

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Family Assessment Within Early Intervention Programs

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This chapter explores the context and processes of family assessment within early intervention programs for children with disabilities or developmental delays. Family assessments are now a routine, indeed mandated, practice in early intervention programs. Three primary reasons can be advanced for the value of family assessment for children with disabilities. First, family assessment recognizes explicitly the need to examine children's development within their most powerful context, that of the family. This requirement acknowledges that the development of young children is not biologically fixed but is conditioned to a large extent by their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Second, family assessment is grounded in the belief that parents can benefit from focused attention on their capacities for providing a nurturing, informed, and attentive environment for their children, particularly those with disabilities. Families' needs for information, guidance, and reassurance in the face of parenting a child with atypical development is presumed to be aided by a structured assessment of their current strengths, resources, and needs. Third, there is increasing recognition that the intensity and specificity of early intervention programs need to be tailored to the characteristics and functioning of the family in light of the child's disability or risk status (Guralnick, 1998).

Despite the clarity of its rationale, implementation of family assessment reveals deep-seated ambivalence from both parents and early intervention professionals. In its traditional form, family assessment implies a process of fact-finding, evaluation, and professional judgment about the capacities and

vulnerabilities of individual families to provide an optimal environment for the growth and development of their children. The goal of such an assessment is to identify specific ways in which external help can be provided that advances the family's natural or acquired abilities to stimulate, nurture, and support a child's development, as defined by the parents, the professionals involved in the child's care, or both. When all parties agree about the optimal conditions for child development, the assessment often proceeds harmoniously and the results reflect a well-negotiated articulation of shared views. When the relevant parties disagree, and express differences in their goals for the child and the means to achieve particular objectives, the family assessment process may constitute a battleground in which deeply held beliefs about family influences and practices produce schisms that must be surfaced, discussed, and reconciled.

For many families, the idea of family assessment as mandated by early intervention programs represents a new phenomenon that they approach skeptically. Others may enter into family assessment quite willingly, explicitly acknowledging that the child's optimal development requires a frontal approach on all spheres of influence. The need to develop a range of assessment methodologies, strategies, or approaches that achieves the goals of family assessment, that are consistent with the skills of intervention professionals, and that can accommodate varying family preferences constitutes a major challenge for the field.

This chapter reviews current practices in family assessment within early intervention programs. It begins with a discussion of the legal and programmatic

bases for family assessment and describes their current requirements. It then analyzes three perspectives that undergird the choice and focus of family assessment strategies, including ecological theories of human development, stress and coping approaches to parental adaptation, and family empowerment perspectives for human services. The next section focuses on methods of family assessment, including informal nonstandardized strategies and more formal standardized modalities. The chapter concludes with speculations about the future of family assessment within early childhood programs, focusing particularly on the need to capitalize on the legal mandate for family assessment to inform a variety of theoretically and programmatically relevant questions.

LEGAL AND PROGRAMMATIC FRAMEWORKS FOR FAMILY ASSESSMENT

The passage in 1986 of the Education for the Handicapped Act Amendments (P.L. 99-457) marked a watershed for the legal transformation of early childhood intervention from child-oriented to family-oriented programs. Among the law's provisions was the requirement that plans for children receiving early intervention services be developed within a family context, resulting in the formulation of an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP). The IFSP is a written document that an early intervention program must prepare, with family participation; it describes how the program plans to meet the assessed needs of the eligible child and his or her family.

The legacy of increased family involvement in the services provided to young children has been described elsewhere (Krauss & Hauser-Cram, 1992). P.L. 99-457 went much further, however, than previous mandates for parental involvement by redefining the service unit from the child as the primary focus of intervention to the family as the primary focus of services (Krauss, 1990). Legally, services to children in early intervention programs are now required to view the child's needs within the context of the family's strengths and areas in need of development, thus mandating as full an assessment of the family's therapeutic and programmatically relevant issues as was previously provided for the child.

Specific requirements are described for the IFSP's development and content. The IFSP must be

prepared within forty-five calendar days from referral and must contain a description of the child's current functioning in five domains: physical development, cognitive development, language and speech development, psychosocial development, and self-help skills. It also must contain the results of a family assessment designed to determine the concerns, priorities, and resources of the family related to enhancing the development of the child. All assessments conducted are voluntary on the part of the family. Intervention plans for both the child and the family are included in the IFSP.

Although many early intervention programs conducted formal and informal assessments of families prior to the enactment of P.L. 99-457 (Krauss & Jacobs, 1990), this landmark legislation and its subsequent reauthorizations (e.g., P.L. 102-119) ushered in a new era in which family assessments are required of all programs serving young children with disabilities. Thus, informal practices have been replaced by mandated, explicit expectations for programmatic activity with parents, a change that has produced considerable consternation within the field of early childhood programs (Slentz & Bricker, 1992). Bailey, Buysse, Edmondson, and Smith (1992) noted the difficulties experienced by early intervention programs in implementing the provisions of the IFSP: 1) the change is perceived as significant; 2) professionals in early intervention programs are experts in child development rather than in family systems; 3) resistance to ceding professional decision-making authority to families exists; and 4) many programs are located within larger agencies that do not require an explicit family focus for assessment and service. Thus, the IFSP requirements signal a range of programmatic challenges that cast the purpose and impact of family assessment into bold relief. Interestingly, the response from the field has been pragmatic. Assessment strategies have been designed that rely on families to define their practical and informational needs. Despite the preponderance of pragmatic approaches toward family assessment that have been developed (and are discussed in the next section), the basis of family assessment rests, in part, on a confluence of theoretical developments concerning family-based influences on child development, stress and coping processes in the caregiving context, and family empowerment as a principle for human services.

