

Collaborative Practices in Early Childhood Intervention: the case for explicitly striving for maximal participation of families

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Abstract

Early Childhood Intervention aims to empower parents and children to become confident and competent in independently finding solutions to everyday life challenges. Therapists have only the best intentions in their practice; however, in their eagerness to help, they may be unknowingly disempowering parents when taking ownership of the intervention. The purpose of this opinion paper is to encourage and inspire therapists to pause, reflect, and reconsider the significance of parent-therapist partnerships and the use of a coach approach for implementing Family-Centred Best Practice. Based on clinical and research experiences in Early Childhood Intervention, the authors believe that therapists need to further develop communication and interpersonal skills so that they can empower parents in the same way they empower children. When therapists are trained to implement collaborative practices, they may feel less pressure to have all the answers and be primarily responsible for supporting children's development and functioning. Collaborative practices such as coaching can help therapists establish a respectful, equitable, and complementary partnership with parents, transforming “power over” relationships into “power with” relationships. This change can be more rewarding and satisfying for everyone involved. Providing best practice interventions often requires therapists to constantly focus on their therapeutic expertise. Yet, the effectiveness of interventions for children and their families can also be significantly improved if therapists refine *how* they deliver their services. Parents play a key role in the successful intervention of their children; therefore, to achieve sustainable long-term therapy goals, it is necessary to understand how to communicate with, relate to, and coach parents effectively.

Keywords: collaborative practices; coaching; family-centred approach; allied health

Introduction

Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) has been gradually moving toward a Family-Centred Approach (FCA) for almost half a decade (Dalmau-Montala et al., 2017). Recommended as best practice, the FCA promotes parental empowerment and child outcomes through parent-therapist collaboration in all stages of the intervention process. (Berkowitz et al., 2016; Dunst, 2002). In addition to being a cornerstone of the FCA, collaborative practices are central to the practitioner's role and to therapy practice (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008; Osher & Osher, 2002). This opinion paper discusses some aspects of collaborative practices between therapists and families, including the adoption of parent-therapist partnership and coaching as therapeutic tools.

The interest in writing about this topic comes from the authors' observation of the significant benefits associated with using coaching as a collaborative practice approach in ECI (Kemp & Turnbull, 2014). Together, they have conducted almost a decade's worth of programs aimed at helping ECI practitioners integrate coaching into their practice. This experience, combined with clinical practice and research, allowed them to identify gaps in ECI collaborative practices. The major gap observed was the need for therapists to further develop communication and interpersonal skills to empower parents in the same way they have been taught to empower children. In their workshops, the authors hear therapists repeatedly say, "I know how to do that with children, but I never considered doing the same with parents". A similar finding was observed in a study in which therapists seemed more comfortable working directly with children than with parents (An et al., 2019).

Partnership and coaching as therapeutic tools

Although children are the clients in ECI, a FCA premise is that children's well-being and care are best supported within a family context (Rosenbaum et al., 1998). Moreover, therapy outcomes can also be impacted by the relationship between parents and therapists (Jaffe & Cosper, 2014), which means that the knowledge we share with parents is as relevant as how

we partner with them. Therefore, the partnership between parents and therapists is a powerful therapeutic tool in ECI. As Maya Angelou said, “people will forget what you did, but they will never forget how you made them feel”.

Adult learning principles teach us that people learn best when learning is relevant, practical and goal-oriented (Knowles, 2015). In ECI, parents are viewed as adult learners (Bodner-Johnson, 2001) and will be more on board if they own their learning and are not only “told what to do”. Thus, instead of a “power over” therapist-led intervention, we propose that therapists engage in a “power with” partnership intervention, in which both parties bring their unique knowledge to accomplish more.

Therapists are often caring individuals and feel satisfied when they can solve their clients' problems. While these good intentions are valued and acknowledged, implementing strategies *for* parents can be disempowering and counterproductive. Alternatively, shared decision-making and mutual engagement may encourage parents to take an equal role in therapy and build parental self-efficacy (Division of Early Childhood, 2014). As Brené Brown suggests, “learning is not comfortable (..) and failure is part of the process”. (2016, p. 4). Therefore, we need to role model vulnerability to create new spaces for parents to learn and practice new skills, make mistakes, reflect, and adapt. This is precisely the aim when building parents' capacity to implement intervention strategies in-between sessions, as McWilliam (2010) recommended. This may not happen if therapists do all the assessing, planning, and implementation.

In ECI, coaching is a way to partner with parents and assist them and their children in developing new skills and competencies, problem-solving, and achieving their goals through joint planning, observation, practice, reflection, and feedback (Rush & Shelden, 2011). Therapists can adopt this help-giving approach as a vehicle to implement therapy, empowering parents and children to embed therapy strategies into everyday routines in natural environments, thereby increasing children's exposure to learning opportunities (Campbell &

Sawyer, 2007). This results in contextualised and generalised learning, as well as the development of parent advocacy skills, enabling parents to lead their child's team and maintain consistency and control regardless of therapists' career changes. Yet, this is rarely seen in practice today since communication between parents and therapists is not always viewed as a billable service.

Being “great therapists” in ECI

ECI practitioners strive to be "great therapists", a term often used to describe someone who always has the answers and solutions for their clients. Here, we propose a new definition of a "great therapist" as someone who assists parents in independently helping their child, making informed decisions, and leading the ECI team. Rather than prescribing parents how to support their children, research demonstrates that adults have far higher learning potential when they can formulate their own solutions (Knowles, 2015).

And how can therapists share information without telling people what to do? A good start may be in changing the order in which the professional expertise is shared. Instead of trying to fix problems, therapists could first ask parents what they know and have tried and how it has worked for them. This will convey a message that they too are knowledgeable and can be instrumental in positively impacting their child's development. It will also open a way for combining knowledge, as parents are experts in their child's and family's needs and priorities and therapists are experts in ECI (Lytle & Bordin, 2001).

Final considerations

Therapists are constantly focused on their therapy expertise; however, intervention effectiveness can be significantly improved by refining *how* therapy is delivered. Partnering with parents is the key to effective intervention for children. The authors of this paper believe that long-term therapy outcomes can only be achieved by understanding how to communicate with, relate to, and coach parents effectively.

Effective collaborative practices rely on ongoing professional education, experimentation, reflection, and practice in communication and interpersonal skills. This should be integrated into healthcare university programs and continuing professional development courses.

As a final reflection for therapists:

- How does your communication with parents impact your therapy outcomes?
- How can you be even more effective at empowering parents?

Key messages

- Collaborative practices are the key to successful interventions in Early Childhood Intervention.
- Partnership between therapists and parents is a valuable therapeutic tool to promote parental self-efficacy and child development.
- Coaching is a help-giving approach that can be used as a vehicle for therapists to empower parents and children to embed therapy strategies into everyday routines.
- Therapists may benefit from further communication and interpersonal skills training to comply with best practices recommendations.

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