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Practices for Parent Participation in Early Intervention/ Early Childhood Special Education

Abstract

The authors examined the extent to which practices for parent participation in early intervention/ early childhood special education (EI/ECSE) programs. The role of parents in the EI/ECSE is important and supported through the literature. The changing traditional family picture in the classrooms, the importance of evolving laws and regulations and recommended practices regarding parent participation are highlighted. The conceptual framework is based on the children, parents, and practitioners' outcomes. Strategies to promote family involvement provided a direct way to understand how early childhood education programs influence family participation. Practices to promote family participation are discussed.

Key Words: parent participation, early intervention, early childhood special education, strategies

Introduction

Vignette 1: Carol, an early childhood education teacher, is filling out the parent communication notebooks in the afternoon. Earlier at the beginning of the school year, the children had decided to call their notebooks "Explorers' Daily News." Children decorated the first page of their notebooks and glued on a family picture.

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Alex had a picture with his father and his grandparents. Carol wrote, "Alex played in the block area and built a ship with Legos. I am attaching a photograph of his ship. During the outside time, he took his ship outside with him. During the afternoon circle time we read a book about ships." Carol searched the weekend hours for the town museum's naval section on the Internet, found the related web page, printed a copy, and attached it to Alex's Explorers' Daily News…Alex was playing in his room, waiting for his father to come home from work. His grandmother tapped his shoulder and signed, "Dinner is ready, wash your hands please." Alex went to the bathroom; in the meantime his father arrived home… Later, Alex's father wrote, "Thanks for the information Mrs. Carol, I didn't have a chance to learn the town yet, good to know about the museum's naval section, can be interesting for Alex." In addition to his father's note, Alex's grandmother wrote, "Thanks for the photo today. Alex told us about his ship and we put the photo on the fridge." Then, she put the notebook in Alex's back bag.

Vignette 2: (Alex had 12 peers in his classroom. We won't be able to describe each child and their parents, but there are two more children we would like to introduce: Sam and Tracy.)

On that night, Sam and her twin brothers were helping their mother to set the dinner table. Sam while in her wheelchair was placed the napkins around the table, and her brothers were placing the forks. With pride she said, "I'm done!" Sam's mother wrote, "Hi Carol, FYI Sam and I took our dog for a walk today, and she had one night accident."

Tracy was lying on the floor and playing with the carpet, when her mother showed her visual card for dinner. Tracy's mother started to use the visual cue card about a year ago, after Tracy was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. Tracy's mother wrote, "Hi Carol, next month Tracy is turning 4. We would like to celebrate her birthday in the classroom, what do you think? Her interventionist and the student from the university visiting us on weekends told that they want to come to the birthday."

Vignette 3: On the other side of the town, program coordinator Kathleen checked her daily agenda for the next day. She remembered she had to mail a local family a welcome letter. Since the referral information indicated that the primary language of the family is English, she chose the letter and related materials written in English. In previous years, she had families with diverse linguistic backgrounds. Thinking about Sam, Tracy and many others, Kathleen gazed into the distance and thought "more than 10 years in the field and I still learn something new from children and their families."

Working with families who have young children with special needs requires a combination of child-centered and family-friendly approaches (National Research Council, 2000). Parents play a central role in the education and development of children with special needs (Brotherson, Summers, Naig, Kyzar, et al., 2010; Bruder, 2010;

Gallagher, Rhodes, & Darling, 2004; Murray, Christensen, Umbarger, Rade, et al., 2007; Trohanis, 2008). Parents have valuable information regarding their child's development and learning because they observe their child's potential outside the educational and clinical settings (Park, Alber-Morgan, & Fleming, 2011; Treyvaud, Anderson, Howard, Bear, et al., 2009). Parents are knowledgeable about many aspects of their children, such as likes, dislikes, interests, strengths, fears, and past experiences. The early intervention/early childhood special education (EI/ECSE) programs should include a series of collaborations among families and practitioners to reveal this information. The purpose of this manuscript is to describe a range of practices designed to strengthen parent participation in EI/ECSE, in the hope of promoting positive outcomes for children, families, and practitioners.

Parent Participation

Parent participation is an important component of EI/ECSE programs. As stated in the literature, a child's house and family is his primary environment where he has the opportunity for constant, generalized, natural education, and family support (Mahoney & Kaiser, 1999; Odom & Wolery, 2003). The importance of primary caregiver participation in EI/ECSE is well established in the literature (Brotherson, et al., 2010; Bruder, 2010; Gallagher, Rhodes, & Darling, 2004; Murray, et al., 2007; Trohanis, 2008). As an essential principle of EI/ECSE, the practitioners must seek and establish positive and effective relationships with primary caregivers (Brotherson, et al., 2010; Miedel & Reynolds, 1999; Odom & Wolery, 2003). Odom & Wolery (2003) defined professionals' roles as "to work collaboratively with families, to strengthen families by helping them secure needed supports and resources, to provide individualized and flexible help, and to capitalize on families' existing competencies and strengths."

