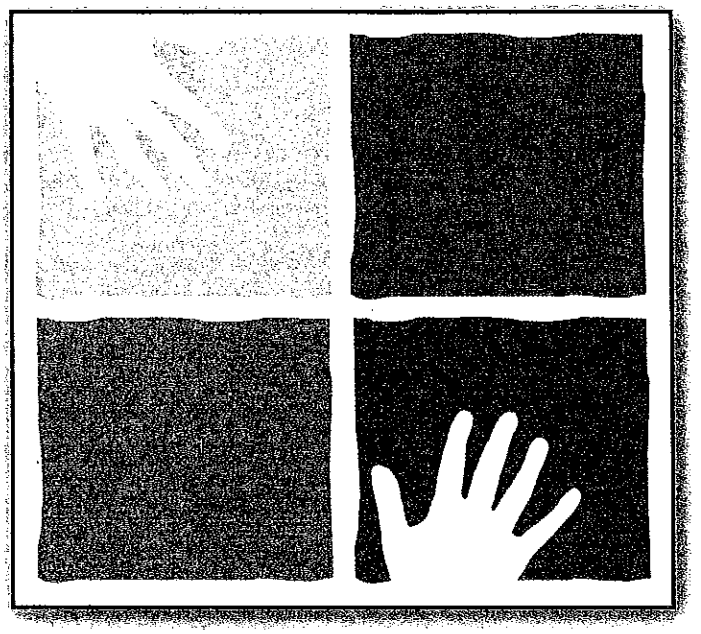
WORKING WITH FAMILIES

of Children with Special Needs



Family and Professional Partnerships and Roles

NANCY M. SILEO • MARY ANNE PRATER

Working with Families of Children with Special Needs

FAMILY AND PROFESSIONAL PARTNERSHIPS AND ROLES

Nancy M. Sileo
University of Nevada Las Vegas

Mary Anne Prater
Brigham Young University

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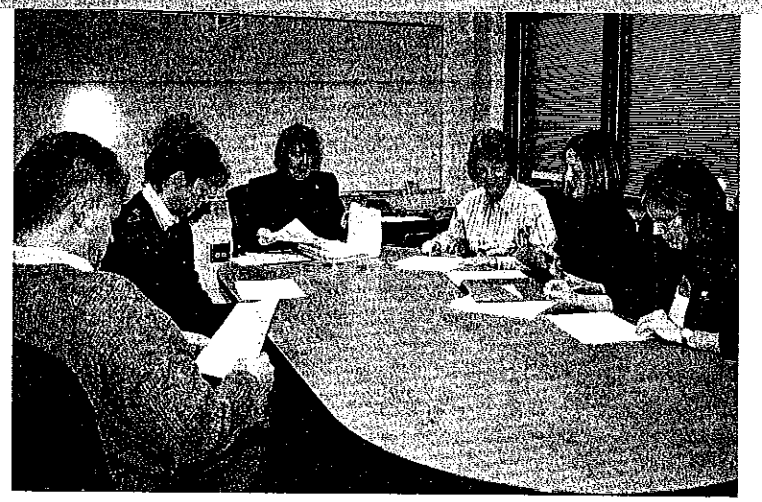
CHAPTER 4

Communicating and Collaborating with Families



CHAPTER OUTLINE

OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter you will

1. Describe the purposes and benefits of collaboration.
2. Explain the role of parity, common goals, trust and respect, styles of communication, and cultural influences on collaboration.
3. Discuss barriers of communication and collaboration and strategies for avoiding these barriers.
4. Describe ways to demonstrate collaborative attitudes.
5. Demonstrate understanding of active listening skills and appropriate nonverbal communication.
6. Discuss effective verbal language skills in context of collaborating with families.
7. Discuss ways to reduce miscommunication with family members.
8. Explain the steps of problem solving and negotiating.
9. Describe the different conflict management styles.

INTRODUCTION

Mr. and Mrs. Juarez adopted 6-month-old David as their first child. They were thrilled to become parents. The Juarezes loved their son and wanted the best for him. When David started school, he experienced considerable difficulty acquiring basic academic skills such as learning letter names and sounds. It was hard for him to write, and he was frequently distracted in class. David's kindergarten teacher suspected he had a disability and referred him for assessment. Although Mr. and Mrs. Juarez gave their consent for testing, they knew very little about special education services. When the IEP team meeting was held, and the assessment team recommended that David be placed in a special school, Mr. and Mrs. Juarez didn't know what to do. They didn't know what their options were, and they didn't understand why David couldn't be educated at their neighborhood school. They asked if they could visit the school before making a decision. They were told that they couldn't because of confidentiality issues and that the placement was appropriate for David. The special education teacher indicated that the sooner David was placed in the special school, the better. His development was significantly delayed, and he needed the services the school offered. By the end of the meeting, David's parents felt overwhelmed. Although they had noticed that David had difficulty learning how to do new things, they hadn't considered that he had disabilities. They thought that he just needed more time and practice to learn new skills. The diagnosis of developmental delay was surprising to them, as was the recommendation to place David in a special school. They thought that they should trust the teachers, but they needed time to understand the situation and to evaluate their options. Mr. and Mrs. Juarez wanted to make the decision about David's placement with the teachers—not have the teachers make decisions and inform them of what they had already decided (Personal communication, 2007).

Effective communication and collaboration are critical skills for special educators. Mr. and Mrs. Juarez would not have been so overwhelmed and confused if the school personnel had helped them feel more a part of the decisions for their son, David, and communicated better the purpose of the meeting and the options for David. Within this chapter we identify the factors that are necessary for true collaboration and productive communication to occur between school personnel and family members. The overall goal is to achieve collective empowerment for all parties involved. We begin with a brief overview, followed by a discussion of specific collaborative and communication skills.

OVERVIEW OF COMMUNICATING AND COLLABORATING WITH FAMILIES

The role of families of children with special needs as it relates to communicating and collaborating with school professionals has changed in the past few decades. Even as late as the 1950s and 1960s, families who had a child with a disability were themselves referred by professionals for counseling and psychotherapy. The underlying theory was that if the child was not typical, the parents would also have issues that only more professionals could solve (Turnbull, Turbiville, & Turnbull, 2000). During this time, professionals had power over parents. That is, professionals' decisions about children were absolute. Parents' input was generally not solicited nor considered. This attitude continued through the 1970s, as the psychotherapy model transitioned to more of an emphasis on parent training and involvement. This occurred concurrently with the many

changes in the educational opportunities offered for individuals with disabilities through the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Downing, 2008; Turnbull et al., 2000). Again, however, professionals continued to have the upper hand, maintaining a position of power (or the *power position*) when working with families of students with special needs, as they *trained* parents on what to do with their own children.

In the 1980s, families increasingly influenced the way students with disabilities were provided services in the school and the community, and the concept of *family-centered approaches* became more prevalent (Dunst, 2002). As family-centered practice became more popular, the power between professionals and parents shifted from one of a *power-over* situation to one of a partnership, in which both parents and professionals have some power to decide the issues to be addressed and the resources to be provided (Turnbull et al., 2000). The new focus on families emphasized the need to recognize family choice, family strengths, and family resources.

Collaboration and communication increased and improved during the 1990s and moved the family–professional partnership more toward one of "collective empowerment." *Collective empowerment* may be described as a model that "assumes power-through family-professional partnerships" (Turnbull et al., 2000). A key element of this approach includes opportunities for families and professionals to participate in equal decision-making processes. The relationship between families and professionals is equal, not subordinate or hierarchical.

Over time, parents of children with disabilities have played many roles. For example, they have been viewed as the cause of their child's disability, organization members, service developers, recipients of professionals' decisions, teachers, political advocates, and educational decision makers (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006). With the movement toward collective empowerment, a new role of *partner* was added to the list of roles. However, such a role requires collaboration and communication with families.

Many school professionals, especially those who have been teaching a long time, may find it difficult to embrace the paradigm shift required to move from a *power-over* relationship to the *power-through* situation necessary for a real partnership (Osher & Osher, 2002). Likewise, many other communicative, collaborative, and cultural factors can influence the success of this endeavor from both families' and professionals' perspectives (Harry, 2008). Traditional special education programs in the past that have lacked meaningful parent participation have not been successful (Correa, Jones, Thomas, & Morsink, 2005). Therefore, many professionals support increased teacher preparation in the areas of teamwork, collaboration, and communication between families and professionals.

Regardless of the individuals involved, for effective collaboration and communication to occur, all participants must understand the key terms and minimize their use of jargon. Even when individuals are speaking the same language, misunderstandings may occur if words are misinterpreted (Walther-Thomas, Korinek, McLaughlin, & Williams, 2000). Therefore, we define two important terms that will be used throughout this chapter.

- ***Collaboration.*** "Interpersonal collaboration is a style for direct interaction between at least two coequal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision making as they work toward a common goal" (Friend & Cook, 2009, p. 5). The focus of this chapter will be on the collaboration between families and school professionals, to include the benefits, barriers, and strategies involved.

- ***Communication.*** Communication is "the act of transmitting, giving, or exchanging information, or the art of expressing ideas" (Dettmer, Dyck, & Thurston, 1999, p. 6). Typically a sender transmits a message to a receiver. Communication is critical to the success of collaboration, and as such, we devote a large part of this chapter to examining communication skills, barriers, and needs.

Purpose of Communication

People communicate on a regular basis for a variety of needs that include physical needs (e.g., hunger), identity needs (e.g., to know who we are in comparison to others), social needs (e.g., to relate to others), and practical needs (e.g., to achieve a desired goal or give information to others; Adler, Rosenfeld, & Proctor, 2009). In the context of educators and families communicating, the more specific purposes may include sharing information, identifying and achieving educational goals, making requests, and problem solving (Minnesota Parent Center [MPC], 2000a). Because children with disabilities often have special issues that affect both home and school, the need for more frequent and more in-depth communication between both parties increases. Without strong communication, there can be no true collaboration.

