

8 Concepts from Adult Learning You Can Use to Support Caregivers

With service delivery focusing on caregiver coaching, early intervention providers (EIs) must be able to communicate and interact with caregivers to explain and demonstrate early intervention methods and strategies. Learning “how to” share information on embedding intervention using meaningful, functional and respectful approaches is a high priority for EIs. Research on adult learning offers many helpful strategies for facilitating partnerships between EIs and caregivers as they support their children’s learning.

1. Learning opportunities, especially those that help them understand their child’s development and learning needs will be appealing to many parents and caregivers.

Rather than adding to a family’s burden or overwhelming them as many EIs fear, learning about their child and how they can be involved can result in positive interactions and be a coping strategy for parents. Involving the parent in the intervention process gives meaning to the information they receive and strategies for using it. For most adults gaining knowledge about their child’s strengths and needs is



not sufficient; they want to apply the information in ways that are relevant to them. For example, knowing about the developmental progression that leads to more sophisticated language gains relevance when the caregiver learns that gestures develop before words and can be just as useful as words to ask for more cookie or to draw attention to the kitten. Engaging the caregivers in planning for how to help the child move from sitting into a crawling position and eventually to a pull to stand position provides information about walking milestones in the context of how they can teach their child during their everyday routines. Caregivers report that being a part of the planning process allows them to choose what they know they can do and increases the likelihood that they will continue to participate and practice between visits. It also builds confidence in their role supporting their child’s learning.

2. Trust is central to the teaching and learning relationship.



Listening to the caregiver’s priorities and interests will promote positive interactions and build trust in your partnership. For example, if the parent shares that she and her child enjoy music, activities such as songs, musical games, and dancing may be options for intervention. Confidence and motivation in the adult learner are enhanced through positive interactions, success with embedding intervention, improvement in child skills, and positive experiences with the coaching process. Honest, specific feedback about what worked and why supports the adult’s learning. Also, caregivers learn differently. The EI needs to appreciate these differences and provide the time and supports necessary for the adult to gain confidence. Although there are some “just do it” adult learners who are ready to try anything, most adults benefit from ongoing interaction and support from a trusted EI.

3. Adults learn best when expectations are clear.

“What is my role in my child’s early intervention program?” is a logical and very reasonable question for any caregiver. EIs cannot assume that caregivers know what to expect in EI. They may have heard from others about their experiences and have excellent information; they may have misinformation or no information at all. It is important to learn what they are expecting before you begin and build consensus on how they will participate. A thorough exploration of what the adult wants to learn is important for the coach as well as the caregiver. Problem-solving around who will do what, when, and specifying this information in a plan decreases miscommunication and misunderstandings. Taking time with caregivers to describe and demonstrate how coaching works and explain why at the beginning of the relationship will save time later and build a stronger relationship. The use of early intervention jargon such as natural environments, family-centered services, IFSP, and primary service provider is confusing without real experiences to serve as illustrations. Examples should be specific to the priorities and everyday experiences of each family- not general suggestions. Caregivers can only make informed decisions about their preferences for participation and learning outcomes when they know their role. Knowing “why” increases motivation to use the “what, when, and how” that is so important to systematic embedded intervention.

4. Habits and beliefs take time and reasons to change.

Concepts that conflict with previously held views force a re-evaluation of information or beliefs. As stated previously, it is important to start with a clear understanding of expectations and previous experiences. Moving from providing direct services with children to caregiver coaching has required EIs and family members alike to make changes in the ways they think, interact with each other and team members, and how they conduct the home or classroom visits. Some adults find change more challenging than others but all adults benefit from understanding the value of the change and seeing positive outcomes. Comments or questions from family members such as “it seems like all you are doing is playing;” or “how can he learn to talk while I give him a bath?” are cues to EIs that caregivers were expecting a different type of intervention or role

