

# Handout 4.1 Teaming and Collaboration – Ask the Expert



## What Does the Research Say?

Teaming and collaboration is not one of the more well-researched topics in early childhood intervention, so many of the DEC Recommended Practices on this topic draw on professional wisdom gained through our work with young children with disabilities and their families. Other fields, such as social science, business, and psychology, have more research around teaming and collaboration. Not surprisingly, the bulk of the early childhood research on this topic focuses on team organization, structures for interaction, and how to approach service delivery. This research has primarily helped us understand how to organize our work and optimize the collective wisdom of the team supporting the child and family.

In the research, coordination and collaboration were, at times, used synonymously. An important distinction between these two terms exists in the literature, though. Collaboration presumes that no individual team member has complete knowledge of either the challenges or the solutions the team hopes to address. Successful resolution is then only achieved through contributions of all members of the team. In contrast, coordination focuses more on the actions needed to ultimately achieve the outcome. While we certainly need a plan for achieving the outcome, using collaboration to develop that plan is more respectful of the unique skills and contributions that each team member will make and acknowledges that the final outcome is richer when the collective knowledge of the group has been utilized.

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Though there is not much experimental research on collaboration, one of the most comprehensive reviews of the research available in a variety of fields identified several factors that were shown to influence successful collaboration. Some of the factors cited that are also reflected in the DEC Recommended Practices relate to team composition, communication and group facilitation strategies, and team purpose. It is logical that the research encourages us to think about whose expertise we need on our teams, to contemplate how we communicate and relate to each other, and to clearly define the goal for our work together. Elements of these items are often even required in a child's service plan.

## Why is this Important?

The teaming and collaboration practices are important to consider because they help us think about the interactions and relationships necessary for successful intervention. Teaming and collaboration provide a direction for thinking about not only what we do during our time together, but also how we might go about doing it. The practices provide ideas for supporting communication, sharing information, and acknowledging the unique perspectives and contributions of all team members. Collaboration reflects an evolution of the role of service providers, shifting from the role of expert to the role of consultant. This evolution reflects our growing understanding of the important information the child's caregivers have and how, without this information, our interventions are likely to be less effective. Ultimately, these practices provide a framework for interactions that support the achievement of desired child and family outcomes.

## Why Is This Important for Children With Disabilities?

Teaming and collaboration are particularly important for children with disabilities because most of the educational programs and services designed to support young children with delays and disabilities involve

more than one adult. Also, the federal legislation guiding these programs and services requires the utilization of a team. Because each individual will likely have a unique set of information about the child and a defined skill set, it is only through a meaningful exchange of information that we can gain a complete picture of the child. This complete picture is critical to effective intervention. This exchange of information is also critically important for identifying the resources and supports that will be most useful to the child and family. It acknowledges that no one individual is likely to have all the answers.

Teaming and collaboration are also important for children with disabilities because they are seen as critical components of successful inclusion. Collaborative teaming provides opportunities to access, participation, and support that might not otherwise happen.

### Bottom Line

Although the research in this area is still developing, the information available makes a strong case for being intentional about the processes we use to gather and exchange information. Successful teaming and collaboration with other professionals and family members increases our skills and understanding, ultimately leading to better informed decisions about intervention planning and implementation.

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### About the Expert

**Chelsea Guillen** works at the Early Intervention Training Program at the University of Illinois. She serves as the Early Intervention Ombudsman for Illinois providing professional development and technical assistance in order to improve the overall quality of the early intervention system. In this capacity, she has the opportunity to team and collaborate with stakeholders from a variety of early childhood programs and systems. For the past four years, Chelsea has also been serving on the DEC Recommended Practices Commission.

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