



The Transformative Process of  
Collaborating with  
Parents and Family Members:

## **Engagement, Involvement & Partnership**

September 2019



The **New Jersey Parents' Caucus Inc.** (NJPC) is a coalition of parents, caregivers, and youth whose mission is to ensure that every family who has children with emotional and behavioural needs is given an opportunity to play a strong and active role in the conceptualization, development, and delivery of effective and timely services in the mental health, juvenile justice, and child welfare systems.

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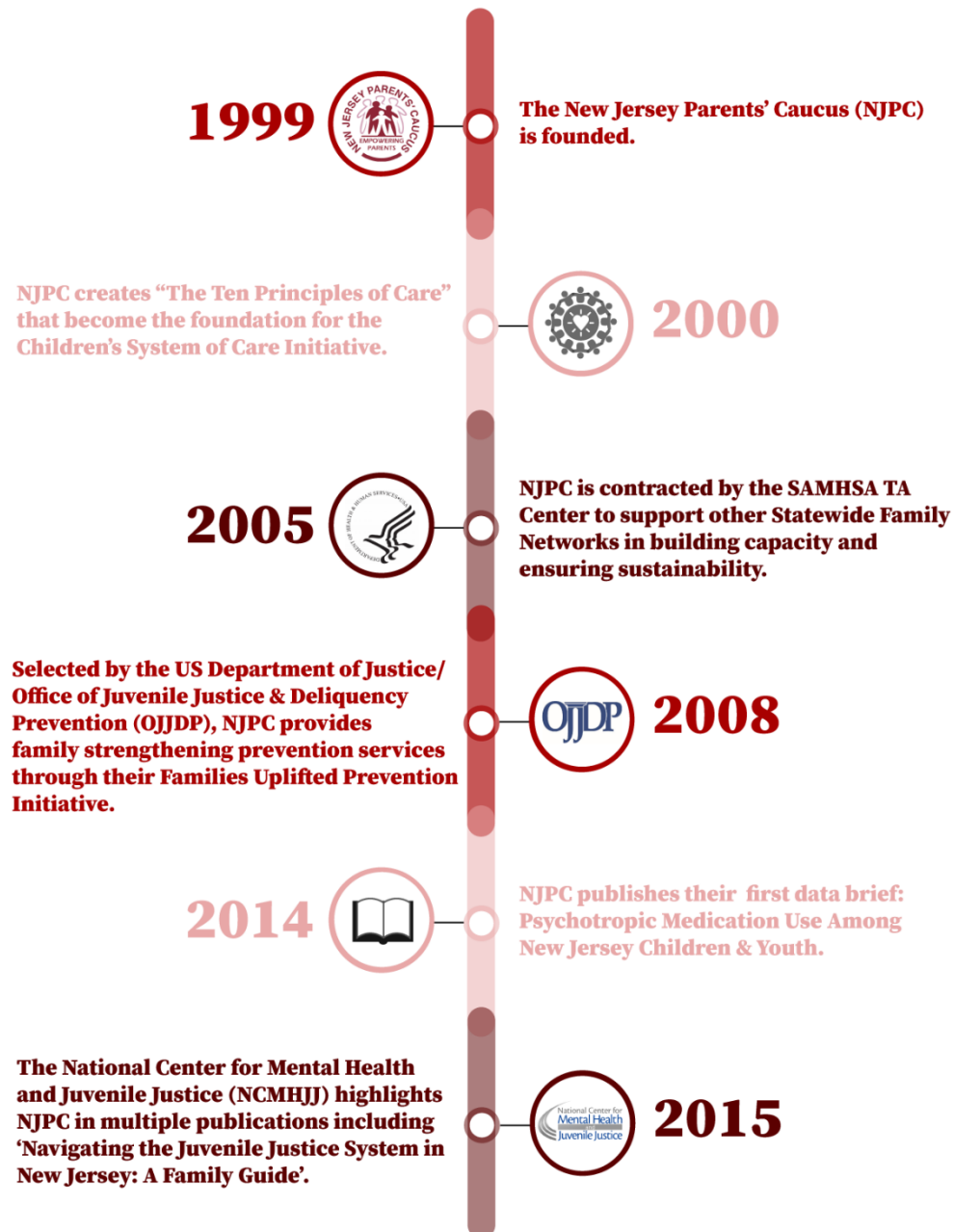
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	3
i   ABOUT US .....	4
1   BUILDING AUTHENTICITY, CONSENSUS, AND COLLABORATION .....	5
1.1   THE PROCESS .....	5
1.2   GOALS .....	6
1.3   A PARADIGM SHIFT .....	7
1.4   THOUGHT EXERCISES .....	8
2   COLLABORATION WITH FAMILIES .....	9
2.1   ELEMENTS OF COLLABORATION WITH FAMILIES .....	9
2.1.1   <i>PREPARATION MATTERS</i> .....	9
2.1.2   <i>COMMUNICATION, COMMUNICATION, COMMUNICATION</i> .....	10
2.2   BARRIERS TO COLLABORATION WITH FAMILIES .....	11
2.2.1   <i>FROM PARENTS AND FAMILY MEMBERS</i> .....	11
2.2.2   <i>FROM PROFESSIONALS AND ADVOCATES</i> .....	11
2.3   BENEFITS TO COLLABORATION WITH FAMILIES .....	11
2.4   ONGOING ISSUES IN COLLABORATION WITH FAMILIES .....	12
2.4.1   <i>THOUGHT EXERCISE</i> .....	13
3   FAMILY-SPECIFIC STRATEGIES .....	14
3.1   THE HIERARCHY OF STRATEGIES .....	14
3.1.1   <i>UNIVERSAL STRATEGIES</i> .....	15
3.1.2   <i>SELECTIVE STRATEGIES</i> .....	15
3.1.3   <i>INTENSIVE STRATEGIES</i> .....	16
3.2   ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES AND RESOURCES .....	17
4   A CHALLENGE TO YOU .....	19
5   REFERENCES .....	20