As illustrated in the opening vignettes, family types, needs and interests can vary. In other words, parents may have different preferences about (a) choosing and scheduling the time, setting, and mode of services, (b) deciding their child's goals and needs within a multidisciplinary team, (c) defining early intervention services and special education, and (d) requiring additional information and support such as medical insurance information, family rights, or parental support associations (Bruder, 2010; Dishion, Shaw, Connell, Gardner, et al., 2008; Sheehey, 2006). Therefore, identifying family perceptions is an essential component of family-centered practices (Epley, Summers, Turnbull, 2011; Odom & Wolery, 2003). Identifying family needs, interests, concerns, and resources may help to establish a shared understanding between practitioners and parents in EI/ECSE (Pretis, 2011). Ideally, an understanding of family needs and interests influence and shape practitioners' behaviors and practices regarding EI/ECSE (Dunst, 2002; Odom & Wolery, 2003).

Definition of primary caregiver

The definition of primary caregiver in EI/ECSE has been a critical issue (Flippin & Crais, 2011). The term primary caregiver is a multidimensional and evolving concept,

and used interchangeably among EI/ECSE programs and related services. Some of the examples listed under the umbrella term of primary caregiver are stable resident biological parent, stable resident non-biological parent, nonresident biological parent, stable mother and/or father figure, and unstable parent presence.

In this manuscript, the definition of parents includes two main components: (a) parents "being there" for the child (Bradley, Shears, Roggman, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2006 ; Summers, Boller, Schiffman, & Raikes, 2006; Unger, Tressell, Jones, & Park, 2004), and (b) parents are the first teachers of their children (Bornstein, 1995; Britto et al., 2006). A neutral definition of primary caregiver can help practitioners to create a clearer perception of parents and discourage judgments.

Family demographics and diversity

To support functional and meaningful parent participation, practitioners need to address families' diverse backgrounds. The definition of diversity appears to be incomplete if it underestimates cultural, social, linguistic, economic, developmental, and individual differences. This list can be extended by including age, gender, sexual orientation, value and ethics, family type and life, religion, healing beliefs and practices, art and expressive forms, diet and food preferences, clothing, and social group interaction patterns. However, the ultimate point should be to focus on supporting child's development and learning in collaboration with parents.

The end of the first decade of the 21st century marks a turning point in the countries' population demographics. The 2012 U.S. Census, which details the population characteristics of states, revealed that the states are getting more diverse each year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The inevitable growth in diverse populations contribute to increasing numbers of culturally and ethnically diverse families in EI/ECSE programs (Hernandez, Takanishi, & Marotz, 2009; Turney & Kao, 2009).

The role of diversity appeared to be even more important factor when differences exist between practitioners and parents. Parents share cultural values, beliefs, rules, and expectations with their children, transferring patterns of behaviors and cognitions to their children (Bornstein & Cote, 2006; Derman-Sparks & Olsen, 2010). For that reason, while working with parents, it is imperative to consider early intervention services with respect to the families' diverse backgrounds. Without culturally competent practices and interventions that including screening, assessments will be neither effective nor embraced by families (Barrera, Corso, & Macpherson, 2003; Espinosa, 2005; Spivak & Howes, 2011). A true equal partnership may not be established, if practitioners perceive diversity as a barrier. Promisingly, professional organizations in the field of EI/ECSE recommend the use of reliable and valid assessment instruments that are responsive to the child's linguistic and cultural background (Division of Early Childhood Education, 2010). Additionally, translating materials into a family's native language and hiring a trained interpreter when feasible are common practices in the field.

Carol printed out labels in different languages that are spoken in her classroom. She encouraged children to look at the different letters. She also provided CDs of children songs in different languages. She asked parents to donate books, developmentally appropriate computer games, musical instruments, toys and materials, clothes and costumes, flower and herb seeds from their countries. Carol invited parents to classroom to sing children songs in different languages and share pictures of their countries. Visiting parents reported that their diverse cultural backgrounds are valued in the classroom, and they felt as if they were a member of their child's classroom.