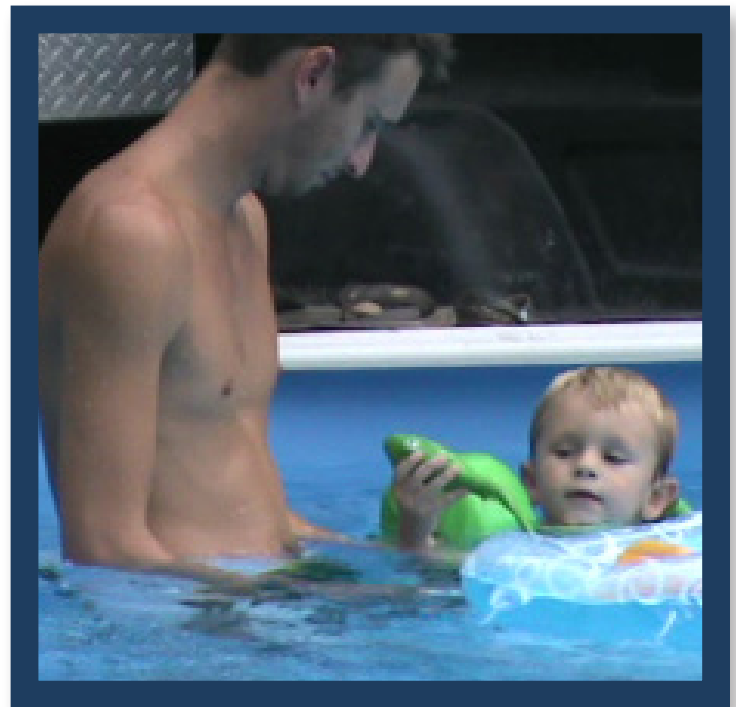
for themselves. They may have had prior experience with either a medical or educational model and need additional information or evidence about a coaching model within routines and activities. Adults tend to build on what they know and do. They are likely to need multiple and varied explanations of how and why embedded intervention is effective. Over time, by building consensus and continuing the conversation, adults will integrate the information into new meaningful experiences.

5. Learning less can result in more change when it fits within established patterns of interaction.

When learners integrate new ideas with what they already know it is easier to keep and use the new information. Anchors for learning are plentiful when the parent identifies the routines and activities for intervention and participates in problem-solving on when to embed intervention strategies. EIs will want to maintain the current routine or activity sequence to facilitate ease of learning the specific intervention strategy. The routine's sequence, the materials typically used and the predictable turn-taking all help to serve as anchors for the adult learner. Incorporating limited modifications or additional opportunities is much easier within a familiar and predictable framework. EIs should make only as many suggestions for change as necessary within an interaction or routine to preserve the caregiver's ownership and build confidence.

6. Adults learn best by applying the content to relevant problems systematically and sequentially.

The need for relevance increases with age, during periods of illness or exhaustion, and when dealing with multiple priorities, all situations that caregivers often encounter. "More isn't better" when the adult isn't able to remember how or when to use it. EIs may underestimate the complexity of the adult learning process necessary to embed opportunities in daily routines. EIs may expect competence from caregivers after a single conversation or demonstration. It is helpful for providers to remember that they had more than one hour of pre-service training to learn about child development, various disabilities, intervention strategies, data collection, and principles of instruction and reinforcement! EIs also have had multiple experiences to practice with feedback from mentors and teachers. Caregivers are not likely to have spent time thinking about how to teach within the typical routines and events that occur throughout their day. A routine is just that, routine, so caregivers



will need to problem solve and reflect with the EI to identify the most practical and comfortable strategies to use, how often to use them, and how to know when it is time to add more. It is important to remember that competence is greatly enhanced by confidence. Feeling inadequate because of the complexity of the task inhibits adult learners and reduces the frequency of their attempts.

7. Adults tend to teach others the way they like to learn or have been taught.

Unfortunately, the learning style, motivation, and format preferences of an EI are not likely to match the majority of the parents she coaches. EIs need to have a variety of tools that recognize the different learning styles, values and developmental stages of other adults. Just because you like to “jump in and try it!” doesn’t mean the caregivers you work with want to join you. Other EIs that prefer to research and read prior to trying something new may find many caregivers less interested in the details and more interested in the demonstrations and discussions. One of the expectations to be clear about from the very beginning is how the adult learner wants to gain new information and skills. Knowing what works for the adult learner will enable the coach to support the learner more efficiently.



8. Active learning opportunities increase adult participation.

EIs should look for ways to join into the caregiver-child interactions rather than encouraging the adult to observe or join the EI and child. Active learning can take many forms and should always reflect child and family interests. The EI may join the caregiver and child for a game of kickball to encourage balance in movement or help unload the dishwasher while discussing how the child is learning to follow directions. When caregivers decide which the routines and activities promote participation with their child, they are motivated to participate. Coaching in early intervention is a collaborative, not an expert process. Coaches infuse problem-solving and reflection to encourage the caregiver’s discussion of what they know and believe to work best for them and their child. The caregiver has much to contribute and decision-making supports future engagement.

Final Thoughts:

EIs should recognize that much of what they are sharing or demonstrating about early intervention is new and often complex information for other adults. EIs should be prepared to share the information more than once, share it in a variety of formats, apply it to multiple settings and situations, and return to it again as new circumstances occur. The presentation of information should always be meaningful to the parents and individualized for their priorities, routines, and activities. There are no “one size fits all” handouts or activities that will support all adult learners. EIs should involve the parent in planning and implementing the process, help them organize new information and relate it to previously stored information to enhance their success.

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