## i | ABOUT US

The New Jersey Parents' Caucus Inc. (NJPC) began in 1999 as a coalition of children's advocacy groups comprised of parents, caregivers and youth seeking to better the policies and services provided for families of children struggling with special needs. Incorporated in 2000, NJPC continues to ensure parents and caregivers of children with emotional and behavioral challenges will always be given the opportunity to shape the conceptualization, development, and delivery of effective services in mental health, juvenile justice, and child welfare and education systems.



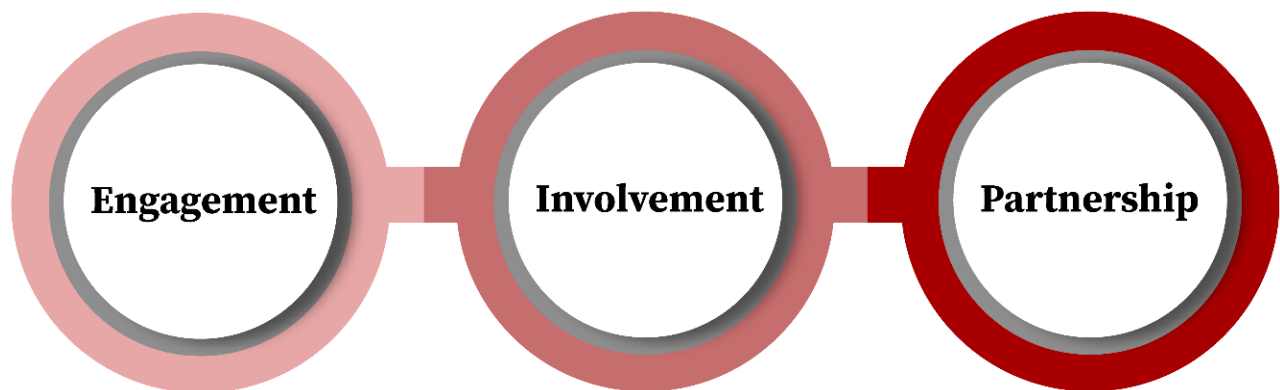
# 1 | BUILDING AUTHENTICITY, CONSENSUS, AND COLLABORATION

The key to a successful, fruitful partnership between families and professionals is the integral concept of building an authentic collaboration. This involves the same foundational work required of any relationship: fostering trust, committing to open communication, and establishing clear and upfront expectations. Families, parents, and caregivers are equals in this journey; as a professional, it is important to acknowledge and internalize this before beginning to conceptualize and implement strategies. Be mindful of the family's contributions, achievements, and potential, and the wealth and success of your work will grow exponentially.

In this Section, we will cover the foundations of creating a successful partnership. We will discuss the difference between engagement, involvement, and a true partnership; the overall goals of family collaboration; and an essential paradigm shift in the field that will both support and facilitate your transition into a family-driven organization.

## 1.1 | THE PROCESS

The process of building authenticity, consensus, and collaboration with families can be summarized in three simple steps:



**Figure 1:** The three-step process in creating successful professional-family collaborations.

### 1. Engagement

This serves as a solid beginning, but it is only that: a beginning. Opened channels of communication will close in the absence of active participation. It is essential to understand that when one party engages the other, it does not constitute a partnership. For any collaboration to move past this initial stage, a concerted effort must be made to foster consistent engagement from all parties.

Examples of engagement include:

- ❖ Inviting families and parents to community events
- ❖ Providing families with general resources (e.g. training materials, broad spectrum strategies and programs)

- ❖ Creating opportunities for families to provide feedback on programs and strategies they have utilized

## 2. Involvement

Active involvement is achieved when all parties choose and commit to a fully present, regular part of any process. This means that each individual now has a vested interest in the outcomes of the work.

Examples of involvement include:

- ❖ Having families attend advocate-sponsored community events
- ❖ Providing strategies and programs that prioritize the child and their specific issues and needs but require families and caregivers to adjust to support
- ❖ Requesting and receiving feedback from families regarding existing paradigms and strategies

## 3. Partnership

The ultimate goal is a collaborative partnership between all parties that recognizes each other's strengths and weaknesses, realizes each party's potential, and acknowledges the equal nature of everyone's value and worth.

