

FINDING COMMON GROUND: WORKING TOGETHER TO RESOLVE BEHAVIORAL CHALLENGES

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Amy is a bright, happy 4 year-old girl who lives at home with her parents and 12 year old sister. She has developmental delays that make it difficult for Amy to understand social cues, independently complete daily activities, and express her needs clearly. Amy attends an inclusive preschool program five full days per week, where she is under the care of a very experienced teacher who works well with children with special needs.

Because of Amy's developmental challenges, her mother does everything she can to promote Amy's language skills at home. She encourages Amy to communicate by incorporating choices in daily routines and providing assistance or stopping demands whenever Amy requests a break or refuses to complete a task. Amy's mom has instructed Amy's father, sister, and grandparents in these strategies and has asked that they too interact with Amy in the same way. As a result, Amy's communication is improving quickly at home. Unfortunately, however, Amy rarely completes activities such as brushing her hair or helping with household chores and expects to get attention and items she wants almost immediately.



Amy's teacher acknowledges the importance of communication, but knows that, to prepare children to be successful in elementary school, she must teach all of her students to follow directions and be fully independent in the classroom. Therefore, she has structured her room and daily activities to require children to cooperate with each other and complete both academic and self care activities (e.g. setting up and preparing their area before mealtimes, getting their own food trays and cleaning up their spaces at the table) throughout the day – regardless of their preference. At school, Amy is participating in more activities and routines, but often cries, throws herself down on the floor, or hits or kicks at children in her class when she feels her communication is not respected.

The different perspectives and approaches adopted by adults caring for Amy at home and school has lead to conflict between her mother and teacher, and produced frustration for Amy. Both viewpoints are valid, but there is very little consistency in their approaches.

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Contradictions such as these between home and school are not uncommon. That is why collaboration, or working together, is important when trying to improve children's skills and behavior. Collaboration involves the development of shared goals and responsibility through open communication. The result is behavior support plans that incorporate multiple perspectives and can be adapted across environments. Some tips for maximizing collaboration when creating a behavior plan include:

- Maintain focus on the child and what will make her be most successful and content (rather than getting bogged down in the conflict between the adults)
- Create mechanisms for open communication, listening carefully to gain insight into different (and equally valuable) perspectives
- Develop shared goals by identifying "points of consensus" to which all care takers agree
- Find out what is driving a child's behavior by paying attention to situations surrounding it and reactions that follow it
- Develop a behavior plan that is based on this understanding, allows the child to achieve all the valued skills, incorporates all the most successful strategies, and that is flexible and easy to use in different settings

Once Amy's mother and teacher acknowledged each others' viewpoints and agreed to work together, they determined that both communication and independence were important for Amy, and that the strategies they were using at home and school could be blended to help Amy be more successful.



For example, Amy's mother and teacher made a list of activities and routines they felt were reasonable to expect Amy to complete every day. Since Amy was not accustomed to cooperating with routines, they decided to start small (especially at home), and add expectations over time. Amy was allowed to take brief breaks from these tasks when she asked appropriately, but was still required to complete them before doing something she enjoyed. They incorporated choices and additional communication cues into the school day, without disrupting ongoing routines. Creating these consistent expectations and encouraging both communication and cooperation prepared Amy for the demands of school and community-based activities and make home life easier too.

Finding common ground and working together to effectively support for children with developmental delays is essential to success. Amy's mother and teacher provide an example how collaboration can enrich children's lives.

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