Principles of Effective Communication

Good communication is one of the keys to your success as an early intervention provider. It is the means of establishing and building relationships with families, with your co-workers and teammates, and community agencies. Your communication skills will play an important part in your ability to support families and their children as they learn new skills.

Communication requires good listening skills, awareness of cultural differences, sensitivity to non-verbal cues, dissemination of information, and appropriate documentation. Using good listening skills involves asking open-ended questions, and active listening strategies.

Begin by watching and listening to the video at this link: http://www.directionservice.org/cadre/listening.cfm

- Keep the focus on the other person
- Listen with care and empathy
- Demonstrate understanding

Open-ended questions are questions that elicit more information than a simple one-word response, such as “yes”, “no”, or a single noun or verb. We can change single-word response questions to open-ended questions by rephrasing them. For example, the question “Can your baby sit up alone?” can be rephrased to “Tell me about how your baby sits up.” So, instead of a “yes” or “no” response, we are able to find out much more information with richer detail about the baby’s ability to sit. Open-ended questions encourage the responder to share more information, but they need to be balanced by active listening on the part of the questioner. The combination of these two strategies will facilitate many aspects of the IFSP process when information needs to be gathered or shared.

Some examples of open-ended question starters are:

- How are things going with…?
- How will you know when…?
- What happens if…?
- What else can you tell me about…?
- What is it like when…?
- What is a typical day like?
- Could you tell me a little more about…?
- If you could change one thing about (routine, event) what would it be?
- I was wondering if…
- Tell me about…

(Avoid “why” questions which can be interpreted as threatening or confrontational.)

The use of active-listening strategies balances the “conversation pendulum” by verbally or nonverbally acknowledging the speaker and what she is communicating. Some examples of active-listening strategies include:

- respond to the speaker with nods, facial expressions, attention, and other body language cues to indicate interest and understanding
- verbally affirm your agreement or express disagreement at the appropriate conversational juncture
- avoid interrupting the speaker
- refrain from being distracted by people or activities in the environment (as appropriate)
- maintain proximity and appropriate eye contact
- wait for your conversational turn to respond
- rephrase what the speaker said to assure your understanding and/or validate his message
- mirroring the speaker’s posture can send the message that you are “enmeshed” in her message (be careful not to overuse or abuse this strategy, it can be very powerful if used wisely, but detrimental if abused.

Watch these video clips that demonstrate principles of active-listening strategies

Part I: http://community.fpg.unc.edu/connect-modules/resources/videos/video-3-3

Part 2: http://community.fpg.unc.edu/connect-modules/resources/videos/video-3-4

Part 3: http://community.fpg.unc.edu/connect-modules/resources/videos/video-3-5

Discuss what you have learned about effective communication with your supervisor.