Examples of partnership include:

- ❖ Sponsoring events that support the family in their own community within the framework of the family's needs and abilities
- ❖ Incorporating and addressing the family's strengths, weaknesses, and current struggles as a part of creating an effective strategy
- ❖ Actively listening to and acting upon feedback from families and caregivers that places their worth beyond that of simply a client

Remember that as with everything, this is a learning process. Once you have identified where your work and your organization resides, take the time to understand and plan the next steps required to realize full partnerships with the families and children with whom you are working.

## 1.2 | GOALS

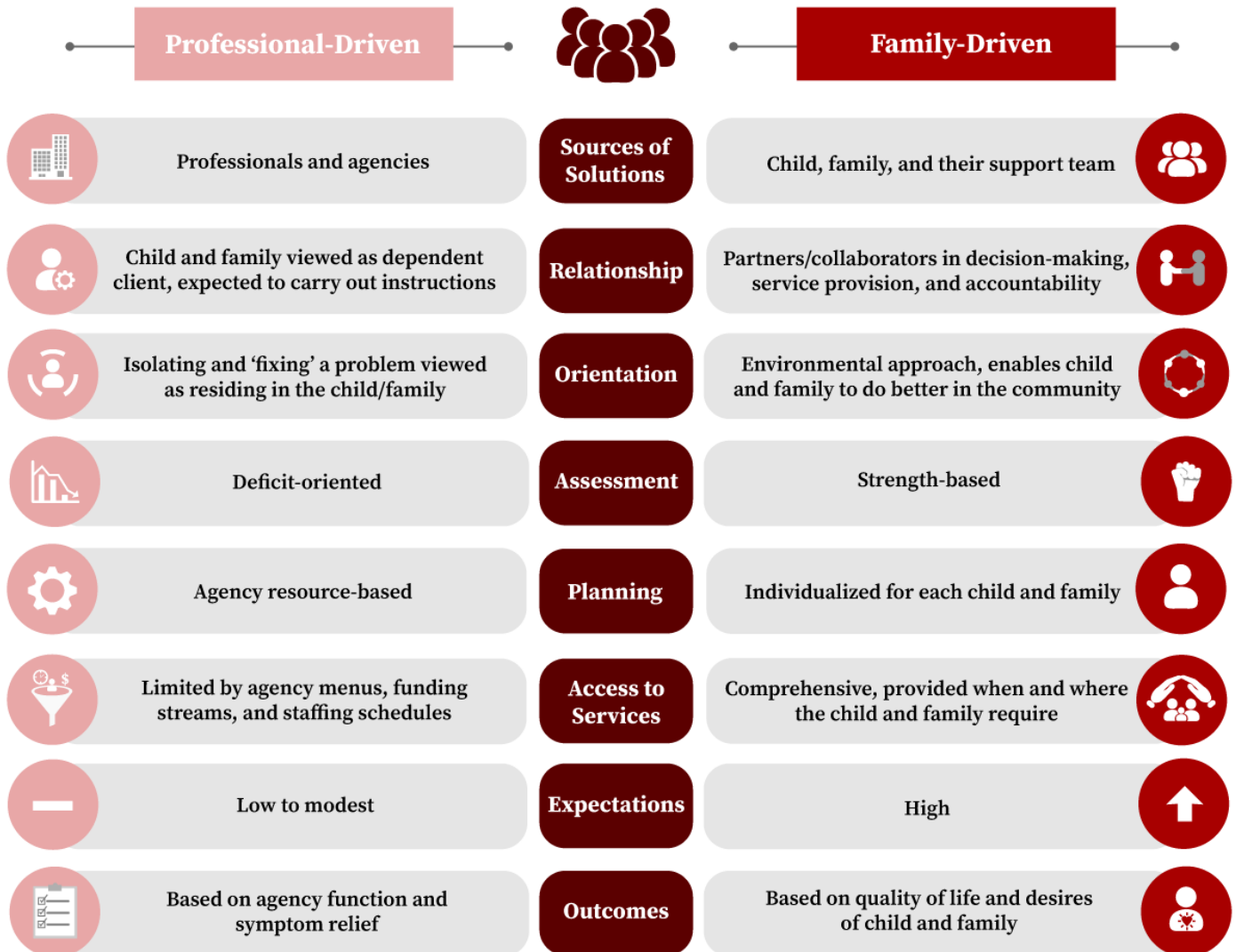
The overall goals of parent and family collaboration are to:

- ❖ Improve the wellbeing of families raising children
- ❖ Ensure families and children remain together in their home and local communities
- ❖ Support families and children to thrive

In general, the aim is to **increase positive outcomes for children, youth, and families**. There are many paths to this end, but it is always important to keep this overall goal in mind and shape strategies that are focused on uplifting and supporting both children *and* their families.