Purpose and Benefits of Collaboration

MUTUAL SUPPORT. The positive interaction between families and school personnel can result in numerous benefits to all three parties: the families, the educators, and the students themselves. The more parents share in decision making with teachers, work to create and achieve common goals, and communicate regularly with school professionals, the more research has found that those parents actively and confidently support schools and school professionals (MPC, 2000a). In addition, as parents' opinions are sought and valued by school professionals, parents in turn begin to value the opinions of school personnel to a greater degree (Walther-Thomas et al., 2000). Families who collaborate with educators report being more willing and able to enforce rules at home and to have a more positive attitude about their children attending postsecondary education (MPC, 2000a).

SHARED KNOWLEDGE. School professionals also benefit from increased collaboration with parents. Teachers often need to be reminded that although they have contact with a child 5 days a week for the school year, most parents, families, and guardians are with the child daily for 18 or more years. Walther-Thomas and colleagues (2000) wrote, "[S]chools that are truly family-centered recognize that families are the constant in students' lives while educational systems and personnel are continually changing" (p. 76). Thus, the benefits of collaborating with parents include learning information about a child's past or current abilities that can positively influence the classroom. This information can aid teachers in creating appropriate instructional, behavioral, and social activities for the child. Learning more about a family's personal goals, cultural influences, and areas of strength can also help educators when working with a child with a disability (Harry, 2008; Murawski & Spencer, in press).

SUPPORTED STUDENT LEARNING. Most important, students benefit when parents and teachers collaborate. When educators and providers work together, students have been found to have increased homework completion, improved academic performance (Turnbull et al., 2006; Walther-Thomas et al., 2000), and reduced absenteeism and disciplinary problems

Javier recently moved to the United States from Mexico. He lives with his parents and four other siblings and has a strong support system and extended family in the area. He is determined to be the first child in the family to attend college. If Javier told the teacher his goal, she could use the information when communicating with his parents. Then, both the teacher and Javier's parents could work together to help Javier develop a plan to achieve his goals.

FIGURE 4.1 A Case Study

(Walther-Thomas et al., 2000). Family members who communicate regularly and demonstrate that they value that communication are modeling effective communication skills for their children. As positive behavior support strategies are used consistently at home and school, students' positive behaviors increase. With the support of home–school collaboration, even friendships among children can improve (Downing, 2008; Turnbull et al., 2006).

COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES

Collaboration and Communication with Families

Family life is complex. Like ripples in a pond, what happens in one aspect of a child's life is certain to have an impact on many other areas, including the educational arena (Poston et al., 2003). As discussed in Chapter 2, home and school can be perceived as overlapping spheres of influence, and school professionals must be aware of changes and occurrences in a youngster's life. To do this requires ongoing communication and collaboration with the child's family. Effective communication hinges on an openness and willingness to communicate, and teachers' and parents' attitudes and beliefs about children's education affect collaborative endeavors. Effective communication and collaboration do not just happen. Effective collaboration requires parity, trust, and respect, as well as the use of appropriate styles of communication. Teachers and parents also need skills to negotiate differing agendas and cultural differences when working together to plan and support education. A discussion of each of these elements follows.

PARITY. Parity, or equality, is a key aspect of developing a collaborative culture. If participants in an interaction do not feel that they are on equal footing with one another, they tend not to participate as actively or to value the interaction as highly (Friend & Cook, 2009). Family members and school personnel both need to have an equal say in decision making and an equal feeling of power in their ability to influence outcomes of children and families if they want to be able to collaborate effectively (Friend & Cook, 2009; Jackson & Turnbull, 2004).

Developing relationships with families and communicating parity takes time and effort. Parents and teachers have different perspectives. The following summarizes benefits and challenges in achieving parity in parent–teacher relationships.

Parents' Perspectives

- Parents respect teachers' opinions and value interactions when they have close relationships with teachers.
- Parents value teachers who become confidants and friends that they can turn to after school hours.

Teachers' Perspectives

- Teachers recognize the value of close relationships with families. However, it can be emotionally draining for teachers to establish close relationships with parents of all their students.
- Attending to a family's at-home needs can be overwhelming for teachers (Nelson, Summers, & Turnbull, 2004).

Thus, although parity is a goal to strive for, parents and teachers may both need to adjust expectations when working together.

COMMON GOALS. Having shared values and common goals makes collaboration easier for parents and teachers. With shared goals, parents and teachers realize that they are working together for the common good of the child (Snell & Janney, 2005). Too often in the past, individuals at the school level have assumed the role of *expert,* telling parents about their children rather than asking them or talking to them about the child. "The fact that professionals are typically in a position of power in relation to the families they serve is a built-in barrier to learning from those families" (Harry, 2008, p. 384). Taking time during meetings to articulate and discuss common goals de-emphasizes the teacher's role as an expert and creates opportunity for parents to provide input and participate in planning and implementing their child's education.

TRUST AND RESPECT. Communicating respect is important because individuals who do not trust and respect one another are not likely to engage in open collaboration. Both parties should seek to earn respect and demonstrate trust. Parents of children with disabilities have often had negative experiences with schools, sometimes resorting to fighting to get services to which they believe their children are entitled (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004). When school professionals come to meetings armed with voluminous reports, completed recommendations, and descriptions of the child's failure, family members can become discouraged and question the value of their input in the process. Many parents report feeling devalued and disrespected by service providers and, therefore, less willing to engage in collaborative efforts (Zionts, Zionts, Harrison, & Bellinger, 2003). Educators need to demonstrate through their actions that they value and respect families' input (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Jackson & Turnbull, 2004; Wang, Mannan, Poston, Turnbull, & Summers, 2004). Jackson and Turnbull stated that trust is "demonstrated through a sense of assurance about the reliability and dependability of the character, ability, strength, and truth of other members of the partnership" (2004, p. 167). For effective collaboration to occur, all members of the interaction need to be able to trust and respect one another (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Snell & Janney, 2005).

When you interact with parents, you can create an atmosphere of trust by welcoming parents and attending to parents' needs and concerns during meetings.

- ***Greet parents and help them to feel welcome and comfortable at school.*** When parents enter your classroom or arrive for meetings, smile and make eye contact with them. At meetings, sit next to parents instead of sitting across from them. Offer them materials for note-taking. Provide them with copies of all reports. When appropriate, meet parents at the school office and escort them to your classroom. Time spent walking to your classroom is an opportunity to establish rapport with parents.

- ***Keep commitments.*** If you make appointments with parents, keep your commitments. Arrive on time to meetings, and come prepared with materials or information necessary to conduct and participate in meetings.
- ***Be honest with parents.*** To establish trust, you should be honest with parents. When parents ask questions, be truthful and honest. At the same time, be sensitive to parents' feelings and concerns and present information in kind, respectful ways. If parents ask about their child's future, share your professional opinion, but do so in a respectful and gentle manner.
- ***Respect family priorities.*** Teachers need to demonstrate respect for family priorities (Wang et al., 2004). Some parents may not attend school meetings because of financial, cultural, emotional, physical, or work barriers. Educators, who jump to the conclusion that these parents do not care about their children, or about education in general, may bring those assumptions with them into their communications with the parents (Harry, Rueda, & Kalyanpur, 1999). If parents do not perceive that educators respect their priorities, they may not be motivated to address involvement barriers.

STYLES OF COMMUNICATION. The style of communication can also greatly affect the collaboration between school professionals and family members. In fact, professionals can be totally unaware of how their communication style acts as a barrier, rather than a facilitator for communication with family members (Harry, 2008). Although there are a variety of ways to identify styles of communication, Friend and Cook (2009) promote the categorization system first conceptualized by Schmuck and Runkel (1994), in which they identified communication as *unilateral, directive,* or *transactional.* Educators need to familiarize themselves with the various styles of communication prior to identifying which style is most appropriate for the specific communication and collaboration desired at that moment (Figure 4.2).

- ***Unilateral communication.*** A unilateral communication style is a one-way exchange, such as an announcement, phone message, e-mail, or letter home. Although unilateral communication may be efficient, it may also be limited in its ability to establish a collaborative culture (Adler et al., 2009). For many non-English-speaking parents of students with special needs, the least desirable mode of communication for exchanging important information is generally phone calls (Park & Turnbull, 2001; Song & Murawski, 2005). The unilateral approach would be most appropriate for quick information that can be disseminated easily via letters, memos, posters, or e-mails (e.g., The school dance will be on February 13 from 5 to 9 p.m. in the auditorium. Tickets are $5 each.).

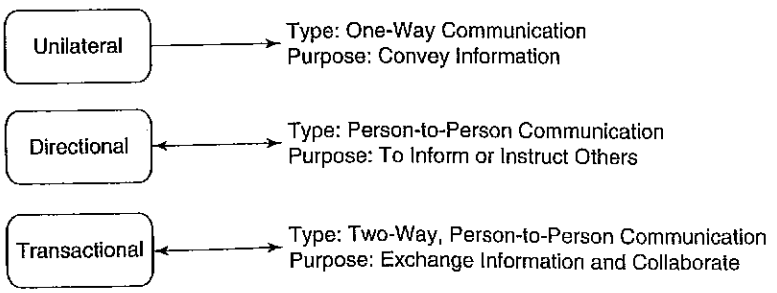


FIGURE 4.2 Styles of Communication

- ***Directive communication.*** Directive communication involves person-to-person contact and usually resembles consultation more than collaboration. Typically, school personnel are the *experts* or *consultants,* whereas the family member or student is seen as the *novice* or *consultee.* This approach is somewhat *interactive* in nature (Adler et al., 2009) because it involves more than one individual; however, it does not demonstrate the parity evident when two equal parties confer collaboratively. The directive approach is most appropriate when individuals are sharing information about which they are considered *expert* (e.g., a lecture, a teacher describing a unit students are doing in class, a mother explaining her son's interests and chores at home).
- ***Transactional communication.*** Professionals and families demonstrate the transactional approach when they are willing to listen to and communicate with one another. During meetings or interactions, all parties have input, and all input is equally valued. The open environment enables all participants to feel comfortable, valued, respected, and interested in sharing, as well as listening to what the other party has to say. However, not every interaction needs to be one that is transactional in nature. There are times when the other approaches are more appropriate and time efficient. The style of communication should reflect the purpose for communicating with parents.

