IDENTIFYING FAMILY CONCERNS, PRIORITIES, AND RESOURCES


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The phrase “Family concerns, priorities, and resources” is now being used instead of “family assessment” or “identification of family strengths and needs.” Families do not appreciate being “assessed.” The phrases describe the process and interaction which occur in gathering information to determine family priorities for goals and services. A major goal is for professionals to understand what families want for themselves and their children and what they need from the professionals to achieve such goals. Thus, a family need is what the family expresses it desires and a family strength is its perception of the resources it has to meet its own needs (Bailey, 1991). Only a family can decide what its concerns, priorities and resources are.

Another issue is an ethical one: what should a professional do when a need is identified for which there are no known services available? As a professional, it may be time to think about working on systems change to make services available if they are within legal guidelines.

PRINCIPLES OF A FAMILY CENTERED PROCESS FOR CONCERNS, PRIORITIES, AND RESOURCES (FROM R.K. KAUFMAN AND M.J. MCGONIGEL, 1991)

1. The inclusion of family information in the IFSP is voluntary on the part of families. There are absolutely NO requirements for a family assessment in Part C.

2. The identification of family concern, priorities, and resources is based on an individual family’s determination of which aspects of family life are relevant to the child’s development.

   As Kaufmann & McGonigel (1991) note, only families can decide for themselves what areas of family life are relevant to their ability to help their child develop. On the same note, families should not be asked to give information about themselves that does not directly relate to their priorities for their child. Thus, assessment of family dynamics, stress, or relationships should not be a precondition of participating in services [Dunst, Trivette, & Deal (1988); McGonigel & Garland (1988)]. If families want help in such an area, this would be addressed in terms of how it would relate to the child’s needs (marital stress might be a barrier to meeting the child’s needs, for example).
3. A family need or concern exists only if the family perceives that the need or concern exists. This is a very challenging principle for professionals as they shift into a role as consultants to families (Bailey, 1991).

4. Families have a broad array of formal and informal options to choose from in determining how they will identify their concerns, priorities, and resources.

   There is no right way. Some families may prefer checklists or surveys while others would rather chat with members of the IFSP team. This is a dynamic process and some families may want different methods at different times.

5. Families have multiple and continuing opportunities to identify their concerns, priorities, and resources.

   Every interaction with EI really is part of an ongoing process to determine concerns, priorities, and resources. Families begin to shape this process by the information they choose to share and the questions they ask (Bailey, 1991). This approach is really a process of developing an informal, open-ended relationship with professionals and the families they work with. Again, families change over time and so, too, do their concerns and resources. This is a PROCESS.

6. Family confidences are respected, and family shared information is not discussed casually among staff.

   This goes beyond confidentiality outside of the agency to family confidences within the service agency.

7. The process of identifying family concerns, resources, and priorities leads to the development of IFSP outcomes, strategies, and activities that help families achieve the things they want from early intervention for their children and themselves.

Once concerns and priorities are shared, IFSP strategies can be used to mobilize and meet their stated outcomes.

METHODS AND MEASURES FOR IDENTIFYING FAMILY CONCERNS, PRIORITIES AND RESOURCES (FROM KAUFMANN AND MCGONIGEL, 1991)

Interviews, Conversations, and Chats

If professionals can truly listen to families even in the initial contacts, an atmosphere of honesty and mutuality usually develops. Developing rapport is seen as crucial to families as noted by Summers and her colleagues (1990). Other ideas include storytelling and brainstorming with families, e.g. on their family resources and talents.

Turnbull and her colleagues (1991) identified the following “pointers for listening” as we work with families:

- Listen for cultural and family values that are important to the family.
- Listen for the names of family members, friends, and professionals who are already in the support network and whose support has been particularly valued.
• Listen for interests, needs, and strengths that might link the child and family with a wider network of supporters.
• Listen for the coping strategies that the family uses and any expressed desire for expanding coping strategies.
• Listen for things that the family would like to do to help their child and themselves (to do list).
• Listen for how the family has typically approached solving problems in the past.
• Listen for concerns, hopes, and plans that the families have concerning transitional issues.
• Listen for the kinds of evaluations that have been conducted in the past and the evaluation questions that they would like to have addressed.
• Listen for and acknowledge the specific strengths the family has shown in adjusting to their child’s disability and in meeting the child’s needs.

One parent said she liked to say that “no family is dysfunctional.” Rather, a family may need help in looking at its problems in new or different ways so that they are not “stuck” with one viewpoint.

The state of Florida’s 1990 Module on Evaluation discussed interview procedures with families as well. The module refers to key sources (Carkhuff & Anthony, 1979; Garrett, 1982; Gordon, 1987) which provide excellent descriptions of interview techniques in conducting needs assessments. Winton’s 1988 article on the family-focused interview also provides some guidelines for readers who may be particularly interested in this area. (Winton, P. J. (1988). Effective communication between parents and professionals. In D. B. Bailey & R. J. Simeonsson (Eds.), Family assessment in early intervention (pp. 207-228). Columbus, OH: Merrill.)

Dunst, Trivette, and Deal (1988) make the following suggestions for listening to and outlining families’ strengths, needs, and resources:

• Be positive and proactive in arranging the first contact with the family.
• Take time to establish rapport with the family before beginning the interview.
• Begin by clearly stating the purpose of the interview.
• Encourage the family to share aspirations as well as concerns.
• Help the family clarify concerns and define the nature of their needs.
• Listen empathetically and be responsive throughout the interview.
• Establish consensus regarding priority needs and outcome desires.

Scales and Mapping
In helping define resources, social support scales and network mapping have commonly been used. Network mapping defines a respondent’s personal social support network in terms of both needs and support sources.

Written Measures
Checklists, inventories, surveys, etc. can all be used to help a family identify its concerns and resources. These measures can be used formally or informally. Many are self-assessment measures. These can and should be used AS A FAMILY WISHES TO USE THEM. Remember to ask the family. Some may want to complete the measures privately and then discuss certain aspects with the EI staff.
Sometimes it is helpful to define general categories for a family so that they can organize their major sources of support.

**Summary: Family Strengths Paradigm**

The philosophy of a family centered approach to identifying family concerns, priorities, and resources presumes that families have strengths and are competent (Davis & Kaufmann, 1990; McGonigel, 1990; Trivette, et. al., 1990). Such an approach builds on the strengths present in a family and creates opportunities to acquire new competencies to meet the outcomes THE FAMILY chooses for its child and itself (Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1988).

Professionals are traditionally trained to look at needs and concerns instead of strengths and resources. Professionals must reorient themselves. In looking at and recognizing family strengths and competence comes valuing all cultures as being intrinsically healthy. Cultures are powerful in shaping family and professional beliefs, attitudes, and practices. Honoring family diversity helps to create a solid foundation for developing the rapport necessary to look at family concerns and priorities.

Garshelis and McConnell (1993) reiterated the importance of asking parents to participate as they wish in this phase. In their study, “assessments” of family needs made by interagency EI teams and individual professionals were compared to the mothers’ assessment of their own needs. Interdisciplinary teams were more accurate in assessing family needs than were individual professionals, but even teams did very poorly, with the best only matching 74% of a parent’s responses. The authors suggest a family needs survey with follow-up personal discussions with family members in order to ensure that services focus on the needs that are of direct concern of families.

**References**