### 1.3 | A PARADIGM SHIFT

An essential change needed in this the field is the shift in focus from professional-centric thinking and strategies to a process rooted in collaboration and driven by the family. This reframing goes hand-in-hand with the idea that a full, active partnership with families is the key to increasing positive outcomes. The main differences between professional and family-driven strategies are outlined below:



**Figure 2:** Differences between professional-driven versus family-driven strategies.

With the current paradigm still focused on professionals, it will take time, dedication, and an active commitment to change for this paradigm shift to occur. As a professional, this may mean making the decision to significantly overhaul your existing organizational infrastructure and program offerings. Know that this is an investment and statement of belief in the value of families and community support. The power and trust that you choose to actively give is the first step in fostering a strong, enduring partnership, and is essential in achieving the overall goal of increasing positive outcomes for children and their families.

## 1.4 | EXERCISES

The following are some questions to help inspire self-reflection and facilitate an understanding of where your current professional strategies stand in relation to the goal of open partnership and collaboration with families:

**Question 1:** How do you currently collaborate with parents and family members in your organization?

**Question 2:** What are some of the barriers that parents and family members currently face in your organization?

Take note of your answers; we will revisit these concepts in Section 2.4.1.



## 2 | COLLABORATION WITH FAMILIES

In Section 1, we covered some of the fundamental concepts behind the foundations of effective collaboration. In this Section, we will discuss in further detail the key elements of successful professional-family partnerships and examine some actionable methods that will help you shape your work and strategies.

### 2.1 | ELEMENTS OF COLLABORATION WITH FAMILIES

At the very center of supporting and uplifting families and children are several key philosophies. Please keep these in mind as you move forward with your work, and think back on them as you devise programs and examine your organization's infrastructure:

- ❖ Recognize that ALL parents, regardless of income, education level, or cultural background, want their children to do well
- ❖ Be consistent, reliable, and authentic
- ❖ Listen, respect, empathize
- ❖ Be willing to share power with families

These guiding principles emphasize the basic concepts of successful, healthy relationships, but they require a fundamental paradigm shift – from not only supporting and empowering families, but to actively valuing and uplifting their strengths and participation. Remember these central tenants as we move forward and discuss some methods in achieving full partnership with families, and always consider how they integrate into your mindset and work.

#### 2.1.1 | *PREPARATION MATTERS*

As you work to embrace each of the above philosophies, you must also take the time to understand yourself and your organization. It is not enough to try to implement these broad concepts as ideals to strive toward. First and foremost, make sure you have a clear idea of your or your organization's foundational framework so you can effectively build upon it. The following questions will help you take stock of where you are as a professional and where your organizational infrastructure is:

1. What are your personal biases and prejudices? What are the biases and prejudices that exist within your organization?
2. Are you and your organization equipped to support diverse families at a cultural and linguistic level?
3. Do your current initiatives and strategies prioritize parental support in guiding their children and families, or do they solely focus on the child?
4. What steps do you currently take to understand and acknowledge the multitude of perspectives from each party (e.g. professional, para-professional, parent, family member, individual)?
5. What are your bottom lines and boundaries as an advocate professional and as an organization? How does this relate to the families you work with?

Authenticity and trust are the ultimate keystones in any successful, collaborative relationship. Do the work to prepare yourself and your organization so that you can fully embody that authenticity and the changes in what you bring to the table. How you do so will be reflected in your success.

### **2.1.2 | COMMUNICATION, COMMUNICATION, COMMUNICATION**

The next step in fully engaging with the families and children with whom you are working is to clearly and proactively communicate. This involves numerous conversations. A great place to start is to find and highlight common ground.

Recall from Section 1.2, the overall goal of **increasing positive outcomes for children, youth, and families**. As you begin this partnership, you must first ensure that your starting points are the same; one cannot build a sturdy home on a shifting foundation. Establish your expectations clearly and seek to understand those of the family and child. Do they align? If not, take the time to understand why, and bridge any gaps that you discover. Each party may share the overall goal of increasing positive outcomes but there is a world of possibilities in how to achieve this.

Another key aspect to consider is the purpose of the collaborative partnership. What does the overall objective of increasing positive outcomes look like on an actionable level? Seek to understand the markers of success in this journey and define a clear-cut, achievable purpose that matches the expectations of both you and the family. This will further solidify your foundation and allow you and the families you partner with to grow and expand together safely and effectively.

Your commitment to understanding the family doesn't end at their expectations and baseline requirements of the partnership. Just as families seek to understand you and your work as a professional, you too must learn about families and understand them as people and partners. What are their strengths and weaknesses? What challenges and barriers do they face as they work with you in this partnership? Taking the time at the beginning of your journey together to discuss families' past experiences, current situations, and any concerns they may have will mitigate unnecessary roadblocks and will concretely demonstrate that you value the family and their role in this process.

Inevitably, you will discover discrepancies and disagreements as you move through these conversations – this is simply the nature of a journey with more than one party. Establishing a rapport and defining yourself as a partner who is willing and able to communicate will do wonders in addressing these issues.