In previous years, Kathleen hired a part-time interpreter to translate the documents in a family's' native language. Kathleen also provided training sessions to the interpreter to become familiar with the terminology before she started to work with families. Kathleen's program also requires interpreters to sign a document to maintain confidentiality of children and their families. Additionally, she leaves a copy of translated materials at the end of each family visit so that families have a chance to review the materials. One family reported that learning special education terminology in another language was challenging to them. When their early interventionists provided translated materials, they felt more confident about how to implement intervention activities.

To promote parent involvement, practitioners need to respect, recognize, and respond to diversity of family needs and interests (Barrera, Corso, & Macpherson, 2003). Sheehey (2006) searched Hawaiian parents' experiences and feelings in the field of special education and differences between home and school cultures. The results showed that parents' definition of special education was different than the known legal definition of special education. In line with prior studies, Keels (2009) examined the between-and within-ethnic group differences in parenting beliefs and child rearing practices. The findings showed that parenting beliefs and behaviors varied among different ethnic groups. The implications for practice may include that practitioners may need to (a) be aware of family's diverse backgrounds, and (b) tailor intervention strategies with respect to a family's cultural preferences.

Parents' first experiences with practitioners tended to influence their relationships between home and school environment. Practitioners working with young children and their families can adjust their services according to parents' needs and interests, and their daily routines (Keels, 2009; Keilty & Galvin, 2006; Sheehey, 2006). Keilty and Galvin (2006) discussed that practitioners could assist families to establish and maintain individually appropriate daily routines. They identified that families tend to tailor early intervention practices according to their child's developmental needs and available environmental resources.

Parents in Early Childhood Intervention System

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) addresses the family role in early intervention. According to the IDEA, "congress finds that there is an urgent and substantial need to enhance the capacity of families to meet the special needs of their infants and toddlers with disabilities" (20 U.S.C.1431(a)(3)).

The Program for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities (Part C of IDEA) is a federal interagency grant program that supports states in providing a comprehensive EI/ECSE services for infants and toddlers (birth through age 2) with developmental delays and disabilities, and their families. In 2011, the U.S. Department of Education publicized the announcement of the final regulations for the early intervention program under Part C of the IDEA. The latest Part C regulations incorporate requirements in the 2004 amendments to Part C of the IDEA. The needs of families were further recognized with the latest Part C. The final regulations safeguards states responsibility to providing needed services for infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families. Part C of the IDEA highlighted the family component in the EI/ECSE field. To develop the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) for infants and toddlers, Part C requires a family assessment. It should be noted that the meaning of assessment indicates practitioners need to encourage parents to share information about their concerns, priorities, and resources regarding their child's development and learning. Furthermore, if the family so desires, the plan must include procedures to address family needs as well as child needs. Families must be informed of their rights, be a part of the IFSP team, and receive a review of the IFSP at least every 6 months.

A similar legal system known as Act 573 of the Law of Special Education, which was revised in 2006 in Turkey, supports parent participation in EI/ECSE programs (Republic of Turkey Ministry of National Education, 2006). The Act 573 supports the importance of empowering families through EI/ECSE services (§5: 4, 36). According to the Act 573 family training services,

(a) are designed and implemented based on child's developmental, educational, and family needs,
(b) are implemented either via group form or distance education form based on the child and family needs
(c) are planned for a year with the participation of the family and updated each year based on the child and family needs
(d) are provided in the institutions; but when needed family training services are implemented at the home.

It is important for practitioners and researchers to understand that countries have unique perspectives, policies, and practices regarding parent participation in special education. In the long run, this may help professionals to develop an international perspective on EI/ECSE. Cultural differences in the definition of EI/ECSE result in varying legislations,

practices, and curricula. Understanding how other countries approach parent participation in EI/ECSE may allow for a better collaboration at the international level, which serves to improve the quality of EI/ECSE services worldwide.

In National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)'s position statement on developmentally appropriate practice, the fifth guideline is establishing reciprocal relationships with families (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, p.22). According to the fifth guideline the "practices is not developmentally appropriate if the program limits parent involvement to schedule events, or if the program family relationship has a strong parent education orientation." Additionally, according to the NAEYC's Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation Programs, students enrolled in early childhood degree programs "understand that successful early childhood education depends upon partnerships with children's families and communities" (NAEYC, 2009). It is also stated that early childhood educators "use this understanding to create respectful, reciprocal relationships that support and empower families and to involve all families in their children's development and learning".

