



Understanding Children's Behavior as Communication Handout: Who Can Help

There are a variety of professionals who can help families when they have concerns about child behavior. This handout briefly defines the role of each.

Behavioral Specialist

Behavioral specialists are individuals with expertise in the principles of behavior. They may be employees of your program or agency, or they may be employed on a contractual basis. Behavioral specialists can observe in the home or classroom. They look for ways the environment or interactions may influence a child's behavior. They may also collect data to help the team understand what a child is trying to communicate through his or her behavior. Behavioral specialists may lead a process known as a functional assessment, which is a systematic assessment of the child's behavior across settings. This kind of assessment helps the team hypothesize why a particular behavior occurs. Behavioral specialists can help lead the process of developing a behavior support plan. Behavioral specialists have training and education in behavioral support, and some have earned a Board Certified Behavior Analyst credential.

Mental Health Consultant

Mental health consultants work to support family and child well-being by helping to promote a child's self-regulation and social and emotional competence. Mental health consultation is a "problem-solving and capacity-building intervention implemented within a collaborative relationship between a professional consultant . . . and one or more caregivers" (Cohen & Kaufmann, 2000, p. 4). Mental health consultants assist caregivers in developing the skills and attitudes necessary to support child development. They can help all families address concerns and promote healthy development. Mental health consultants have a strong foundation in infant and early childhood mental health and are knowledgeable about early childhood practices.

Staff often believe that mental health consultants work primarily with children. However, mental health consultation has a comprehensive, program-wide reach. It extends across many sectors—community, system, program, classroom, family, and child. Mental health consultation can contribute to adult wellness, which is an important component of every family engagement effort. When the adults—for example, parents and program staff—in a child's life are healthy, children do better. Staff wellness influences the ability of staff members to relate to a parent, listen empathically, remain flexible and think creatively. Mental health consultants scaffold staff competence and confidence in addressing difficult topics and issues with families. Mental health consultants' goal-directed relationships with staff supports staff as they walk alongside parents.

Disability Specialist

Disability specialists promote school readiness of all children by providing technical assistance, mentoring, and training to staff and agencies. Disability specialists may provide training or assistance and coaching to staff. They may facilitate the development, implementation, and coordination of support

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plans with families, educators, and supervisors. Disability specialists may provide guidance and support for individualizing plans and assessment for children with disabilities and their families. They may also coordinate family or child referrals and communicate with consultants and staff. Disability specialists have education and training in early childhood education or early childhood development.

Family Services Professional

Family services professionals, sometimes referred to as family services staff or family resource specialists, contribute to family well-being and positive parent-child relationships. They support the recruitment and enrollment of families and help families transition to and from Head Start and Early Head Start programs. They work with families and program staff to learn about the child and about family goals. As well, they plan and use assessment information for program improvement and school readiness.

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation

Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation is a multilevel preventive intervention that teams mental health professionals with people who work with young children and their families to improve children's social, emotional, and behavioral health and development. IECMHC builds the capacity of providers and families to understand the powerful influence of their relationships and interactions on the development of young children. As a result of these IECMHC partnerships, children's well-being is improved and mental health problems are prevented and/or reduced. IECMHC includes skilled observations, individualized strategies, and early identification of children with and at risk for mental health challenges.

The document at the following URL describes the IECMHC model, its elements, and core competencies:

https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/programs_campaigns/IECMHC/iecmhc-expert-convening-summary.pdf

Reference

Cohen, E., & Kaufmann, R. (2005). *Early childhood mental health consultation*. DHHS Pub. No. CMHS-SVP0151. Rockville, MD: Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Retrieved from <https://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/SVP05-0151/SVP05-0151.pdf>

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For more information about this resource, please contact us:
PFCE@ecetta.info | 1-866-763-6481



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