To summarize:

- ❖ Establish and align your expectations
- ❖ Understand and acknowledge the family's strengths and weaknesses and the barriers they may face
- ❖ Be clear about the purpose of the collaboration
- ❖ Demonstrate that you understand and value the participatory role of the family

Finally, and most importantly: remember to **listen, show respect, and be authentic**.

## 2.2 | BARRIERS TO COLLABORATION WITH FAMILIES

In Section 2.1, we discussed the merits of having productive conversations with families to understand their strengths, weaknesses, and the expectations they have for developing a partnership. One of these conversations involves taking the time to identify barriers that you and the families you work with may face in this process. This Section is devoted to further outlining and dissecting some of these barriers and challenges, both from the perspective of the family and the professional.

### 2.2.1 | *FROM PARENTS AND FAMILY MEMBERS*

One of the biggest barriers to full, effective collaboration is mistrust. This can stem from a variety of factors and cannot be discounted as simply inconvenient or misguided. Perhaps the family has personal history with the systems within which you must work; perhaps they have had similar processes become intrusive or detrimental to their children and communities. Recall from Section 2.1.2 that authenticity and trust are keystones in any successful and collaborative relationship. Part of establishing this trust is not only identifying and discussing factors that contribute to a family's mistrust, but also acknowledging their validity. Communicating clearly and proactively will help dispel misconceptions at the beginning and can directly address concerns before they completely block your path to progress.

Another important consideration is that no two families are alike: each family and individual has access to different types and levels of resources. A consequence of this difference in access is the potential for a lack of involvement. It is essential, however, to remember that this does not reflect a lack of commitment. Work schedule conflicts, difficulty accessing transportation, or even limitations in family members' mental and/or physical health may be a root cause of a lack of family involvement. These types of challenges are unfortunately very common, and are examples of immediate, concrete concerns that can be readily addressed. This will be discussed in further detail in Section 3.

### 2.2.2 | *FROM PROFESSIONALS AND ADVOCATES*

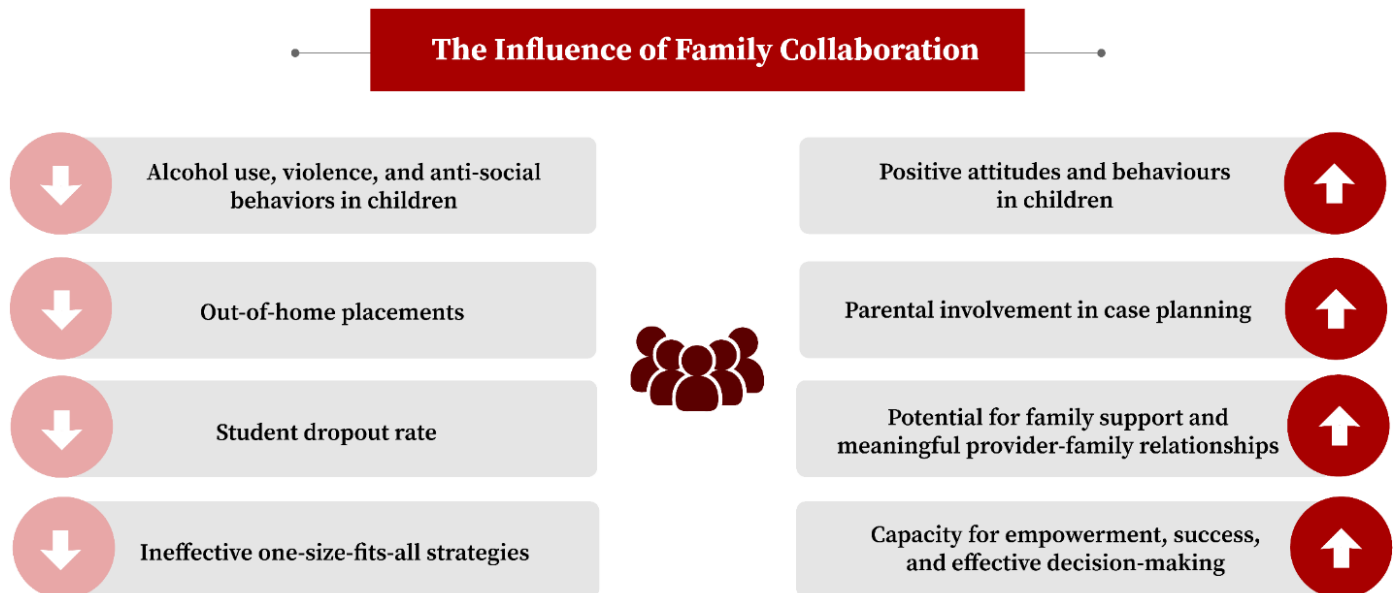
Certain barriers and challenges may have come to light as you worked through the questions outlined in Section 2.1.1. Perhaps your organizational infrastructure does not currently support certain families from a linguistic perspective (e.g. lack of translators); perhaps there is a lack of diversity in your staff or on your board that may deter engagement from diverse families. A myriad of organizational facets can impact how accessible you and your services are; take the time to consider each aspect and how they currently succeed or can be improved.