Moreover, recommended practices identified by the Division of Early Childhood (DEC) address the importance of parent involvement (Sandall, Hemmeter, Smith, & McLean, 2005). DEC "recognizes that the family is the constant in the life of a child and the purpose of early intervention is to enhance the capacity of the family to facilitate their child's development" (Sandall, McLean, & Smith, 2000, p.150)

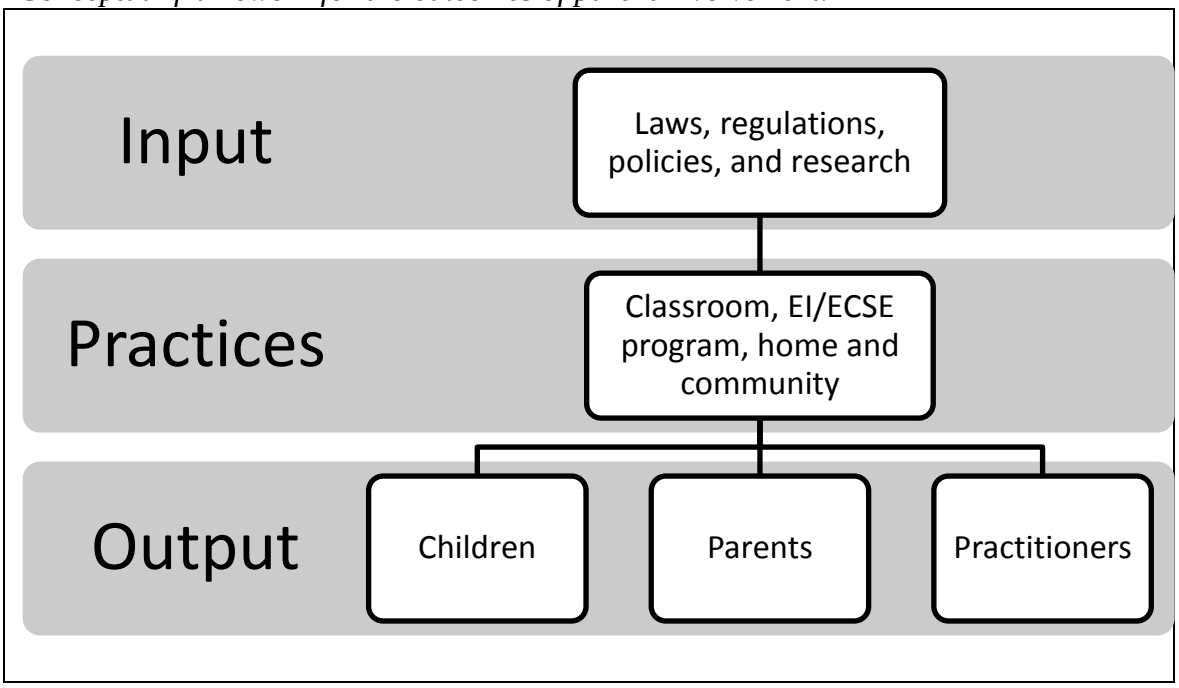
Strategies to increase parent involvement in the field of EI/ECSE are changing rapidly in response to policy implementation and increased evidence. These system changes compel EI/ECSE practitioners to strengthen their initiatives to support functional and meaningful family involvement. A program's definition of parent involvement can vary according to different philosophical standpoints, institutional practices, laws and legislations regarding parent involvement. It is desirable to think that the programs working with families and their children with special needs tailor program practices to address parent's unique needs. This approach would encourage educational field to capture the essence of parent involvement in EI/ECSE to support children and their parents to reach their full potential. The concept of parent involvement calls for professionals from educational fields to involve parents as equal partners in the field of EI/ECSE.

Conceptual Framework

Consistent evidence indicates that parent involvement has a positive impact on child, family, and practitioner outcomes. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework for the outcomes of parent involvement in EI/ECSE. The input includes laws, regulations, policies and research studies regarding parent involvement in EI/ECSE. The practices consist of efforts to improve parent involvement at the classrooms, EI/ECSE programs, home and community. Lastly, the output contains the outcomes for children, parents,

and practitioners. Based on the conceptual framework, we propose two main hypotheses: (1) a mutual relationship exists between inputs and practices. The inputs and practices influence each other and improve their own capacities, and (2) when inputs and practices are combined at different levels (such as classroom, home, and program) the positive outcomes for children, parents, and practitioners will likely to improve.

Figure 1
Conceptual framework for the outcomes of parent involvement.



Note: EI/ECSE = Early Intervention/ Early Childhood Special Education.