CULTURAL INFLUENCES. Cultural factors are a major influence on collaboration and communication between families and schools. In Chapters 5 and 6, we address the major issues in this area; however, it is still important to mention some of the predominant cultural issues that influence home–school collaboration. School professionals need to develop competency in cross-cultural communication; this does not mean simply learning to speak a different language. In fact, the attitudes and beliefs one has about cultural differences often create more barriers to cross-cultural communication than the language itself (MPC, 2000a). Because cultural beliefs and expectations influence the priorities and concerns of families, school professionals must be aware of, sensitive to, and understanding of these varying priorities and concerns. Schools need to provide family members with an environment that is respectful of their culture and their children, and teachers should recognize the difficulties cultural differences can create for parents and children (DeLaTorre, Rubalcava, & Cabello, 2004; Harry, 2008).

Although culture can influence collaborative efforts in many ways, a major influence is the value families place on collaboration and how they believe it should manifest itself. For example, some families may value frequent input from other family members or friends, resulting in children turning more to their peers for support, especially in large classes where the teacher cannot give each child specific attention (MPC, 2000b). On the other hand, despite this value of a collaborative environment, those same parents may not be as quick to collaborate with school officials. Although professionals expect parents to advocate for their child, such advocacy may be against the parents' cultural values (Wang et al., 2004). A family may believe that it is disrespectful to question authority figures, such as a teacher. Thus, they may choose to attend meetings but never volunteer requests, questions, or comments (e.g., Park & Turnbull, 2004; Song & Murawski, 2005). Understanding cultural differences can help educators understand how to work with and help children in a manner that is respectful of the student and his or her family.

Janica's mom, Melisa, works two jobs to support her three children. Because of her work schedule, she rarely has time to attend school events or meetings. Back-to-School night is coming up, and Melisa's children beg her to attend so that she can meet their teachers. Melisa is scheduled to work the night of the event and doesn't feel that she can miss a night's work—so she doesn't go. Janica and her siblings are disappointed. They assume that they are the only students in their classes who didn't go to Back-to School night. Although Melisa felt bad, she wasn't sure that her involvement was valued, or that she could contribute much to her children's education.

You can support parents like Melisa by sending home information or by scheduling meetings when they can attend. Although you may firmly believe that Melisa should attend meetings and support school activities, respecting her priorities communicates sensitivity to her life and circumstances (Friend & Cook, 2009; Wang et. al., 2004).

FIGURE 4.3 A case study

Barriers to Communicating and Collaborating

A person's experiences, interests, cultural background, education, age, and gender, among other variables, influence an individual's *frame of reference* (Friend & Cook, 2009). Because families and school personnel often have different frames of reference when coming together to discuss students, conflicts are bound to arise. Using strong communication skills (both verbal and nonverbal) can help mitigate and avoid some of those issues but being aware of the common barriers that occur when communicating is also helpful. Pugach and Johnson (2002) described actions that create barriers to quality communication. These behaviors often engender miscommunication and become barriers for collaboration.

1. ***Avoid giving unsolicited advice or providing quick fixes to problems.*** Educators are prepared to be problem solvers and are often rightly expected to be the *experts* in educational issues. Teachers may feel that they will be judged as incompetent if they are unable to quickly *solve* an educational issue. This can lead to hasty, and at times ineffective or even undesired, advice. However, advice is more effective if it is sought after, rather than given when it is unsolicited (Friend & Cook, 2009).
2. ***Avoid minimizing feelings through false reassurances, clichés, and so forth.*** School professionals who minimize issues and broadly state that things will work out, without truly paying attention to the parents' concerns, will be viewed as dismissive and uninterested. Quickly dismissing a parents' concern may result in the parent not sharing other important issues in the future. Using clichés is also inappropriate. "Cliches diminish the feelings of the person with whom you are interacting. . . . In virtually no situation is a cliché an appropriate response" (Pugach & Johnson, 2002, p. 99). In addition to demonstrating a lack of true understanding, a cliché can also result in stereotyping and can make others uncomfortable.
3. ***Ask appropriate questions and actively listen.*** Question asking is a skill critical for effective communication. *Misdirected questions* hinder effective communication. Educators who ask too many questions, irrelevant questions, unfocused questions, or the wrong types of questions (e.g., closed vs. open) are likely to find that communication is choppy and unproductive. Practicing good question-asking skills can result in improved family interactions (Figure 4.4).

Mrs. Davies meets with you and expresses concern that her son Jung Su is not organized and frequently misplaces homework and assignments.

Don't Give Advice

"You should buy new binders and teach Jung Su how to be organized."

Do Say

"How can I help at school?" or, "I'm glad you brought that up. I've been concerned Jung Su's organizational skills as well."

****

When discussing Mikah's reading problems with his parents, the father says, "I had difficulty learning to read when I was a child."

Don't Use Clichés

"The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, does it?"

Do Say

"Based on your experience, what are your concerns for Mikah?" or, "How did you feel about reading?"

****

Mr. and Mrs. Kuja meet with you and express their worry about their son's temper tantrums. You have observed mild behavior problems in your classroom.

Don't Falsely Assure

"He's still young, that's probably normal. I'm sure he'll grow out of it."

Do Say

"I'd like to know more about what happens at home," or, "Please describe your concerns."

****

Mr. and Mrs. Kiernan are at an IEP meeting and share that they are more concerned with their son Patrick's social interactions and peer relationships than with the academic side of school.

Don't Dismiss Feelings

"That's something you can address outside of school. My job is to focus on academic learning."

Do Say

"Do you have suggestions for how we can support Patrick's social development at school?" or, "I can understand how that would be a concern for you."

****

During a parent–teacher conference, you learn that Justin's parents have recently separated.

Don't Ask Inappropriate Questions

"Do you think you're going to divorce soon?" or, "Was infidelity involved?"

Do Say

"Do you have suggestions for how I can support Justin at school?" or, "Do you have concerns for Justin?"

FIGURE 4.4 Examples of communication do's and don'ts.

4. ***Schedule meetings when you can focus your attention.*** Unfocused interactions can negatively affect collaboration and communication. If parents notice that you are distracted and trying to do other work while meeting with them, they will rightfully question your commitment to being collaborative. If you do not have time to discuss important issues with parents or have work to complete at the time of interaction with

parents, share these barriers to time and attention with them. If they catch you at a bad time and it's not an emergency, schedule a specific time to meet with them later.

5. ***Minimize interruptions.*** One of the most frustrating barriers to good communication is constant *interruption.* Interruptions can be external (e.g., phones ringing, people opening the door during meetings) or internal (e.g., team members interrupting each other with comments). The key to addressing both types of interruptions is to be proactive. For example, schedule meetings in places less likely to have interruptions. Place signs on the door stating *Meeting in Progress* and *Do Not Disturb.* Ask all participating team members to put their phone ringers on vibrate, and make certain that other school professionals know that you are not to be interrupted during this time. Do not send text messages during meetings.

Other barriers to effective collaboration relate to individuals' differing agendas or goals. Friend and Cook (2009) define collaboration as "a style for direct interaction between at least two coequal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision making *as they work toward a common goal* [italics added]" (p. 5). If both parties do not take the time to ensure that they

TABLE 4.1 Collaborative Approaches: Examples of Do's and Don'ts

Approach	Do say	Don't say
Describe, don't evaluate	"Johnny has been tardy four times this week."	"Why aren't you able to bring Johnny to school on time?"
Collaborate, don't control	"Let's discuss placement options for Javier. To make a decision, I think it would be helpful if we all discussed pros and cons of the placement options."	"Javier needs to be in a special school. Sign your consent right here."
Be honest, not strategic	"In order to provide the continued support that Sheree needs, I'd like to work with her in the inclusive classroom with other students who are receiving speech and language services."	"I don't think Sheree needs as much individual speech and language therapy with me."
Express empathy, not disinterest	"It sounds like you are worried about how to help your grandson cope with his parents' divorce."	"Well, divorce is hard on kids."
Communicate parity, not superiority	"I have had some classes in behavior management if you'd like to talk about strategies to use at home and school with Jeremy."	"You really shouldn't spank your son. Haven't you ever heard of positive behavior support?"
Use provisional language, avoid definitive statements	"In my opinion, Jiyun will struggle with the academics of a general education class. Can we talk about the level of support Jiyun needs in school?"	"Jiyun will never succeed in a general education class."

are actually interested in the same goal, the result is often wasted time and growing frustration. Although educators and family members enter a conversation with the common goal of *meeting the child's best interests,* this may mean different things to the different participants based on their own frames of reference (e.g., Harry, 2006). Be cognizant of individuals' agendas, and during meetings take time to understand parents' perspectives and agendas.