One such aspect is the way in which your organization communicates with your partner families. As outlined in Section 2.1.2, clear communication helps deconstruct barriers by proactively addressing concerns, clearly defining the roles of each party, and reducing accessibility challenges (such as overly short notice for meetings or having difficult-to-reach event locations). **Focus on prioritizing the support and uplifting the individual's wellbeing alongside their families.** Oftentimes the singular focus on rectifying given behaviors or issues poses one of the biggest barriers to full partnership between families and professional advocates.

## 2.3 | BENEFITS TO COLLABORATION WITH FAMILIES

Building an effective collaborative partnership with families is, like many processes, an exercise in dedication and commitment. We have discussed the different elements involved, along with potential

challenges that both you as a professional and the families that you work with may face. What makes such an endeavor fraught with difficult work worthwhile in the end? The following figure outlines several of the changes that family collaboration has been demonstrated to inspire:



**Figure 3:** A summary of how family collaboration can influence systems, professional strategies, and address the overall goal of increasing the wellbeing of children and their families.

One of the most accurate predictors of a child's achievement is the level of family involvement and support (Schargel & Smink, 2001). Families with high-achieving children:

- ❖ Create a home environment that encourages learning
- ❖ Communicate high, yet reasonable expectations
- ❖ Become involved in their children's education

In fact, the positive relationship between family engagement and outcomes such as increased academic achievement stands even across diverse socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, and educational backgrounds (Mapp, 2004). Considering the complexity and depth of challenges that are associated with each of these systems, it is all the more astounding that family collaboration and involvement has such a profound impact on the overall efficacy of strategies. As such, as a professional harnessing and supporting this wealth of strength and potential is a key component in ensuring proper support of the wellbeing of children and families with whom you partner.

## 2.4 | ONGOING ISSUES IN COLLABORATION WITH FAMILIES

Throughout this Section, we have guided you on considering the multitude of facets of building an effective, collaborative partnership with families. We have discussed the strengths and challenges that professionals and families each bring to the table, as well as the overall benefits of persevering in this endeavor. One thing that has yet to be touched upon is external challenges. While you may work to understand and account for each variable that individual parties contribute, every process will be impacted by outside, systemic challenges. Examples of such external barriers include:

- ❖ Institutional restrictions
- ❖ Court orders
- ❖ Child welfare involvement

In these cases, it is essential to focus on improving outcomes for the child rather than becoming mired in the roadblocks inherent to navigating external systemic challenges. Committing to the paradigm shift from professional-driven strategies to a strength-based, family-driven approach will help build a solid foundation that can and will support your work.

### **2.4.1 | *THOUGHT EXERCISE***

Recall the questions posed in Section 1.4 and your answers to them. Given what you have now learned in this Section, please consider the following:

**Question 1:** Which ones of your listed strategies are **true** family collaborations?

**Question 2:** How can you shape your current strategies that require improvement into true family collaborations?

Consistent self-reflection and an honest, critical approach to your work is key to ensuring that your progress is effective and efficient. Take the time to revisit these questions as you continue to conceptualize, implement strategies and build your organization. New perspectives and re-evaluation of existing infrastructure will be invaluable in shaping your success.

### 3 | FAMILY-SPECIFIC STRATEGIES

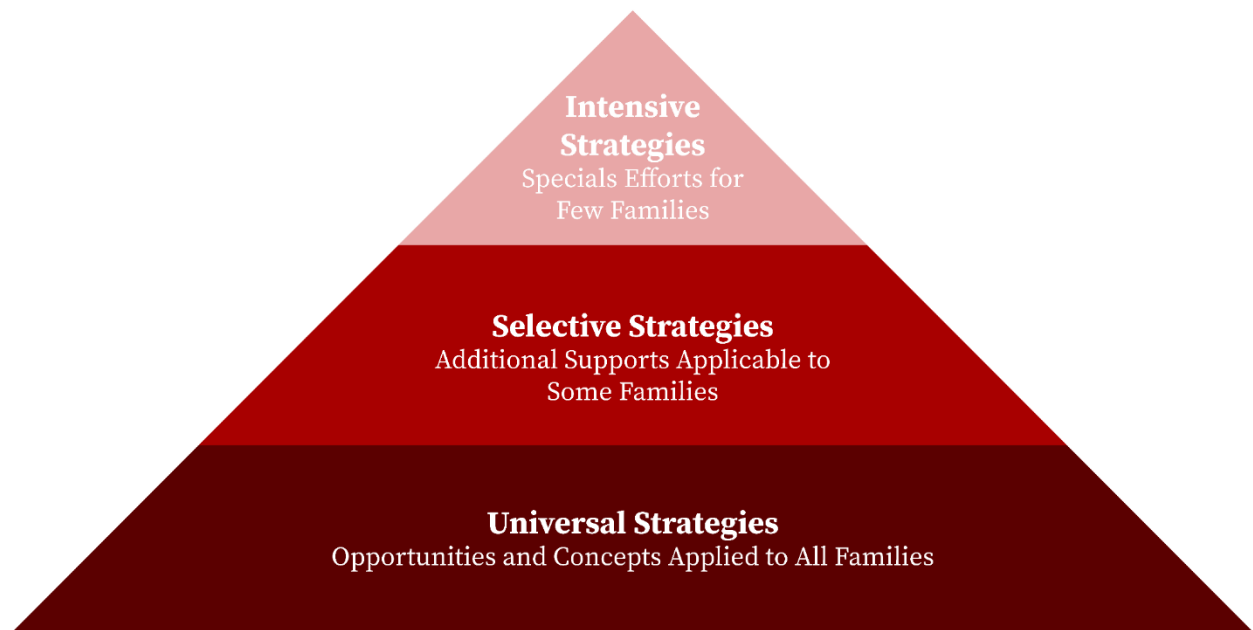
Now that you have committed to building full, collaborative partnerships with families and understand the elements, barriers, and benefits associated with this process, let's discuss some actionable strategies that can be implemented to achieve this goal.