Child outcomes

In recent years, a number of research studies have been published related to parent participation in intervention programs for children with special needs. For instance, studies demonstrate that parent participation can impact positive child outcomes for children with physical disabilities (Blauw-Hospers, Dirks, Hulshof, Bos, et al., 2011; Matson, Mahan, & LoVullo, 2009). The findings showed that interventions which were associated with better developmental outcomes, supported parents participation. In particular, parents received coaching to (a) recognize their children's signals, (b) respond appropriately to their needs, (c) implement a variation of challenging activities to support their children's motor behavior, and (d) encourage their children to continue motor behaviors (Blauw-Hospers, et al., 2011).

The findings suggested important implications for practice: (a) parent involvement needs to be incorporated into assessment and intervention protocols, (b) parents can define

their priorities and set goals for their children, (c) parents can identify strategies with therapists, (d) parents can observe and videotape their children's performance, and (e) parents can take anecdotes about the intervention process (Blauw-Hospers, et al., 2011; Darrah, Law, Pollock, Wilson, et al., 2011). As the above literature review suggests, coaching parents, who have children with physical disabilities, to implement interventions is a useful practice to generalize child outcomes across different settings (Blauw-Hospers, et al., 2011; Matson, Mahan, & LoVullo, 2009).

In another discipline, parents who are involved in their child's behavior management plan contributed significantly in reduction of problem behaviors (Levy, Kim & Olive, 2006). De Falco, Esposito, Venuti & Bornstein (2011) discussed that children with Down syndrome displayed an increase in symbolic and collaborative play activities with their fathers. Align with the previous studies, Cheatham and Santos (2011) noted that when parent participation for non-English speaking parents provided through language interpretation services and being careful and respectful, the educational outcomes of children with disabilities are more likely to result positively. Lastly, systematic reviews indicated that EI/ECSE programs by the application of supporting meaningful ad functional parent participation seem most promising to influence child's development (Flippin, & Crais, 2011; Matson, Mahan, & LoVullo, 2009).

Family outcomes

Several studies reported that families can effectively use intervention strategies (Ingersoll & Gergans, 2007; Kaiser, Hemmeter, Ostrosy, Fisher, et al., 1996; Peterson, Carta, & Greenwood, 2005). The studies showed that parents (a) learned and increased use of strategies (Ingersoll & Gergans, 2007; Kaiser, et al., 1996; Peterson, et al., 2005), (b) maintained some strategies and skills after the intervention, (Ingersoll & Gergans, 2007; Peterson, et al., 2005), (c) embedded intervention strategies into their daily routines, and (d) supported their child's development and learning.

High levels of stress have been documented as a common feature that might influence child outcome and parent confidence among parents who have young children with special needs. Several studies suggested that mothers' involvement in the EI programs is essential to reduce their stress level and increase parenting skills to address their child's developmental needs (National Research Council, 2010; Feinberg, Donahue, Bliss, & Silverstein, 2012; Ingber, Al-Yagon, & Dromi, 2010; Strauss, Vicari, Valeri, D'Elia, et al., 2012). In particular, parents demonstrated skills to respond to their children's needs via training and supervision as a part of intervention process (Strauss, et al., 2012; Unger, Tressell, Jones, & Park, 2004). The findings suggested the importance of providing informational and emotional support to parents during the intervention process and developing collaborative relationships with families.

It should be noted that not only is mother involvement essential in EI/ECSE but father involvement, as well. Active father involvement in children's development and

education is associated with better developmental, educational, and social outcomes for children and other family members at large (Flippin & Crais 2011; Raikes, Belloti, 2006). EI/ECSE strategies should take into consideration that fathers' parenting skills are different than mothers' and intervention programs should reflect those differences according to the needs and characteristics of their target population. Downer, Campos, McWayne, & Gartner, (2008) stated that father involvement is associated with socio-emotional and academic child outcomes. Moreover, father involvement is assumed to improve the quality and increase the quantity of infant/toddler-father interactions. Roggman, Boyce, & Cook (2009) suggested that educating fathers on infant/toddler play would increase fatherhood skills. Through intervention programs, fathers may learn how to play with their infants, develop related skills, pay more attention to read infant cues, and effectively support infants' development.

Additionally, father involvement in the early childhood years of children promotes secondary gains, such as positive relations with mothers, and other siblings in the family. It is assumed that fathers gain lifelong skills, which they can apply to their social relations with other family members (Raikes, Summers, & Roggman, 2005; Helfenbaum-Kun, 2007; Honig 2008). The fatherhood research enables educators to understand how early intervention programs influence fathers' relationships with their children and mothers. It appears that parent involvement contribute to the positive child and parent outcomes. In that sense, promoting a positive correlation between father involvement and child outcomes may guide intervention practices.