Collaborative Attitudes

The attitude with which two parties come together affects the success of the collaborative efforts. Gibb (1961) identified behaviors that can support positive collaborative cultures. They continue to be validated by more recent research and literature. An adapted version of these behaviors follows:

- ***Use descriptive messages, rather than evaluative ones.*** It is easier for others to accept statements that appear to merely describe a situation, as opposed to statements that contain value judgments. Value statements reflect judgments of what should be or should exist (i.e., a child should not be tardy) and are usually expressed in terms of something being "good" or "bad."
- ***Use a collaborative message, rather than a controlling one.*** Demonstrating to the other person that you are willing to be part of the solution, as opposed to telling them what to do, will more effectively establish a collaborative culture.
- ***Use an honest approach, rather than a strategic one.*** Forthrightness provides a clear understanding of a child's situation and does not obscure real issues. To create the trust and respect necessary for a strong collaborative climate, an honest approach is best.
- ***Use an empathetic approach, rather than a neutral or casual one.*** Collaborative climates require participants to understand one another. If one individual feels dismissed, irrelevant, or that the other party is indifferent to his or her concerns, then that person will not feel supported. Both parties need to be sensitive and empathetic to each other's needs.
- ***Use an equal approach, rather than a superior one.*** Teachers are *experts* in educational practices; parents are *experts* on their children. When working together to create a collaborative culture, both parties need to use statements that demonstrate their feelings of parity, not superiority.
- ***Use a provisional approach, rather than a certain, definitive approach.*** For a climate to remain positive, open, and communicative, all participants need to demonstrate that they are amenable to one another's ideas. An individual who seems to have a need to be right all the time may unconsciously close efforts at communication. Your communication should reflect your professional judgment but should also identify your statements as opinions, not facts, and should reflect an openness to others' ideas. Do not present opinions as facts, and avoid definitive statements such as *always* and *never.* Use language that informs parents that you are expressing your opinion, such as, "In my opinion, I think that Jeremy would benefit from ..." Ask parents what they think, or invite them to share their perspectives and opinions.

As a final note related to collaborative and communicative climates, remember that each family is different and has its own preferences—even family members within the same family may have differences. A particular Asian family, for example, may wait for invitations to participate in meetings or may only respond to communication rather than initiating it (Song &

TABLE 4.2 Intended Communications

Type of nonverbal communication	Communication	Purpose for nonverbal communication
Face, eyes, and touch	A teacher smiles, looks at the parent, and extends her hand to shake theparent's hand.	To communicate friendliness and a desire to collaborate with the parents.
Touch	A mother tells a teacher that her spouse is seriously ill. The teacher touches the mother's arm.	To express sympathy and concern.
Touch and voice	A student is misbehaving, and the teacher holds the student's hand and uses a firm voice to tell the student to stop the behavior.	To communicate displeasure and disapproval.
Dress	A teacher's class is going to a field trip to the beach to study tide pools. The teacher wears jeans and a sweat jacket to school.	To participate in an activity with students.
Dress	A teacher arrives at an IEP meeting dressed in slacks, a button-up shirt, and a jacket.	To project a professional attitude toward work and collaboration.
Silence	During a meeting, a teacher asks parents if they have any comments. The teacher waits for the parents to respond.	To allow parents to contribute to meetings.

Murawski, 2005), but this does not mean that all Asian families will have the same preferences. Furthermore, even within that same family, the father may prefer to communicate via e-mail, the mother may want to communicate face-to-face, and the grandparents may wish to use an interpreter. Some families view frequent communication as necessary for collaboration, whereas other families may have time, work, and other pressures that make regular communication difficult. Thus, some families may be perfectly content with less frequent, yet still completely collaborative and positive, communication. In all situations, educators must identify the needs, goals, and preferences of each family with whom they wish to collaborate. Just as educators are familiar with the need to adapt to children's learning styles, we should be willing to adapt and be flexible to the communicative preferences of family members. "How do you learn about a family's preferences for communication? Simply ask" (Turnbull et al., 2006, p. 197).

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Communication is such an integral part of our lives that most of us don't consider how we communicate, and we don't pay attention to skills we use when we communicate. As a professional, you should evaluate your skills and identify areas in need of improvement to work effectively with parents and families of students with disabilities. Figure 4.5 summarizes purposes for communicating and facets of effective communication.

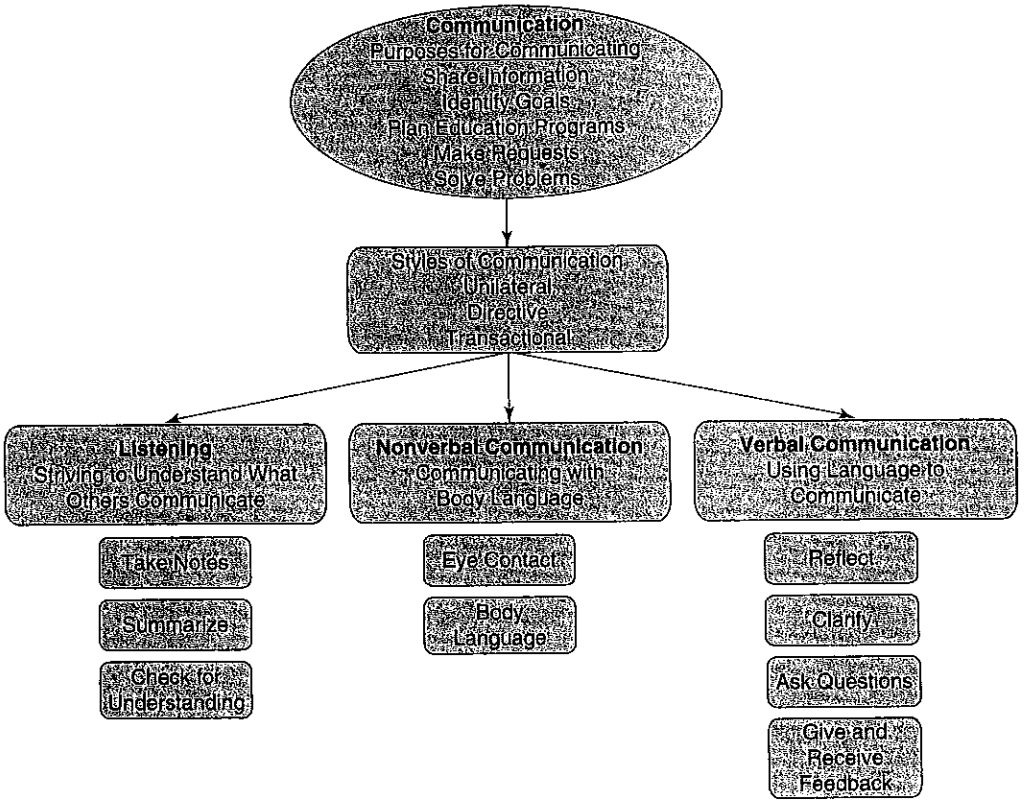


FIGURE 4.5 Communication skills

To ensure that communication is accurate and unambiguous, educators must also master foundations of good communication, including both verbal and nonverbal language (Pugach & Johnson, 2002). The skills involved in strong intra- and interpersonal communication include (a) creating a collaborative climate, (b) listening, (c) using nonverbal communication, including silence, and (d) using a variety of verbal language skills effectively (e.g., reflecting, clarifying, asking questions, giving and receiving feedback). In this section, we discuss active listening, nonverbal communication, and verbal communication.

Active Listening

Active listening is an important skill for any special educator. For individuals to feel their input is valued, they need to know that others are truly listening to them (Murawski & Spencer, in press). Active listening requires work and may not come easily, but there are techniques educators can use to improve these skills. First, school professionals need to consider the *location* of the interaction. A busy hallway right before class starts is not a good place for a quality conversation between teacher and parent. In situations like these, the teacher should ask the parent if they can reschedule the conversation at a time and place in which active listening can take place. The environment should be a quiet one, when the teacher is not feeling rushed, and when he or she can take notes on the conversation and respond appropriately to parents' concerns.

Mr. and Mrs. Weber scheduled a meeting with their son's third-grade teacher, Ms. Cox. When they arrived at Ms. Cox's classroom, she had Jared's folder on a table and was prepared for the meeting. When the special education teacher joined the meeting, Ms. Cox closed the classroom door and focused her attention on the parents. Ms. Cox began the meeting by greeting the parents and asking them to describe their concerns. The Webers told Ms. Cox and Mr. Jimeniz (the special education teacher) that they had noticed that Jared had difficulty comprehending stories. They related that when they read with him at home and asked him questions about stories they read, he had difficulty answering simple questions. The Webers were worried that Jared would fall farther behind in school if the problem wasn't addressed. Mr. Jimeniz acknowledged the parents' concerns. He said that although Jared was making good progress in basic reading skills, comprehension was still a problem. Ms. Cox agreed with Mr. Jimeniz' observations and asked the Webers if they had suggestions for addressing the problem. Mrs. Weber shared that when she read with Jared and previewed stories (looked at pictures and talked about the pictures before reading), Jared seemed to understand stories better. Mr. Jimeniz said that he had been teaching Jared comprehension strategies and thought his reading group would benefit as well. The Webers appreciated the teachers' willingness to help Jared and said that they would spend 30 minutes a day reading with him.

FIGURE 4.6 A case study

- ***Take notes to aid in active listening.*** Because teachers are bombarded with information daily about the students with whom they work, information can be lost or forgotten if it is not written down. In addition, in this day and age of documentation, educators will find it helpful to refer back to their notes to ensure accuracy, reduce chances of miscommunication, and summarize the information back to parents to demonstrate that they were listening.
- ***Summarize, paraphrase, clarify, and check for understanding when conversing with parents.*** These techniques will be discussed in more detail in the section on verbal language. We include them here because they are critical strategies for attentive listening. When teachers reiterate the main points of the conversation to family members, it shows that they were listening, and it helps to ensure that both parties share an understanding of the conversation. Wait until the other party has completed their thought and then restate, "What I'm hearing you say is . . ." This allows the provider to agree or disagree with the restatement (Figure 4.7).

