

A Family-Centred Approach

A Guide for Educational Personnel



Based on the strengths of each student and their family, a family-centred approach is tailored to fit the needs of each individual family. Families are actively involved in planning and decision-making related to student learning. The chosen objectives and identified strategies are thus more likely to facilitate family life, deal with special challenges, and create the best possible environment for the health, development, and well-being of the students.

A family-centred approach works because:

- Parents/guardians understand best the needs of their children and are in an advantageous position to guide them toward positive outcomes.
- This approach increases parent/guardian confidence because they are involved in all stages of the intervention.
- Parents/guardians are more proactive and independent when they are meeting their children’s development needs.

The five components of a family-centred approach are:

1. Establish a Bond and a Partnership with the Family

2. Identify Learning Objectives in Collaboration with the Family

3. Select Actions or Strategies to be Implemented

4. Clarify Everyone’s Roles

5. Provide Effective Feedback and Support

To help illustrate the five components of a family-centred approach, we will use the example of a fictional student, Juliane, and her family. Excerpts of conversations and steps taken by the resource teacher and Juliane’s parents will be presented for each component.

Juliane’s Profile

Student: Juliane, 10 years old, Grade 5

Strengths: Reading, music, excellent memory, good relationships with her peers, and fine motor skills (drawing, sewing, and making bracelets)

Challenges: Writing, mathematics, lack of awareness of danger (crossing the street, moving around in a parking lot, and straying from adults), and daily routines (storing items in her locker, getting out the materials required, and moving around the school)



Learning objectives at school:

- Grade 5 curriculum outcomes with adjusted curricular outcomes in English and mathematics
- Follow a visual schedule
- Organize materials
- Stay with the adult when asked to do so

Teacher: Ms. Brooks

Resource teacher: Mr. Smith

Mother: Mrs. Steward

Father: Mr. Steward

Other information: Mrs. Steward is working at home. Mr. Steward sometimes has to travel but is also working at home. Juliane has a younger sister who is seven years old.

1. Establish a Bond and a Partnership with the Family

Building positive relationships with parents/guardians is essential to a family-centred approach. Teaching staff and empowered and engaged parents/guardians work together with a common goal; the child's well-being. Achieving this involves:

- listening to needs.
- gathering information about the strengths, interests, and challenges of the child as well as of the family.

Above all, do not assume you know the strengths, challenges, and needs of families.

When questioning parents/guardians about their strengths and needs, do not limit yourself to just academics. Think about language and communication skills, social skills, life skills, leisure and daily activities.

Ms. Brooks, Juliane's teacher, contacted Mrs. Steward, Juliane's mother, several times. During the first two telephone conversations, Mrs. Steward was not worried and felt comfortable guiding Juliane through her online learning activities. Mrs. Steward shared that the family takes at least one 45-minute walk a day in the neighbourhood and that the children spend time outside when weather permits.

During the third telephone conversation, Ms. Brooks realized that Mrs. Steward was not as optimistic and cheerful as usual. She made comments such as:

- We're starting to have trouble motivating Juliane to do her school work.
- I can't always be sitting beside her, and she can't do the work on her own.
- When I spend time helping her sister to do her work, Juliane interrupts and bothers us.
- She keeps wanting to play games on the tablet. It's getting harder and harder to take it away from her.

Ms. Brooks listens to Mrs. Steward and takes down the information. She makes sure to give Mrs. Steward a chance to express her thoughts, and makes the following comments:

- I understand that you are experiencing some frustration right now with school work and the daily routine. Is that right?
- How can I help you?
- Would you like us to discuss some more specific learning objectives you could work on at home?
- Tell me what is going well. What activities can Juliane do on her own?

Certain factors may interfere with building positive relationships with parents/guardians. The following are some possible factors and solutions.