Practitioners outcomes

The literature review revealed main outcomes of parent participation for EI/ECSE practitioners. According to the research studies practitioners: (a) are more likely to develop an understanding of parental experiences regarding intervention services, when parents actively participated (James & Chard, 2010), (b) tend to become more familiar with how emotional needs are met in partnership interactions between parents and practitioners (Brotherson, Summers, Naig, Kyzar, et al., 2010), and (c) appear to increase skills to work with diverse families (Watson & Gatti, 2012). These findings and novel insights into the EI/ECSE principles governing positive child and parent outcomes lead to the supporting functional and meaningful parent participation in the field of EI/ECSE.

Practices for Parent Participation

Over the past three decades practitioners have presented several options to strengthen family involvement in EI/ECSE. Organizing parent meetings, assigning classroom volunteers, setting goals for children, and including parents to the decision making process are just some examples of many types of parent involvement efforts. The common notion of each effort is that the EI/ECSE field, including professionals and practitioners, acknowledge that early childhood years are critical, that children's

developmental outcomes and learning can be enhanced within the context of parent and program partnership.

The first step in supporting parent involvement during EI/ECSE process is to assess their needs and interests with respect to their volunteer participation. In some cases, EI/ECSE programs may use family needs indicators such as Assessment, Evaluation, and Programming System, Family Report 2nd Edition (Bricker, 2002), or Routine Based Interview Form (McWilliam, 2006). However, it is essential to conduct an interview, which includes structured yet open-ended questions. During the interview, practitioners may ask about family demographics, routines, concerns, priorities, and resources regarding a child's development and learning.

Table 1 provides a list of Carol's interview questions that she adopted throughout her experiences with families. Carol uses these questions as a reference point to learn more about family needs and interests, and to establish a rapport with families.

Table 1
List of Interview Questions

Area	Examples
Introduction	1. Can you tell me about your day? 2. How is your morning routine or your daily routine? 3. How does your weekend look like? 4. What types of things/activities do you enjoy? 5. How are you doing, as a parent?
Family structure	1. Who are the key decision makers in your family? 2. Do family members all live in the same household? 3. Who else participates in the caregiving?
Child-rearing practices	1. What are the family feeding practices? 2. Is there an established bedtime? 3. How do you define acceptable behavior?
Child's needs and interests	1. What are your child's interests, needs, likes and dislikes? 2. What are your child's strengths? 3. What makes your child happy? 4. What kind of activities/tasks makes your child uncomfortable? 5. What has your child been doing lately? 6. What kind of daily activities you do together?
Family CPRs'	1. What are your concerns, priorities, and resources regarding your child's development and learning? 2. What are your goals about your child's developmental needs? Which developmental area(s) do you have concerns?

	3. Can you identify a specific challenge for your child? 4. What kind of support do you need immediately?
Additional questions	1. Tell me more about this…? 2. What do you mean by…? 3. Can you give an example for …? 4. Is there anything else you would like to share?

At the beginning of school year, Carol schedules a meeting with each family. She uses this opportunity to (a) introduce her classroom and curriculum, (b) explain her open-door policy and informs parents about the available volunteering opportunities in her classroom, (c) provide resources to families, (d) and learn about family needs and interests. Later, Carol uses the information gathered during the family meeting to initiate an individualized package for parents. The individualized package may include ways to support parents' immediate needs: (a) materials that may be helpful at home such as visual schedules or a list of children's books, (b) resources about their child's disability such as books, online parent support groups, or related associations, (c) information regarding parent rights and IFSP process, and (d) a list of activities that parents may implement at home or outside such as going to a park to watch birds or counting the number of blue cars while going to the grocery store. Carol informs parents via email and/or mail about the agencies and parent support groups in the community, and encourages them to participate to the parent training meetings with respect to their daily schedules, needs and interests.

Carol provides activity calendars to parents at the beginning of each month. She lists the activities for each day, reminds holidays and special occasions, and leaves her e-mail and work phone for parents. Some families may have a chance to chat briefly during drop-off and pickup times. They can see the activities in the classroom and read the parent bulletin board. In Carol's classroom, some parents use the school bus and may not have time to see the classroom regularly. In that case, activity calendars help parents to learn about the daily routines.

Carol also made a suggestion box in her classroom. The children named the box, "Explorers Fortune Cookie Box." The box includes lyrics of children's favorite songs and brief descriptions of activity suggestions printed on small cards. Carol encourages parents to pick up a card, when parents visit her classroom. Carol regularly updates the content of the box. Parents reported singing songs and implementing different activities with their children was fun. They also said that they had a chance to review the classroom activities with their children at home.