Barriers to active listening include trying to conduct too many conversations at one time or trying to address too many issues simultaneously. Informal conversations that occur in the hallway or when educators are not fully focused can also lead to poor listening and poor content retention. Meetings that are scheduled too close to the teacher's class or other commitments result in educators glancing at the clock or appearing distracted,

You may find the use of *mnemonics* and other memory devices helpful in connecting information given in a conversation with information you already may have. For example, if parents come to a meeting and share numerous events that have clearly affected them emotionally, you may mentally number each event when listening. Then, to demonstrate that you were paying attention, you can respond by saying, "Wow. I can see how this month has been a real struggle for you and Gavin; I can't imagine how I would react if I had to deal with those four different issues. I really appreciate you sharing these with me so I can better understand why Gavin has been having such a hard time focusing and doing his work this month."

FIGURE 4.7 Teacher tip for communicating with parents

both of which are nonverbal messages to parents that the teacher is not actively attending to the interaction. Finally, all parties need to understand the purpose for the communication and the rationale for their involvement (Murawski & Spencer, in press); otherwise, a major barrier to listening will arise—a feeling from one or more of the participants that this doesn't relate to me, so I don't need to pay attention.

Nonverbal Communication

Facial expressions and body language can communicate desire and willingness to understand another person's perspective. Nonverbal communication has a greater impact on communication than use of language. In fact, up to 90% of the content of a message is conveyed through vocal inflections and nonverbal behaviors (Thomas et al., 2001). Nonverbal signals are strong indicators of good—or poor—communication skills (Snell & Janney, 2000).

Researchers have well established that behavior has a communicative value (Albin, Dunlap, & Lucyshyn, 2002; O'Neill, Horner, Albin, Storey, & Sprague, 1997). Nonverbal communication can be demonstrated through more than just eye contact and paralanguage (e.g., minimal encouragers). Types of nonverbal communication involve (a) face and eyes, (b) body movement, (c) touch, (d) voice, (e) proximity and territoriality, (f) time, (g) physical attractiveness, (h) clothing, and (i) environment (Adler et al., 2009). Most educators are aware that facial expressions, eyes, and body movements communicate feelings and attitudes. Tone of voice, the use of silence, dress, and environmental factors also communicate information, attitudes, and feelings to others. The use of silence, in particular, is an effective nonverbal tool. Silence enables all parties to reflect and consider the information that has been shared. It also provides an opportunity for all persons to participate, especially those who have been quiet up until this point. Educators need to work to resist the urge to fill all gaps in conversation or moments of silence with more words. Often, parents who have been reluctant or too shy to ask questions or seek clarification will seize these opportunities to do so.

For all types of nonverbal interactions, intended and unintended messages are conveyed to others. Table 4.3 illustrates what can be purposefully and inadvertently communicated through nonverbal communication.

Nonverbal behaviors can have an enormous effect on the success of collaborative interactions. During interactions, pay attention to your nonverbal behavior and the nonverbal behavior of parents (Adler et al., 2009). In evaluating parents' nonverbal behavior, you should be aware of stereotypical interpretations that may be inaccurate. For example, although crossed arms may be seen as a signal that a teacher or parent is closed off and less willing to communicate, it may also mean that the individual is cold or simply is comfortable with crossed arms. Eye contact is highly valued in mainstream American society, and individuals who cannot maintain eye contact are characterized as shifty, uncomfortable, shy, or disinterested. However, individuals may be from cultures that believe that direct eye contact is disrespectful and that they are showing their respect and absolute interest in conversations by averting their eyes. In addition, some family members may themselves have disabilities that affect various social skills. Even nonverbal minimal encouragers, such as a nod or eyebrow raise, that are designed to indicate listening and interest may vary in their use. Tannen (1990) demonstrated that the use of minimal encouragers often varies by gender; females tend to use them liberally to encourage continued conversation and show interest, whereas males often state

TABLE 4.3 Unintended Communications

Type of nonverbal communication	Communication	Unintended Message
Silence	At a meeting a teacher asks for comments, but quickly ends the meeting when no one speaks up immediately.	The teacher does not value the contributions of others.
Dress	A teacher wears a T-shirt and faded jeans to a meeting with parents.	The teacher is not concerned about her professional image.
Environment	A teacher asks parents to sit at a table in the back of her classroom. The table is covered with papers. The teacher has to move papers to make room for the parents.	The teacher is disorganized and doesn't value the parents' opinion.
Proximity	At an IEP meeting, a teacher moves her chair to sit right next to a mother. The teacher's chair touches the mother's chair.	The teacher does not understand professional boundaries.

that they believe they are showing more active listening by not interrupting at all. As in each of these cases, strive to understand students' parents so that misunderstandings are minimized.

Verbal Language

Educators constantly use language to communicate with others. Although some miscommunications are probably unavoidable, you can utilize techniques that will help reduce the frequency of miscommunications. Reflecting, clarifying and checking for understanding, and summarizing are ways to enhance the quality of verbal interactions. In addition, how questions are asked, the feedback provided to others, and the use of leading strategies can facilitate or hinder future communications.

REFLECTING. When reflecting, teachers rephrase or restate (also known as *paraphrasing*) what the speaker has said, including any affective or emotional aspects of the statements made. In reflecting what others say, do not add information or opinions or provide feedback. The purpose of reflecting is to demonstrate to the speaker that you are employing active listening and that you understand what has been said. Reflecting can help the speaker clarify meaning, assist the receiver to ensure that he understands the critical intent of the message, and allow both parties to check that they have the same interpretation of the conversation. When understanding has been achieved, individuals can have more in-depth discussions of issues.

Reflecting should not, however, feel like a parroting of the speaker's words, the result of which may be that the speaker becomes annoyed by a sense of psychobabble or pseudo-listening. For example, consider the following interaction.

Mrs. Smith states, "I'm very concerned with how my son Darien is doing in your class."
The teacher reflects, "You're very concerned with how Darien is doing in my class."
Mrs. Smith continues, "Yes. I think he can do better." The teacher repeats, "You think he can do better."
At which point, Mrs. Smith may respond, "That's what I just said!"
The teacher could have reflected, "You're frustrated that Darien is not doing as well as he could in my class."

The aforementioned example demonstrates how reflection often involves capturing the affective component of the statement (Friend & Cook, 2009) or what is being implied (e.g., the parent is most concerned about his performance in class). Stating the implied is a helpful communication skill but must be used with care to avoid making excessive assumptions; communicators should have a solid rapport prior to engaging in this technique (Pugach & Johnson, 2002).

CLARIFYING. Unlike reflecting, which is mainly restating ideas or verbalizing what has been implied, clarifying involves checking for understanding. As previously discussed, there are numerous opportunities for miscommunication among educators and family members based on cultural factors, frame of reference, differing goals or agendas, and so forth. Thus, teachers should frequently check for understanding. School professionals should be open to admitting that they do not understand information or that they did not get all the information because their attention was elsewhere for a moment. Given that one misunderstanding may lead to many more, immediately ask for clarification when you do not understand something that has been said. A benefit of using clarifying statements is that parents may recognize that asking for clarification is a welcome communicative device (see Figure 4.8).

SUMMARIZING. Summarizing statements or interactions is a great way to clarify what someone has said and discussed. Summarizing typically takes place after a substantial part of the interaction has taken place. Two main reasons exist for summarizing an interaction. First, it provides all parties involved an opportunity to hear the key points. They can then agree or disagree on what was said. If there is disagreement, then revision can take place by

Read the following statements, and identify which statements parents would and would not understand. How would you check for understanding and clarify meaning for the parents?

1. "I'm concerned that Javier may have an SLD. And if he does, we'd like to hold an IEP meeting to determine if this class is really his LRE. I'll try to schedule it for next week when the LEA will be in town and can attend the meeting. As long as we're going to assess Javier, I'll have the SLP assess him for language difficulties, that way we're covering everything and should have all the information we need for qualification."
2. "We've tested Eldon's reading ability and he scored fairly low in his ability to hear sounds in words. In scoring low in sound awareness, it's not that Eldon doesn't hear sounds and has a hearing problem; he hears sounds but has difficulty separating different sounds in words. He might think that cat is one sound unit instead of three separate sounds blended together."
3. Rosa scored at the 17th percentile for math reasoning. Her grade equivalent reading scores were 1.2 and 1.9, so I think reading is more of a concern at this point.

FIGURE 4.8 Clarifying understanding

clarifying. Second, summarizing makes public the actions that all individuals need to take, thus avoiding misunderstanding about agreements or next steps (Pugach & Johnson, 2002).

ASKING QUESTIONS. The manner in which questions are asked during an interaction between school professionals and parents can greatly improve or impede the conversation. Sincere questions are designed to clarify; learn about others' thoughts, feelings, and wants; encourage elaboration; and gather more facts and details. Insincere questions are "disguised attempts to send a message, not receive one" (Adler et al., 2009 p. 121). Using insincere questions, the question asker may try to trap the speaker, make a statement, cover a hidden agenda, seek a *correct* answer, or utilize questions that are based on unchecked assumptions. For example, when discussing placement options for Michelle, an insincere question would be, "So, are we all in agreement that Michelle should be placed in a self-contained classroom?" when in fact, placement has not previously been discussed. For effective communication, individuals need to practice asking sincere questions. A variety of types of questions can be used to elicit information and demonstrate a sincere interest to improve understanding, rather than a masked intent to advise or criticize. Familiarize yourself with the variety of types of questions and practice using each type effectively (see Table 4.4).

GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK. Continuous feedback is required in any interaction, as it indicates whether the sender's message has been received or not and, even if it was

TABLE 4.4 Types of Questions

Types of Questions	Definition	Example	Benefits and/or limitations
Closed Questions	With closed questions, limited responses are available. Closed questions include yes/no questions, multiple-choice questions, and questions that require specific answers.	• "Are you satisfied with Christien's progress in math?" • "Would you like him to be in prealgebra, algebra I, or geometry next year?"	Closed questions focus discussions and can be useful when making decisions.
Open Questions	There are no boundaries for answering open questions. Responses will vary from individual to individual.	• "What goals do you have for Christien in math next year?" • "How do you think he has been doing academically?"	Open questions tend to invite more perspectives, support divergent thinking, and encourage more open communication between participants.
Direct Questions	Direct questions are made by a speaker to a specific individual or group of people and are in interrogative form. The questions should be clear and straightforward, avoiding vague language, jargon, or assumptions.	• "What do you think is happening differently in Annalia's math and English classes that is resulting in such varied behavior from her?" • "Does Nicholas have any friends at home?"	Direct questions are straightforward and invite discussion and the exchange of information and ideas.

(*continued*)

TABLE 4.4 *(continued)*

Types of Questions	Definition	Example	Benefits and/or limitations
Indirect Questions	Indirect questions are phrased in the form of a statement and are typically broad questions that invite a variety of responses.	• "I wonder why Annalia behaves well in math and not in English?" • "It would be interesting to know if Nicholas has more friends when he's not at school than when he is here."	Indirect questions may put family members at ease. They are less formal and may not seem as imposing or threatening. However, indirect questions may lead to misunderstandings, and individuals may not answer if they do not perceive that they are expected to answer.
Single Questions	A single question is one question asked at a time. A teacher or parent asks a question and then waits for a response.	• "Is Joshua required to complete chores at home?" • "Does Angelica bring home her work folder?"	When single questions are asked, the respondent knows what to answer and can focus the response.
Multiple Questions	Multiple questions are numerous questions asked in succession. A person asking the questions does not allow time in between the questions for the respondent to answer.	• "Does Joshua have any chores at home? What type of chores? • Does he seem to do better at morning or evening chores or is he the same at both?"	When multiple questions are asked in succession, a parent or other professional may be unable to process effectively or choose how to answer appropriately. She may choose to answer part of the question, possibly leading to misunderstandings.

Sources: DeBoer (1995); Friend & Cook (2009); Gamble & Gamble (2009); Snell & Janney (2000).

received, whether or not it was received accurately (Pugach & Johnson, 2002). Feedback can be verbal (e.g., "Sure, I can get you a copy of that book I was mentioning") or nonverbal (e.g., a frown, questioning look, or smile). The following is a list of guidelines for providing feedback (Friend & Cook, 2009).

1. ***Feedback should be* descriptive, *rather than evaluative in nature.*** By avoiding judgments, recipients of the feedback are more likely to be open to receiving the information. For example, instead of saying, "You don't help Laquita with her homework enough," a teacher might say, "Laquita has only turned in her homework once a week for the last three weeks."
2. ***Feedback should be* specific, *rather than general.*** The preceding example regarding Laquita demonstrates specificity in the second statement. The teacher has given the parent specific detail regarding how often she has turned in her homework. Now the parent and the educator can look for solutions to this specific problem.

3. ***Feedback should be* directed toward behavior or a situation *that the individual can change.*** Telling a parent who works three jobs that her son might improve his behavior if she were to come and sit in the class a few times a week may frustrate a parent and demonstrate a lack of consideration for her situation. On the other hand, simply saying, "I am open to your input or assistance if you have suggestions," or "How would you like us to collaborate on this issue?" opens the conversation up to possibilities.
4. ***Feedback should also be* concise.** Too many details, extraneous information, irrelevant comments, or redundant observations can impede, rather than clarify, the feedback provided.
5. ***Feedback needs to be* checked to ensure clear communication.** The use of paraphrasing or questions can help ensure that feedback was received as it was intended.

Verbal feedback should be solicited, rather than imposed. In other words, when family members ask for feedback, they are more likely to be receptive to what you say, than if you provide information or feedback that they have not sought. Feedback can be given indirectly (e.g., through notes, messages, or a third party), but this is not recommended. To be most effective and to minimize potential misunderstandings, feedback should be given verbally and in a timely manner. For example, a comment given to a family member in a crowded grocery store on a Friday night, days after an event occurred, would be received differently than if the same comment had been delivered in an appropriate setting the same day the event occurred (Friend & Cook, 2009).

Sometimes feedback is not provided in an effective manner or received as intended. Two indications that misunderstandings have occurred are silence and aggressiveness (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2002). During interactions, if you notice that parents stop talking and become nonresponsive or that they argue with you and become verbally aggressive, miscommunications have probably occurred. A simple technique to clarify meaning is to state what you intended to communicate (e.g., "I wanted to communicate that I am concerned about your child's social skills."), and to contrast that with what you did not mean to inadvertently communicate (e.g., "I did not mean to communicate that I am criticizing your parenting.").

USING LEADING STRATEGIES. Leading strategies are valuable strategies for individuals who need to facilitate efficient and effective interactions between multiple parties (see Table 4.5). Although the strategies described in Table 4.5 can be very effective in encouraging parties to listen, share, and even to avoid or work through disagreements or difficult moments, the effectiveness of these strategies depends on listening to and trusting one another (DeBoer, 1995).

Reducing Miscommunication

One of the easiest ways to avoid miscommunication is to ask parents how they prefer to communicate. Teachers should avoid phone calls as the primary mode of exchanging important information with parents for whom English is a second language (Park & Turnbull, 2001; Song & Murawski, 2005). However, some parents prefer phone calls to written notes, and others prefer a combination of both approaches. Teachers should identify which families need interpreters or translated materials. For communications that are especially important, school officials should initiate follow-up calls, send letters, or speak face-to-face to check understanding.

TABLE 4.5 Leading Strategies and Examples

Leading Strategy	Examples
Explanations: Explanations involves paraphrasing, reflecting, and clarifying to ensure that all parties are in agreement.	"We have been discussing using a token economy with Sarah Grace. Token economies can take many forms. Let's review how it would look at school and how it would look at home."
Encouragement. Encouraging statements are statements that keep the conversation going by validating and supporting behaviors of others.	"As a single parent, it must be difficult dealing with Raudel's aggressiveness at home without any additional support. It's clear that you have been very consistent in your interactions with him. I'm impressed with how much progress he's made."
Assurances. Positive statements and assurances help build confidence.	"I'm excited about the different ideas we've shared. I know that many of them will be effective in working with Liang."
Suggestions. Offering suggestions provides individuals a chance to share ideas without assuming the role of an expert.	"I was thinking that Maria may respond to a peer buddy at school; what do you think?"
Agreement and Disagreement Statements. Agreement and disagreement statements need to be clear, unemotional, and phrased as "I" statements.	"I love the idea of using computer time to motivate Chad!" Or, I like the idea of giving Juli Anna one On-one-time, but I don't see when that can be done without taking away from the other students or having her miss critical academic time."
Spontaneous Humor. Humor used appropriately can defuse tension and help to create rapport. Always consider the context of interactions and individuals' cultures and sensitivities' when using humor.	"You'd think with all of this paperwork that educators have stock in lumber companies."

Good communication does not always mean that parents and school professionals will agree. Understanding is not equivalent to agreement. Misconceptions about communication are common. Adler et al. (2009) identified the following three major areas of communicative myths and misperceptions.

1. ***Myth: More communication is always better.*** In reality, too much talking can lead to difficulties and be unproductive. In fact, if the communication is all negative, more of it will only result in more negative results. Silence is a key tool in good communication, as it can allow the other members of the interaction to process what has been said and allow them to think about their response.
2. ***Myth: Open communication will solve all problems.*** Despite accepted wisdom, complete honesty is not always the best policy. Sometimes, it is better not to share honest opinions than to express them. For example, members of an IEP team meeting might be asked to share their beliefs regarding a child's abilities. If an educator honestly states that he does not think the child will obtain a typical school diploma, and the parent disagrees with that educator's assessment of the child's abilities, conflicts may arise. Instead, the educator might describe the child's current abilities, rather than sharing opinions of the child's future.

3. ***Myth: Communication is a natural ability.*** Most people can communicate without formal communication training. However, most individuals are also communicating at a level far below their potential (Adler et al., 2009). It seems important, therefore, for school professionals to receive instruction in communication skills. If educators want to glean the benefits of communicating and collaborating with families, they need to be adequately prepared in those skills; school administrators who assume that teachers all have an innate ability to do so will inevitably be disappointed.

School personnel can take a variety of actions to demonstrate to families a sincere desire to collaborate. Parents want professionals who are available and accessible beyond specific hours and locations of jobs (Nelson et al., 2004). They want professionals who are willing to take on responsibilities that may appear beyond the strict definition of their job tasks, and they want professionals who act like a friend or part of the family in relating to them or their child (Hughes-Lynch, 2010; Nelson et al., 2004). Although not all these may be possible all the time, school personnel can take steps to be more accessible, responsive, and friendly.

Ultimately, parents want communication that has quantity and quality (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Many parents prefer to keep the lines of communication open with educators but want their time and boundaries to be respected. The same holds true for educators (Nelson et al., 2004). Although both parties respect the need for ongoing collaboration, each also wants to avoid unnecessary and unproductive meetings, wasteful and time-consuming paperwork, and ambiguous or confusing communications. Schools need to ensure that parents have access to relevant information on their child, and they need to use positive communication strategies for sharing information and evaluations (Turnbull et al., 2006).

Problem Solving

When working with children with special needs, problems are bound to arise. What differentiates a collaborative home–school relationship from an indifferent, nonexistent, or hostile one is the manner in which all parties approach the problem-solving process. Educators who wish to have a productive, nonemotional and effective problem-solving session are wise to familiarize themselves with one of the many approaches available in education and related fields. Employing a structure, such as the five-step process can help all parties stay focused on the problem at hand, rather than resorting to emotion and frustration. All participants in the problem-solving session need to be aware of the steps and structure of the process, so that there is increased buy-in and equal participation by all. Various authors espouse approaches with different steps in the problem-solving process, but many agree on the following five steps as the most important.