#### 3.1 | THE HIERARCHY OF STRATEGIES

An important consideration is the concept that there is no single "one-size-fits-all" strategy to supporting and uplifting children and families. As mentioned in Section 2.2.1, every family and child is unique, possessing a different set of strengths and weaknesses and facing a different array of challenges. The design and implementation of strategies must also reflect and address this diversity in order to be most effective.

As we translate this into actionable strategies, it very quickly becomes apparent that having a unique approach for every single one of your partner families is, quite frankly, impossible. The amount of time and organizational infrastructure required to support every family in such a detailed manner stretches far beyond what is currently feasible. How then, can professionals bridge this gap and still provide the best support possible given these understandable limitations?

The answer to this question is the idea that there is a hierarchy in the depth and coverage of strategies. The following figure outlines this concept:



**Figure 4:** The hierarchy of strategies focuses on building a foundation of broad, universal concepts that can help all families, followed by layers of increasingly personalized, resource-intensive strategies (adapted from NDTAC).

The theme of establishing a strong, stable foundation has been at the forefront of this training brief and is again highlighted here: at the base of this hierarchy of strategies are those that are termed "universal" and serve to ensure equal treatment and support of all families. The next layer, strategies that

are termed 'selective,' encompass concepts that are only applicable to a subset of families and serve to address equitable treatment and support. These are more resource-intensive and can only be implemented after situational considerations. Finally, the uppermost layer, strategies termed "intensive," are those that can only be applied to the smallest subset of families and require the most resources and effort. The concrete differences between these classes of strategies and examples of each will be discussed below.

### 3.1.1 | UNIVERSAL STRATEGIES

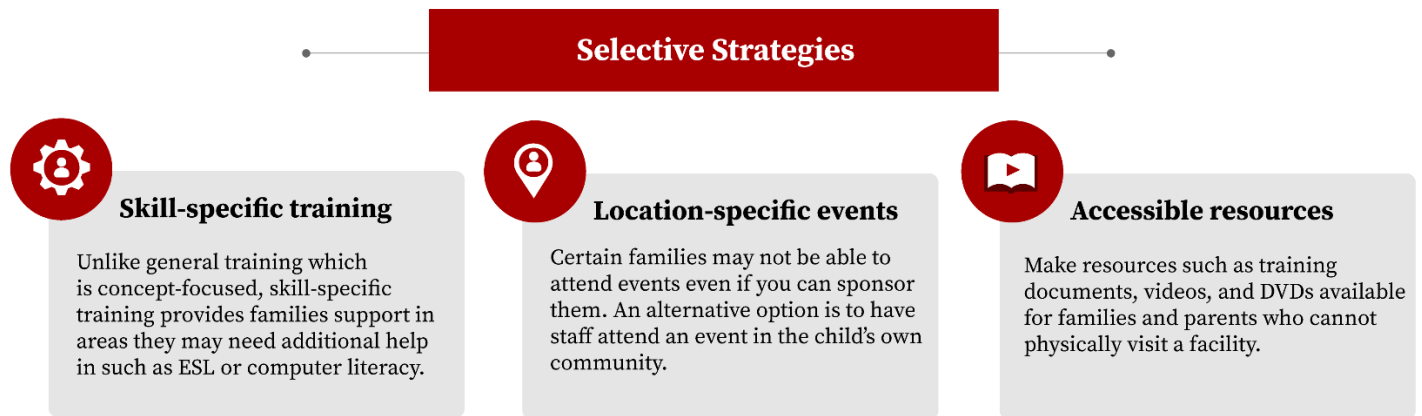
Universal strategies are those that are considered the least resource-intensive and are applicable across all families that you partner with. They should be used to shape the basis of your organizational infrastructure and will serve as the foundation upon which you can build more directed approaches.