Practitioners of young children who have special needs should be aware of the importance of parent participation and promote parent involvement at many levels. Table 2 offers practices in various areas such as decision making, collaboration, training, and communication to support parent involvement. Each family has unique needs and

interests. Practitioners need to tailor their services to address family needs and interests. Providing multiple options to parents and following an open-door policy can encourage parents to take active roles and responsibilities. Designing activities that involve parents and children together is another key practice that practitioners can use to increase parent participation. For instance, doing craft activities, reading or singing with children, playing outside are some of the activities that parents can participate.

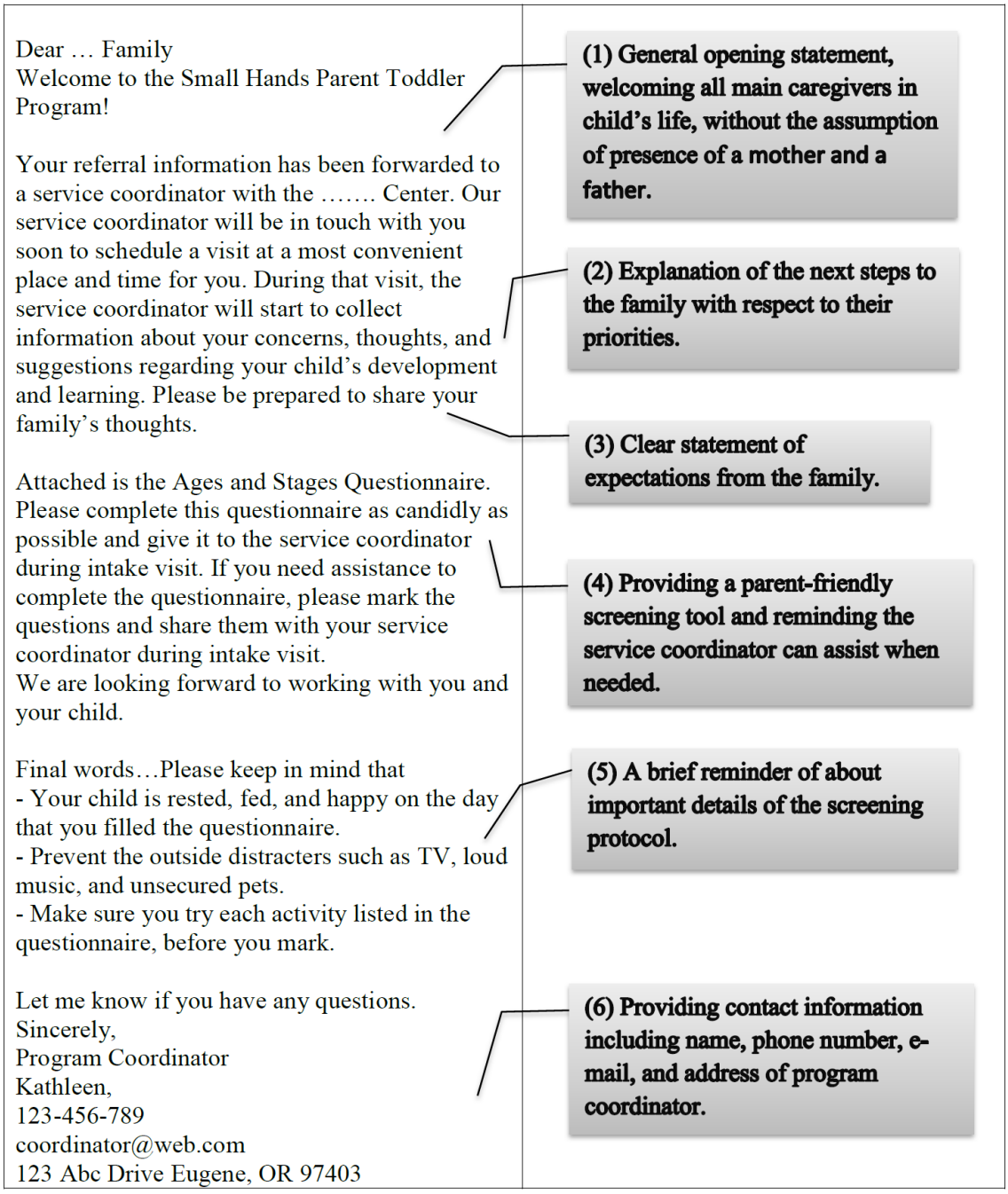
Table 2
Strategies to Promote Parent Involvement