1. ***Identify the problem.*** The first step requires that school professionals and parents agree on the problem. Too often, meetings are called, and it is assumed that everyone knows the reason for the meeting. Unfortunately, this can result in frequent miscommunication and misunderstandings—ultimately harming the communication and problem-solving process, rather than helping it.
2. ***Generate potential solutions.*** After agreeing on the problem, the team should generate potential solutions. If all participants feel equally valued and believe their input is encouraged, they will contribute more solutions to address the problem.

An IEP meeting is called to discuss Denzel, a fourth grader who has increasingly been fighting other boys and is concurrently failing his classes. At this meeting, the teacher is focused on the fighting and wants to determine why Denzel's behavior has changed recently. She thinks that if the aggressive behavior is addressed, his academic grades will improve. Denzel's parents, however, are not interested in talking about why Denzel might be fighting others; his father is a former boxer and feels that fighting is part of a young boy's rite of passage and that Denzel will grow out of it soon enough. Denzel hasn't had any incidents in the classroom itself. All fighting has occurred at recess, lunch, or after school, so the parents are confused about why the teacher is involved at all. In the meantime, though, they are concerned about Denzel's grades. They have impressed on him that grades are critical, and Denzel's dad states, "That boy knows we don't tolerate bad grades. He gets a whuppin' if he brings home less than a B." The first thing these parents and school officials need to do is agree on the problem that they are meeting to resolve. Is it Denzel's fighting or his grades? Or is it something else? By going through the problem-solving process and discussing their differing views on the problem, they can come to consensus. In this case, both parties agree that they want Denzel to improve his grades, even though they may continue to disagree about how much the fighting was affecting that area of his life.

FIGURE 4.9 A case study

The following bullet points provide some rules for brainstorming that can be extremely beneficial in helping teachers and parents generate solutions for multifaceted problems.

- Accept all ideas.
- Do not eliminate ideas that do not seem feasible.
- Present ideas as "rapid-fire" as possible.
- Generate as many ideas as possible.
- Invite all members of the group to suggest solutions.
- Write down suggestions as presented—do not reword ideas.
- Do not cut off brainstorming prematurely.

3. ***Evaluate the potential solutions.*** After brainstorming potential solutions, participants should determine which ones are feasible. Family members and educators should have equal input into which solutions are reasonable and which are not. Some suggestions may work for teachers but be too much work or time consuming for parents—and vice versa. Other suggestions may be cost prohibitive; all participants need to be willing to be open and honest about the drawbacks they see for each possible solution. At the same time, they need to be open-minded about the possibilities of different options in addressing the problem. Before the end of the meeting, participants need to agree on one or more solutions to the problem.
4. ***Implement the selected solutions.*** Once solutions have been selected and before they are implemented, parents and teachers need to discuss exactly what they will be doing, how they will be doing it, and for how long (Figure 4.10). This step is particularly critical if both the school and the home are involved in the intervention. If, for example, Emma Leigh's parents agree to reinforce her every time she comes home with a signed progress report, the teacher will need to ensure that she signs the report regularly and doesn't run out of time or forget to do it.
5. ***Evaluate the results of the solution.*** After implementation, school officials and family members meet again to discuss the outcomes of the solution and determine whether success was attained. Participants discuss why and how the intervention was or was not successful. This affords both parties an opportunity to build on the

Step 1: Identify the problem. Be specific and clearly describe the problem to be solved.

_____

_____

Step 2: Generate potential solutions. Brainstorm solutions, and list all ideas presented.

_____ _____ _____

_____ _____ _____

Step 3: Evaluate the proposed solutions. Determine which solutions are feasible to implement, and address the needs and interests of all parties involved. List the best solutions.

_____

_____

From the list of solutions, select a solution or solutions that will be implemented.

_____

Step 4: Implement the solution. Determine when and how the solution will be implemented.

_____

_____

Step 5: Plan to evaluate the results. Schedule a follow-up meeting, and discuss and describe how the effectiveness of the solution will be evaluated.

Next meeting: _____

Criteria for evaluating the solution:

_____

Notes:

FIGURE 4.10 Problem-solving process form

success for the future or to examine why the intervention was not effective and what changes need to occur. In either case, it is critical that both family members and educators come back together to assess the progress of the intervention. A common mistake is that team members do not meet again, which can result in later frustrations, ongoing miscommunications, and continuing issues for the child.

Resolving Conflict Constructively

Even when educators and parents effectively work together to plan a child's education or to address problems, conflicts can occur. Any time individuals with different goals or frames of reference come together, such as parents and educators, there is the potential for conflict. Conflict in education is unavoidable and is neither good nor bad. Judgments about conflict determine whether conflict is perceived as having positive or negative outcomes (Knackendoffel, 2005; Murawski & Spencer, in press). In special education, conflicts generally center on the design of educational programs, service delivery, and relationships between professionals and parents (Hughes-Lynch, 2010). Disagreements can arise in many areas such as assessing students to determine eligibility for special education services. Parents and educators may not agree with assessment results or on determinations of eligibility. Making placement decisions and decisions about the type and extent of services students receive can also be areas of disagreement (Hughes-Lynch, 2010). Schools are constrained by budgets, and parents may desire services the school is not prepared to provide. In addition, educators may not deliver services specified in students'

IEPs. Finally, conflicts can arise when trust is violated, communication breaks down, and cultural barriers are not addressed in parent and teacher relationships (Feinburg, Beyer, & Moses, 2002).

To resolve conflict constructively, the conflict must be identified and understood (Morse & Ivey, 1996; Snell & Janney, 2005). Not all conflict needs to be addressed head-on. Some conflict is best resolved through ignoring, particularly conflict that occurs infrequently or is unusual (e.g., a team member acting unusual because of having a stressful day). Other conflict can be handled through indirect confrontation through modeling the desired behaviors or via direct confrontation by applying the problem-solving process steps. Conflict management is a special example of the problem-solving process. The steps of the process, when shared with all the participating parties, help those in conflict remove the emotionality and focus on achieving consensus and resolution. When using the problem-solving process to resolve conflicts, utilizing effective communication skills such as identifying frame of reference, asking questions, and employing active listening facilitates problem resolution.

NEGOTIATING. Listening and understanding the perspectives of others is critical for negotiating solutions to problems. Although you may not consider yourself a negotiator, you probably engage in informal negotiations every day and don't even realize that you are negotiating solutions to problems. When conflicts arise, negotiation strategies need to be more conscious and deliberate (Knackendoffel, 2005). The following four principles of negotiation can be used when addressing conflicts.

1. ***Preserve relationships.*** Separate the person from the problem, and strive to understand the other person's concerns.
2. ***Focus on interests, not on opposing positions.*** The following questions can be asked to identify interests.
   a. Why does an individual want what he or she wants?
   b. What does the individual dislike about your position?
   c. What are common goals or shared interests (e.g., Do both parties want the child to excel academically?)?
   d. Are the individual's interests centered on basic human needs such as security, sense of belonging, control over one's life, or recognition?
3. ***Discuss options for mutual gain (emphasize "win-win" solutions).*** The problem-solving process involves brainstorming and generating solutions to problems. When resolving conflicts, strive to identify options that are mutually satisfactory (Davidson & Wood, 2004). Refrain from judging ideas before solutions are agreed on.
4. ***Use objective criteria for evaluating decisions.*** For example, cost or feasibility may be the criterion for making decisions and resolving issues (Knackendoffel, 2005).

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES. As individuals encounter problems and enter negotiations to solve them, they generally utilize different conflict management styles. Although a variety of conflict management styles exist (e.g., Cornille, Pestle, & Vanwy, 1999; Rudawsky & Lundgren, 1999; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974), successful educators know that styles can change. In fact, it is wise to recognize that different styles may be needed based on the situation, the people involved, and the desired goals. Therefore, you should become familiar with the advantages and disadvantages of different styles for specific situations (Adler et al., 2009). Styles of conflict management most commonly

Mr. and Mrs. Alonzo's daughter, Rosa, has learning disabilities. For the past 2 years she has qualified for special education services in math and has received remedial instruction in the special education classroom. Rosa's achievement in math has improved to the point that she no longer qualifies for special education services. Although Mr. and Mrs. Alonzo are pleased with Rosa's progress in math, they are concerned that she will fall behind again if she does not have support at school. When her parents meet with the IEP team, they request that Rosa continue to receive math instruction in the resource class. They do not have the means to hire private tutors for Rosa, and they expect the school to provide the instructional support Rosa needs. The special education teacher has a full case load and does not believe that she should continue to provide services for Rosa. Rosa's general education teacher has 30 students in her class, and although she is willing to provide some individualized instruction for Rosa, she doubts that she can provide all the support Rosa will need to continue to progress in math.

Thought questions:

What might threaten relationships in this situation?
What are the parents' interests, and what are the teachers' interests?
What common goals do the teachers and parents have regarding Rosa's education?
What "win-win" options would reflect the interests of the parents and the teachers?
What criteria could be used to evaluate potential solutions?

FIGURE 4.11 Case study problem

used are competitive, avoidance, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating (Friend & Cook, 2009; Knackendoffel, 2005; Ragin et al., 2000). A description of each style follows.

