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Supporting Adult Learning in Early Intervention

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Supporting Adult Learners in Early Intervention

By Carol Trivette, PhD



Flickr [ACS provides parents unprecedented assistance by US Army MWR, August 31, 2010, CC BY 2.0]

Adult learning is part of our lives. Regardless of whether we are parents, teachers, home visitors, wait staff at a restaurant, nurse, or others, we don't stop learning just because we are "adults." Sometimes, we have the opportunity to continue learning as adults through various formal or informal contexts like classes, discussions, reading, or listening to pod casts.

As professionals responsible for supporting the learning of other adults, it is helpful for us to keep some key principles in mind. We must keep in mind that our goal is to support families to master skills so that they can help their children learn and develop.

- First, we want to individualize the learning to specific needs identified by the family.
- Second, we want to provide the most accurate, evidence-based information available.

- Finally, we want to use adult learning strategies that are evidence-based to ensure that regardless of the content families are learning, they can feel completely capable of using their knowledge to support their child's development and learning.

It does not matter whether or not families are learning advocacy skills, feeding skills, language skills, or social-emotional skills. Our goal is for families (adults) to develop confidence so that in their own way, they can achieve what they want to accomplish with and for their children and that **they are giving themselves credit** for their accomplishments.

Families are the experts on their families and it is important that we let them know that we believe this. We are experts on many things that families might want to learn. So we begin by getting families to tell us what they need or want to learn. Sometimes, it is difficult to ascertain what families want or need. But we have many strategies that we can use to encourage discussions about what they want for example, by asking open ended questions and being good listeners.

Once we have identified what families want to learn, then we must be clear, systematic, and consistent about what we are trying to help them learn.

- **First**, we often assume that families know what we are talking about (understand our lingo or professional terms). In fact they have very busy lives and they may not remember all of the specific ideas we were trying to help them understand from week to week. Thus, we need to reintroduce and illustrate the ideas. Ask family members what they remember about the practice. We want them to be successful and revisiting what you were working on with them is very important (introduce and illustrate). This ensures everyone is on the same page.
- **Second**, encourage family members to talk about the "practice" they have been doing. If it makes sense, watch as they practice. The "practice and reflect" parts of good adult learning principles work very well as part of everyday routines. Using "coaching strategies" within the routine encourages active participation of family members in the learning process. Digital videos can be used in various ways in this process – a previous recording taken by the family during the week or live recording that is viewed together. "Reflection" by family members about what happened in the routine is critical in this process. If they are hesitant about the reflection it can be helpful to ask the following types of questions:
 - What was successful?
 - What was still a challenge?
 - Would they like to make changes in what was tried?

You might go through this practice and reflection (coaching phase) several times in one session or over different sessions as family members work out the kinks to get it smooth.

- **Third**, once family members appear to be confident with what they have accomplished then the work turns to what else needs to be mastered. Together with family members, review what has been learned and reflect on whether or not it should be generalized to other settings, people, and contexts.
 - Is there a need to try and make this routine richer by adding other learning experiences?
 - Are there other developmental domains that can be focused on in the routine?
- **Finally**, if there is more to learn on the topic, then together with family members, plan out the next step in the same topic area. If family members have mastered the topic, then the next step is to decide what new things they want to learn next.