**Figure 5:** Examples of universal strategies that can and should be provided for all families.

### 3.1.2 | SELECTIVE STRATEGIES

As you move forward in building partnerships with families and begin to gain a deeper understanding of their current situations, past experiences, and strengths and weaknesses, you may reach a stage wherein providing only universal strategies is no longer sufficient in providing adequate support. Part of working through the processes outlined in Section 2 (in particular acknowledging and understanding barriers to collaboration, as discussed in Section 2.2) is working to address the challenges faced by both you as a professional, and the family you are partnered with. Selective strategies are a method by which to do so.



**Figure 6:** Examples of selective strategies that require situational consideration and are applicable to a subset of families.

The examples outlined here help to address some of the barriers families may face in accessing support from professionals. Considering locations for events and program offerings, and having staff meet within the child's community, can help to address transportation challenges. Skill-specific training helps provide additional knowledge and resources to which a family may not have had prior access. These are all ways to address the concrete needs of the family that were identified in your discussions of challenges and barriers the family may experience.

### 3.1.3 | INTENSIVE STRATEGIES

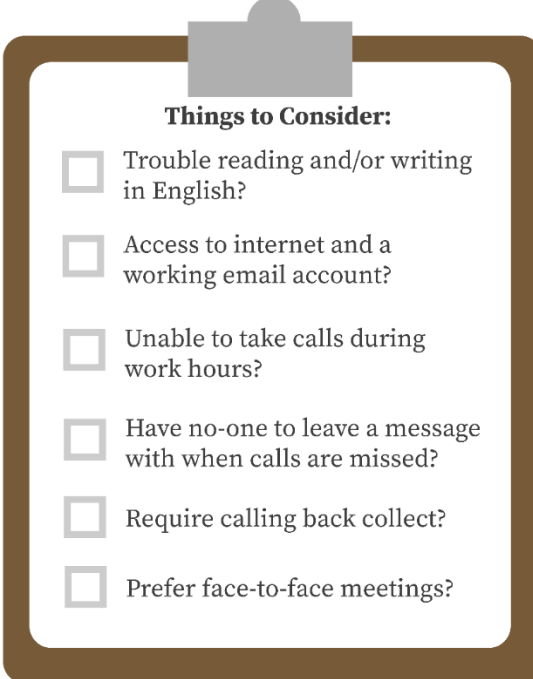
The most demanding tier in the hierarchy of strategies is that of intensive strategies. These are concepts and programs that can only be provided to a select few families due to their resource requirements and overall specificity; however, they have the potential for providing the greatest support. Designing and implementing these strategies requires going beyond fostering a partnership with families; you must really, truly understand each facet of the child and their family, and you must shape your work to uniquely meet their needs. Actionable examples of intensive strategies include:



**Figure 7:** Examples of intensive strategies that are highly resource-intensive but have the potential to inspire the greatest change.



Underpinning all of these strategies is the overarching concept of effective communication. Without an open, authentic dialogue between you as a professional and the families and children with whom you partner, none of the above strategies will be effective due to a lack of fundamental understanding of the family. Achieving this dialogue may be more difficult than you think. Remember that each family faces unique barriers which, in turn, will affect their engagement and accessibility. You may need to try for a third or fourth time to reach a family in order to establish any dialogue at all. The following are some questions to help troubleshoot this process:



**Things to Consider:**

- ☐ Trouble reading and/or writing in English?
- ☐ Access to internet and a working email account?
- ☐ Unable to take calls during work hours?
- ☐ Have no-one to leave a message with when calls are missed?
- ☐ Require calling back collect?
- ☐ Prefer face-to-face meetings?

**Figure 8:** A checklist of troubleshooting questions to ask in order to establish open and effective communication with families.

As discussed in Section 2.1.2, clear, proactive communication is key in building a successful partnership. Strive to build this solid foundation to ensure all levels of strategies will create the greatest positive change possible.

### 3.2 | ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES AND RESOURCES

The strategies discussed in Section 3.1 are not exhaustive. Part of your growth as a professional and as an organization will come from implementing strategies and adjusting as families grow and change, gain new strengths, and meet new challenges. Below are some additional considerations that may help you navigate this process:



**Figure 9:** Additional suggestions that may help your organization grow to be the better support the families and children you partner with.

At their core, all of the strategies focus on the main goal of **increasing positive outcomes for children, youth, and families**. This is achieved through creating authentic partnerships between professionals and families. We hope that this training brief has helped you understand the principles and benefits of this process, and we look forward to the positive change you will shape and build!

## 4 | A CHALLENGE TO YOU

We leave you with a list of overall checkpoints that you can use to gauge your progress as you improve your work as an advocate. Seek to build and implement programs and resources that will:

- ☐ Increase the number of parents who are **informed of available services and supports** through service professionals, community, and government agencies in their local community, county and state.
- ☐ Increase the number of parents who **receive peer support** and offer them opportunities to meet other parents and share their strategies for addressing the needs of their children and families.
- ☐ Increase the number of parents who are **able to make informed decisions** about their children and families.
- ☐ Increase the number of parents who are **better prepared to partner with professionals** and advocate for their children and families
- ☐ Increase the number of parents who are **empowered to provide informal support** to their local communities.

## 5 | REFERENCES

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