- ***Competitive style.*** Competitive individuals try to overpower other people. They focus on winning and are not as concerned about relationships. Competitive styles may be appropriate in some situations (e.g., when ethical issues are at stake), but in most cases, competitive styles are not conducive to forming collaborative relationships.
- ***Avoidance style.*** Individuals who are not comfortable with conflict may avoid confrontations and often appear apathetic or indifferent to the concerns of others. Avoiders may refuse to discuss problems. Avoidance may be appropriate when situations are emotionally charged or when there is not enough time for discussing issues. However, when issues are not discussed, problems can worsen if left unaddressed.
- ***Accommodating style.*** An accommodating individual tends to defer to others. For teachers, it may be easier in some situations to accommodate the concerns of others than to assert one's own position. Accommodating may be appropriate when issues are relatively unimportant (e.g., a teacher agrees to let a coteacher teach the main part of a lesson). However, if an individual frequently accommodates others, the individual may feel resentment if his or her interests are not met.
- ***Compromising style.*** Compromising involves negotiating and occurs when both parties give up something (e.g., a teacher may agree to a higher case load if the principal agrees to increase the number of paraprofessionals assigned to the teacher's class). Compromising may be appropriate when there are time constraints for making decisions and resolving problems. With compromising, individuals may agree on solutions in the short term; however, in the long term, individuals may be dissatisfied with compromises, and conflicts may surface again in the future.

- ***Collaborating style.*** Collaborating involves cooperating with others to develop new solutions to problems that meet the goals and objectives of all parties. Although collaboration is the preferred style for working with parents and other professionals, collaboration is often time consuming and may not be appropriate for all situations.

In the past, schools were isolated arenas in which teachers had the final say in the education of children. Doors were closed, and questions were discouraged. In today's more open society, interaction between educators and families is encouraged and, in some instances, even mandated. As has been stated, conflict is bound to arise when individuals with different backgrounds, expectations, interests, and skills interact. The strategies discussed in this section can help you resolve conflicts. Researchers have documented that conflict that is resolved constructively, is managed effectively, and is functional in nature can result in improved outcomes. Such outcomes include developing stronger interpersonal communication, improving clarity of purpose, generating new ideas and decision making, stimulating thinking, and increasing trust (Snell & Janney, 2000; Turnbull et al., 2006). Developing effective conflict resolution skills takes time. In addition to studying and implementing the strategies described in this section in your practice, take advantage of training offered in your school district and plan to expend time and effort to continually refine your communication and collaboration skills.

Summary

- The role of families in communicating and collaborating with schools has evolved over time. Today families and schools work more together than in previous times.
- Collaboration is a style of interaction that involves parity, communication, and mutual goals.
- Benefits of collaboration include mutual support, shared knowledge, and supported student learning.
- Important elements of collaboration include parity, common goals, trust and respect, styles of communication, and cultural influences.
- School personnel can avoid barriers to collaboration by engaging in specific behaviors.
- The attitude with which individuals come together affects the success of the collaborative efforts.
- Educators should master foundations of good communication, including active listening, nonverbal communication, and verbal language.
- When problem solving, educators should avoid emotional responses and rely on a step-by-step process.
- Conflict in education is unavoidable and neither good nor bad. Conflict can be resolved through the application of specific skills.

Linking Standards to Chapter Content

After reading this chapter, you should be able to link basic knowledge and skills described in the CEC Standards and INTASC Principles with information provided in this text. Table 4.6, Linking CEC Standards and INTASC Principles to Major Chapter topics, gives examples of how they can be applied to each major section of the chapter.

TABLE 4.6 Linking CEC Standards and INTASC Principles to Major Chapter Topics

Major Chapter Headings	CEC Knowledge and Skill Core Standard and Associated Subcategories	INTASC Core Principle and Associated Special Education Subcategories
Overview of Communicating and Collaborating with Families	1: Foundations ICC1K4: Rights and responsibilities of students, parents, teachers, and other professionals and schools related to exceptional learning needs ICC1K7: Family systems and the role of families in the educational process ICC1K8: Historical points of view and contribution of culturally diverse groups	1: Subject Matter 1.01 Special education teachers have a solid understanding of the major concepts, assumptions, issues, and processes of inquiry in the subject matter that they teach. 1.04 All teachers have knowledge of the major principles and parameters of federal disabilities legislation
Barriers to Effective Collaboration and Communication	3: Individual Learning Differences ICC3K3: Variations in beliefs, traditions, and values across and within cultures and their effects on relationships among individuals with exceptional learning needs, family, and schooling. 6: Communication ICC6K3: Ways of behaving and communicating among cultures that can lead to misinterpretation and misunderstanding 10: Collaboration ICC10K3: Concerns of families of individuals with exceptional learning needs and strategies to help address these concerns ICC10K4: Culturally responsive factors that promote effective communication and collaboration with individuals with exceptional learning needs, families, school personnel, and community members ICC10S3: Foster respectful and beneficial relationships between families and professionals	3.03 All teachers understand that a disability can be perceived differently across families, communities, and cultures based on differing values and belief systems. 3.04 All teachers understand and are sensitive to cultural, ethnic, gender, . and linguistic differences that may be confused with or misinterpreted as manifestations of a disability 3.06 Special education teachers seek to understand how having a child with disabilities may influence a family's views of themselves as caregivers and as members of their communities 3.07 Special education teachers share the values and beliefs underlying special education services for individuals with disabilities in the United States, with students, families, and community members and seek to understand ways in which these are compatible or in conflict with those of the family and community. 3.09 Special education teachers actively ask questions, seek information from others, and take actions to guard against inappropriate assessment and identification of students whose cultural, ethnic, gender, and linguistic differences may be confused with manifestations of a disability.

(*continued*)

TABLE 4.6 *(continued)*

Major Chapter Headings	CEC Knowledge and Skill Core Standard and Associated Subcategories	INTASC Core Principle and Associated Special Education Subcategories
		9.07 Special education teachers reflect on their personal biases and influences of these biases on the instruction they provide to students with disabilities, and on the interactions they have with families, and community
Communication Skills	5: Learning Environments and Social Interactions ICC5K8: Ways to create learning environments that allow individuals to retain and appreciate their own and each others' respective language and cultural heritage. GC5S5: Use skills in problem solving and conflict resolution 8: Assessment ICC8S1: Gather relevant background information 9: Professional and Ethical Practice ICC9S8: Use verbal, nonverbal, and written language effectively 10: Collaboration ICC10S7: Use group problem-solving skills to develop, implement and evaluate collaborative activities 10: Collaboration ICC10S10: Communicate effectively with families of individuals with exceptional learning needs from diverse backgrounds	6.05 All teachers are sensitive to the verbal and non-verbal messages they may convey to students with disabilities through their interactions during instruction. 6.06 All special education teachers know how to assess, design, and implement strategies that foster the language and communication development of students with disabilities, including non-verbal and verbal communication. 9.04 All teachers reflect on the potential interaction between a student's cultural experiences and their disability. 10.05 All special education teachers provide leadership that enables teams to accomplish their purposes.
Collaborative Practices	5: Learning Environments and Social Interactions ICC5S1: Create a safe, equitable, positive and supportive learning environment in which diversities are valued 7: Instructional Planning ICC7K4: Technology for planning and managing the teaching and learning environment ICC7S2: Develop and implement comprehensive, longitudinal individualized programs in	6.07 Special education teachers are familiar with a variety of types of assistive communication devices and know how to access support specialists and services within and outside the school setting. 7.08 Special education teachers provide for the active involvement of students, families, and other professionals in constructing the student's education program. 9.05 All special education teachers reflect on the progress of individual

(continued)

TABLE 4.6 *(continued)*

Major Chapter Headings	CEC Knowledge and Skill Core Standard and Associated Subcategories	INTASC Core Principle and Associated Special Education Subcategories
	collaboration with team members ICC7S3: Involve the individual and family in setting instructional goals and monitoring progress GC7S4: Select, design, and use technology, materials, and resources required to educate individuals whose disabilities interfere with communication 8: Assessment ICC8S7: Report assessment results to all stakeholders using effective communication skills. 9: Professional and Ethical Practice ICC9S12: Engage in professional activities that benefit individuals with exceptional learning needs, their families, and one's colleagues 10: Collaboration ICC10S4: Assist individuals with exceptional learning needs and their families in becoming active participants in the educational team ICC10S5: Plan and conduct collaborative conferences with individuals with exceptional learning needs and their families	students with disabilities and work with general education teachers, other professionals, and families to consider ways to build on the students' strengths and meet their needs. 10.04 All teachers accept families as full partners in planning appropriate instruction and services for students with disabilities and provide meaningful opportunities for them to participate as partners in their children's instructional programs and in the life of the school. 10.08 Special education teachers include, promote, and facilitate family members as partners on parent-professional, interdisciplinary, and interagency teams. 10.09 Special education teachers collaborate with families and with school and community personnel to include students with disabilities in a range of instructional environments in the school and community.

Sources: Council for Exceptional Children (2005); Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium INTASC Special Education Subcommittee (May 2001).

Web Resources

INTERNET SUPPORT—ORGANIZATIONS

www.pacer.org/—PACER is the Minnesota Parent Training and Information Center.

www.allkindsofminds.org/—All Kinds of Minds translates the latest research on how children learn into a framework that educators can use.

www.beachcenter.org/—The Beach Center is designed to enhance the quality of life of families and individuals affected by disability.

http://www.thearcoftexas.org/—The ARC of Texas provides information, support, and services to persons with intellectual disabilities.

http://www.supportforfamilies.org/internetguide/index.html—Support for Families of Children with Disabilities provides Internet resources for families of children with disabilities.

http://www.familyvoices.org/—Family Voices aims to achieve family-centered care for all children with special health-care needs and/or disabilities.

http://www.netnet.net./mums/—MUMS is a national parent-to-parent organization for parents of a child with any disability.

http://www.fathersnetwork.org/—The Fathers' Network's mission is to celebrate and support fathers and families raising children with special needs and developmental disabilities.

http://www.specialchild.com/—Special Child is an online publication for parents of children with special needs.

http://www.ldonline.org/—LD OnLine is the world's leading Web site on learning disabilities.

http://www.bridges4kids.org/—Bridges 4 Kids provides information and referrals for parents and professionals working with children from birth through transition to adult life.