Barrier or Challenge	Possible Solutions
<p>Use of overly technical language and an authoritarian attitude</p> <p>This could be off-putting for parents/guardians and even give the impression that the staff member is adopting an attitude that is authoritarian instead of one that leaves room for cooperation and flexibility.</p>	<p>Use active and empathetic listening</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accept information without passing judgment. • Repeat or paraphrase words to ensure you are understood. • Identify and verbalize the other person’s emotions. • Be aware of your own emotions while you are listening and avoid projecting your emotions onto others. • Take breaks so everyone can reflect, organize their thoughts, or regain control over their emotions.
<p>Focus on challenges or problems</p> <p>It might be easy to concentrate solely on the challenges and the things that are not going so well. Find out about what is going well and try to help parents/guardians find strengths in their situation.</p>	<p>Find out about the strengths and interests of the child and the family</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are (the child’s) successes? • During which activities does (the child) experience the most success? • How does (the child) spend free time? • What are your successes as a family? • During which activities does your family experience the most success? • How do you spend your free time?
<p>Negative thoughts about oneself or one’s performance</p> <p>For some people, communication with parents/guardians might be difficult and could lead to a feeling of powerlessness and vulnerability. Negative thoughts about oneself or one’s performance are, however, one of the barriers to establishing a positive relationship with families.</p>	<p>Self-Compassion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mindfulness • Be kind to oneself • Stay connected with others
<p>Lack of sensitivity to family values</p> <p>Each family experiences almost every situation differently and so, it is necessary to be sensitive to what could be very different individual realities.</p>	<p>Show compassion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan breaks and times in the conversation for the parents/guardians to say how they feel. • Confirm the emotional response of parents/guardians without passing judgment. • Discuss as a team how the concerns of parents/guardians could be addressed. • Be understanding of what parents/guardians are going through by offering supportive comments.

2. Identify Learning Objectives in Collaboration with the Family

In some cases, the learning objectives worked on at school may no longer apply in this new context or may no longer be a priority. It will therefore be necessary to identify, with the parents/guardians and the student, if possible, meaningful learning objectives that meet the needs of the student and the family in the current circumstances.

The following are some questions that could help guide the discussion and together with the parents/guardians determine which learning objectives will be prioritized:

- Are there any concerns about the student's safety?
- Does the student have a mean for communicating wants and needs?
- Are there missing prerequisite skills that impact learning?
- Does the student need help with basic self-care?
- What are the student's career and life readiness objectives?
- What teaching resources and opportunities are available in the current environment?

What objectives would the student like to prioritize? What objectives would the family like to prioritize? Why?

Ms. Brooks and Mrs. Steward determine that they will work together to identify learning objectives for Juliane. Ms. Brooks also consults Mr. Smith, Juliane's resource teacher. He knows Juliane's strengths and challenges very well and offers to help the team identify the learning objectives to work on at home.

Ms. Brooks asks the following question during a conversation with Mr. and Mrs. Steward: What types of things would you like Juliane to be able to do during her day, in connection with her learning?

Mr. and Mrs. Steward reply as follows:

- We would like her to keep reading every day. She really likes that, and it is a calm activity she can do on her own.
- We would also like her to be able to write a little and do a bit of math, but we are having trouble finding appropriate activities online. Currently, she is doing activities that are much too easy, but she gets angry if we try to give her other ones.
- We would like to have a small functional routine for the morning and afternoon. There is no structure at the moment and she spends a lot of time playing games on the tablet.

After further discussing the objectives suggested by Juliane's parents, Ms. Brooks summarizes the discussion by listing the objectives set for next week:

- Do 30 minutes of reading per day
- Work on fractions and quantities by following a recipe
- Do a drawing and write a little story to describe the drawing
- Follow a schedule for school tasks every day

3. Select Actions or Strategies to be Implemented

It will probably be necessary to be creative and use your knowledge set to convert actions or strategies implemented in a school context into actions and strategies implemented by parents/guardians in a family context. This is not an easy task, so it is crucial to establish a partnership with parents/guardians and to communicate openly with them.