Area	Examples
Decisions	Deciding screening and assessment tools, child's goals, intervention type and mode of services, adaptations and accommodations in the classroom, choosing toys and materials
Collaboration	Using parent-friendly screening and assessment tools, asking parents to observe their child's development and collect data, asking parents to record their child's behaviors during certain routines, supporting parents to be the intervention agents, inviting parents to volunteer in the classroom, organizing regular home visiting, encouraging parent-to-parent support groups, collaborating with researchers at local universities to improve the quality of practices
Training	Organizing training opportunities to enhance parent's knowledge, skills and rights regarding EI/ECSE with respect to their daily schedules and priorities, informing parents about local conferences and workshops, or online training groups
Communication	Using different ways to communicate such as phone calls, e-mails, mails, daily communication notebooks, parent bulletin boards, "Today We" boards, and password-protected classroom web page, translating written materials when feasible, working with trained interpreters during face-to-face meetings for families who are linguistically diverse, sharing information about daily activities, sharing lyrics of the songs and the titles of the books, sending pictures or video samples to home*

Figure 2 is an example of Kathleen's family welcome letter, including important points: (1) general opening statement, welcoming all main caregivers in child's life, without the assumption of presence of a mother and a father, (2) explanation of the next steps to the family with respect to their priorities, (3) clear statement of expectations from the family, (4) providing a parent-friendly screening tool and reminding that the service coordinator can assist when needed, (5) reminding important details about the screening protocol, and (6) providing contact information including name, phone number, e-mail, and address of the program coordinator.

Figure 2

A sample of family welcome letter.



A welcome letter may help parents to become familiar with the program and its expectations. It can also allow parents to schedule their program for the home visiting day in advance and list their questions. A welcome letter with contact information may be beneficial for parents to share specific adjustments or requirements, so that the service coordinator can be prepared for the actual home visiting day. Organizing regular home visiting schedules may help to establish trust between practitioners and parents. Depending on the practitioners' active caseloads, available time, and funding resources the visiting schedule may vary across programs.

Kathleen's program offers several options to support parent involvement. For instance, Kathleen invites parents to serve on the advisory board and policy committees. Moreover, Kathleen asks parents to share observations of their children during parent meetings and provides immediate feedback to parents to support their children's development and learning. To support parent participation in her program, Kathleen chooses standardized, parent-friendly screening and assessment tools.

The EI/ECSE programs can arrange a room for parents. The room may include publications (e.g., posters, books, journals and magazines), audiovisual resources (e.g., training DVDs and movies), and Internet access, so that families can learn about EI/ECSE concepts. Practitioners can encourage parents to create their own library and share resources. A family room may allow an opportunity for parents to relax and meet other parents who have children with or without special needs. A family room can attract parents' attention to spend time in their children's program and learn about the daily routines.

It is also important to use multiple communication methods such as e-mails, phone calls, parent communication notebooks. Some parents may have hectic work schedules, transportation problems, or personal reasons that may affect their participation in the classroom. In that case, practitioners can suggest using on-line forums or schedule home visits to update parents' about their child's development and progress. Additionally, including the names of fathers as well as mothers in the mailing lists and printed materials can also create a positive atmosphere for fathers. If the mother and father live in separate places, service providers can send information to both parents with respect to custody policies. The program can creatively and diplomatically solve the family conflicts that might keep a father from becoming involved.

Programs should have clear and reasonable expectations for parent participation. Giving opportunities to parents to express themselves and share their concerns can help to learn about characteristics of target group. Practitioners may need time and resources for recruiting parents. Supporting parent participation in EI/ECSE can be challenging and require systematic efforts.

Conclusion

This manuscript describes a set of practices to strengthen parent participation in the EI/ECSE programs. These recommendations highlight the importance of parents as a part of EI/ECSE services. The complexity of the lives of parents, their concerns, priorities, and resources must be addressed to effectively involve parents in the mutual goal of improving developmental outcomes of their children. There are clear benefits gained by parents, children, and practitioners by supporting parent participation in EI/ECSE.

Effective parent participation involves careful planning, establishing and maintaining of a rapport, and understanding of parents' individual needs and interests. As illustrated in the vignettes, programs may offer several ways to support parent participation. It should be remembered that it is not only the program's policies what makes a difference, it is practitioners' individual efforts that makes a difference for a child and his/her parents. Therefore, practitioners need to accommodate their services to address parents' unique needs and interests. Future research should continue to examine multiple ways to enhance parent involvement.

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