

Voices from the Field: Jeanette McCollum



Q1: Why is cultural context important to understanding responsive interaction intervention with young children with disabilities and their families?

Cultural context has everything to do with responsive interaction intervention, since family members are often central to this approach to intervention. Values, expectations, and norms of interaction vary across cultures for children at different ages, and may also vary when children have disabilities. Different views of what is appropriate and valued in children in general and in children with disabilities in particular will influence how we interpret what family members do with children, and will guide our own approaches to interaction and intervention. For example, how family members perceive their children's current and future abilities and roles may determine when, where, and with whom responsive interaction intervention should occur. Cultural perspectives of intervention itself may influence how interventionists go about planning and implementing the intervention. For example, they may form the context for whether and how we use intervention strategies such as demonstrating, coaching, or modeling.

Q2: What are two-to-three tips for fostering culturally responsive interaction opportunities with children with disabilities?

The whole idea of being sensitive and responsive can be a useful intervention guide here as well. One tip is to learn about, through observation or discussion, with whom, when, and where the target child is most likely to engage in interactions with adults and with siblings or peers. With whom is the child most likely to engage in pleasurable interactions that have the qualities of turn-taking, whether verbal or non-verbal? Are there adult-child or child-child interactive games or other high-interest activities that are common in that family's cultural context that might provide the basis for responsive interaction intervention? Many high-interest activities may already incorporate aspects of responsive interaction such as imitation and turn-taking, and can become the basis for intervention. In what other contexts do interactions naturally occur? Are there adult-child routines into which communicative opportunities can be embedded through using strategies such as waiting for attempts by the child?

A second tip is to observe the child during different types of interpersonal interactions, WITH the adult as an observation partner. When the child is engaged in activities in which s/he is interested, in adult-child games, or with another child, how does she respond? What is she feeling and communicating, and how do we know? How and when does she initiate or try to maintain interactions? Might some of these ways of initiating and responding be reflective of cultural norms, as well as of the child's individual differences? Sharing observations with the adult can lead to better understanding of the child's interactions for both the family member and the practitioner, and can provide a better foundation for planning appropriate opportunities and interventions that respond to and support cultural context.