If you were teaching this concept in a school setting, how would you go about it?

Think about the different strategies you know. Ask the parents/guardians if they have any ideas regarding strategies. Could any of them be applied in this context? Of course, most parents/guardians do not have teacher training, so you may have to adjust the activities you suggest depending on the individual strengths of each family. Start with simple activities so that parents/guardians and their child experience success. Check whether expectations are reasonable and whether parents/guardians are comfortable with the suggestions or not.

Ms. Brooks asks Mr. and Mrs. Steward if they have any ideas of activities or strategies for working on the target objectives with Juliane. They suggest that since Juliane will need help with the writing activity, Mrs. Steward will do the activity with Juliane. They will both do a drawing and write a little story. Then, they will share their stories.

Ms. Brooks makes the following suggestions:

- Ask Juliane questions after she reads her story. She offers to email Mr. and Mrs. Steward a guide they could use to ask some specific questions that are appropriate for Juliane's level.
- Put all the cups and measuring spoons on the table and ask Juliane to find the ones she needs.
- Ask Juliane to do some small drawings that represent the day's activities. She could even cut out the pictures and put them in order on a surface such as a table or binder. When she completes an activity, she can then put the picture in a bin marked "Finished." This strategy is used at school except that Juliane does not draw the pictures.

4. Clarify Everyone's Roles

A role-clarifying exercise should also be done in collaboration with the parents/guardians. The example shown below is a possible starting point and must be modified to meet the specific needs of each family and situation.

Teaching Staff	Parents/Guardians
Share information and resources	Share information and resources
Provide explanations to parents/guardians	Try out some things with their child
Do a demonstration or some modelling	Share experiences with the teaching staff
Provide feedback and support	Share successes and challenges
Try to identify solutions to overcome challenges	Try to identify solutions to overcome challenges

Ms. Brooks and Juliane's parents agree on each person's role.

Ms. Brooks will:

- Provide explanations in connection with the proposed strategies and email a supporting document to the parents.
- Offer to demonstrate how to use a visual schedule.

Mr. and Mrs. Steward will try experiments with Juliane during the week and share them with Ms. Brooks during a telephone conversation.

Ms. Brooks then:

- Acknowledges successes and congratulates parents on their efforts.
- Finds out the parents' satisfaction level with the proposed strategies.
- Works with Juliane's parents to find a solution to challenges they encounter.

5. Provide Effective Feedback and Support

The feedback and support you provide to families will vary according to their individual needs. An empathic approach that takes the values and realities of each family into account will certainly be a winning strategy.

The following tips promote effective feedback and support:

- Stress the positive aspects and efforts made. Always begin your feedback with a positive comment.
- Avoid drawing conclusions or making assumptions. Ask parents directly how they feel about everything that is going on with their child. Is the proposed strategy effective and productive? Be prepared to hear positive and negative comments.
- Give constructive feedback or suggest possible solutions, depending on the situation. Use your professional judgment to determine where the parent/guardian could benefit from some possible solutions or constructive criticism. Gauge the reactions of the parent/guardian and adjust your feedback accordingly.
- Ask parents/guardians how you can help them. If the parent/guardian shares obstacles or challenges they have faced, ask them directly if there is something you can do. If the parent/guardian is unsure of possible solutions, try to come up with something together.
- Offer non-judgmental support. Like you, parents/guardians are navigating their way through the situation the best they can.
- If you encounter a problem, remember that you are not alone. Communicate with your co-workers or principal. Above all, try to find a solution in collaboration with the families. To guide the discussion, you could ask questions such as:
 - How do you think this problem can be solved?
 - What strategies have you tried in the past that have worked?
 - What might contribute to your well-being as a family at this time?

Celebrate successes with your students' parents/guardians.

Consult your co-workers and share your experiences.

Be kind to yourself; allow yourself to make mistakes and do not aim for perfection.

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